

THE TURNING POINT

Homily preached by Audette Fulbright
All Souls Unitarian Church
December 31, 2017

Since November 2016, Unitarian Universalist congregations around the country have experienced an increase in first time visitors to our congregations. I'd love to tell you that it's because we finally got our act together and did some marvelous advertising and outreach letting people know about our open-minded, progressive faith tradition with deep historical roots. It would be wonderful to say confidentially that it was because our long history of commitment to justice was a beacon - from emancipation and suffrage through the Civil Rights era and the ERA, from Stonewall to AIDs work to marriage equality, right up to our current work for Trans rights and Black Lives Matter and work on immigration reform. Surely people know that we UUs published the Pentagon Papers and that we can be found in almost every picket line and justice march on Washington there is.

But that wouldn't be true. Our light remains mostly hidden under the bushel of our awkward unwillingness to bother people with our good news. Sad but true. The reason people are finding us is because we once again live in times in which so many of us feel lost, disconnected, anxious, and seeking something to ground and center us, to lend us a little strength and hope, to draw us into a circle of life and love that we can feel, come to rely on.

All Souls has been a gathering place for seekers for almost 200 years. The United States itself was only 41 years old when All Souls opened its doors and began inviting people with open minds and open hearts to gather. In those long years, there have been dark days. We've seen war and poverty, dishonest politicians and lived through disasters, both human-made and natural. Week after week, year after year, this congregation's doors have stood wide, beckoning those who would come to step inside. Great, good and even mediocre ministers may have served, but the congregation itself and our shared faith are what have called.

I mention this in hope that historical perspective may serve as a bit of a tonic for the anxieties of our own day. The members and friends of All Souls have lived, learned and loved together through every kind of struggle, and we will continue to do just that. It's perhaps even more a reminder that it is you - the members and friends who gather here to make up the great family of All Souls - whose ministry matters most. If you are here or if you are missing, that matters. If you take the time to greet a newcomer, invite them to Coffee Hour, offer to meet them for lunch or ask them to join you in some activity - that makes all the difference. People don't join a church just because the music is sublime or they hear a sermon or reading that moves them. People come because they are hungry for meaning and relationship. Worship matters, but you matter so much more.

Whatever you thought of it, 2017 is ending. We stand in the liminal space of letting go and embracing. There are people we have loved and lost this past year. There are struggles we've faced, fears we have conquered and some we haven't. We've experienced joy. We've known hope and exhaustion. I don't know about you, but for too much of the past year it has felt like all the news existed on a spectrum from frightening to terrifying, frustrating to rage-inducing. It's been tough on the well-informed.

But former President Barack Obama shared something on Friday that helped me remember that not everything is bad. He said, "As we count down to the new year, we get to reflect and prepare for what's ahead. For all the bad news that seemed to dominate our collective consciousness, there are countless stories from this year that remind us what's best about America.

"Kat Creech, a wedding planner in Houston, turned a postponed wedding into a volunteer opportunity for Hurricane Harvey victims. Thirty wedding guests became an organization of hundreds of volunteers. That's a story from 2017.

"Chris Long gave his paychecks from the first six games of the NFL season to fund scholarships in Charlottesville, VA. He wanted to do more, so he decided to give away an entire season's salary. That's a story from 2017.

"Ten-year-old Jahkil Jackson is on a mission to help homeless people in Chicago. He created kits full of socks, toiletries, and food for those in need. Just this week, Jahkil reached his goal to give away 5,000 "blessing bags." That's a story from 2017.

"All across America people chose to get involved, get engaged and stand up. Each of us can make a difference, and all of us ought to try. So go keep changing the world in 2018."

I don't know about you, but that's my plan for 2018. To keep trying to change the world. And to do that, I need you. I need All Souls - the people, the music, Galen's sermons, the inspiration of the people here who are feeding the hungry, keeping us informed about everything from Israel and Palestine to nuclear disarmament to immigration and prison reform issues. I need a place to sing and listen to stories with soul, friends to write with and a community that includes children and a faith tradition that teaches me about all the world's religions and the insights of science and the human mind. This is the laboratory congregation that can see us through, if we show up and are committed to creating the Beloved Community, together.

In closing, let us share a blessing for the end of the year. May the poet John O'Donohue's words be a balm and seal for this time together. (p. 159 "At the End of the Year").