

Capture the Wonder of Tomorrow

Reverend Dawn Cooley
First Unitarian Church, Louisville, KY
March 28, 2010

Sermon

Hymn #1003 Where Do We Come From

Homily “Where are we going?”

Today, we join together to capture the wonder of tomorrow and to make a commitment to that future that we envision. But in order to do this, we must have an inspiring vision of tomorrow – a future that gets us going, gets us excited.

I have only been your minister for seven months now, but I have many visions for this congregation – visions that come out of your many, many strengths. Visions based on what I have heard you long for this church to be. What I share with you this morning is one of many possibilities. I share it as a way to prime your vision.

Imagine.

Imagine you walk through the doors of the church on Sunday morning and you are struck by all the activity. Children are running around, making themselves at home. People are milling about, talking with one another. Some folks you recognize, others you don't. You make a note to introduce yourselves to those you don't yet know.

When the music starts, people become quiet and enter into the sanctuary to join those already there. You look and see that the music today is from a group of gifted teenagers who are generously sharing their talents with the congregation.

As you look around at all the familiar and new faces, you marvel at this historic congregation – how it has changed over the years. You think about the vibrancy of the past, of the difficult years of turmoil, and how the congregation came out stronger – came out with a deeper sense of what it means to be a liberal religious community.

In your hands, the order of service is quite full. It seems as though there is more and more going on at the church each week. Small Group Ministry groups are starting up again. Your participation in the group brought you closer to the congregation, and helped you to enunciate your own faith a little better. The service project your group decided to do for the church was to wash dishes on chalice night, and you never realized how enjoyable it could be to provide a service like that to your beloved community. You know you will be signing up for that again and are excited about who might be in your group this time, who you might get to know better.

You read that there is a caravan heading to Frankfort for lobbying. Last month, 20 people from the church went. Kentucky is still a long ways from passing a civil marriage bill, but the church has been getting some good publicity around how we stand on the side of love. You can tell that the cultural conversation is beginning to shift away from fear and more towards compassion, and it is so nice to know this church is a part of that.

And you notice that there are continuing conversations going on about what to do with the disbursements from the endowment, once they resume. You wonder at how we ever through we couldn't live without that money, especially now that there are so many good ideas about what to do with it. Your own favorite is to use the money as grants for members in the congregation who have a creative idea to further the mission of the church.

As the service progresses, the children are remarkable – some stay in their seats, listening and interacting with the service. Others are sprawled on floor pillows at the front of the sanctuary. Some are working on little UU workbooks that are available for busy hands. There is a rugged area off to the side that has some books, rocking chairs and even some beanbags and you notice that a number of the children are quietly reading or drawing. Having them in the service the whole time has been a big change, but so much nicer than you ever expected.

People of all ages participate in the service as musicians, storytellers, chalice lighters. The choir, which has swelled to over 30 people now that youth can participate, sounds amazing. Again, you marvel at how involved everyone is – and remember that you need to return an email to the Storyteller Coordinator to let her know you would be delighted to read a Story for All Ages piece in the coming weeks.

The service has something for everyone – some of it doesn't appeal to you, but you take comfort in knowing that what you don't like is almost assuredly someone else's favorite aspect of the service.

After the service, there is a fellowship meal. It is simple food, at a very reasonable price, and oh so good. You sit at the table with a few visitors and talk to them about the service – their impressions of it. Most people stay for the meal, because most people stay for what comes after. It has grown to be one of your favorite aspects of Sunday morning. You especially like it when you end up at a table with one of the young families here – UU children are so articulate and curious!!! Or a table with visitors – you are getting better at sharing what how important this place is to you.

Once the meal has been cleaned up, it is time for the Religious Education hour. Your small group ministry group meets during the week, but a number of your adult friends have their groups during this hour. The children go to their classrooms – you have heard that the preschoolers are doing Spirit Play and you find yourself thinking you might volunteer to teach that next semester. There are a number of adult religious education offerings, too – drop in classes and on-going ones. You shake your head and again are astounded at how many rich opportunities there are to deepen and develop your own faith.

In the end, you wind up in the class for OWL trainers. This has been a growing outreach effort for the congregation – taking our comprehensive sexuality education out into the community. It was difficult to work out some of the kinks, but the church stuck with it. There are now weeknight classes teaching parents how to talk to their kids about sex in a healthy way, at various ages.

As you leave Sunday afternoon, you find that you have been nurtured in so many ways. Your spirit has been fed, as has your body. You have done something to make the world a better place, connected with dear friends, and learned something. It has been a good day. You are so thankful that this is your church.

Vision Sharing (at each table)

You have heard my vision – or at least part of one of them. But what about yours? Where do you see this congregation in a year or two? Does the vision inspire or excite you? I invite you now – all of you, of all ages – to share with the others at your table what your vision of this congregation is. Write down some of the key words, draw a picture – be creative. There are no wrong answers here! You will have 10 minutes to share with one another.

Homily “How do we get there?”

Now that you have had a chance to talk about and explore your own visions of where you hope this beloved community is going, the question remains – How do we get here?? Certainly, we can't do it without the time and talent of a horde of fabulous volunteers. But this is canvass Sunday, so let me be explicit – we also can't do it without money.

Its not glamorous to think about, and indeed we often get uncomfortable talking about it, but the fact is that we need your financial support. We need money for the essentials: to keep the lights on and the bills paid. For some, this is reason enough to give, but for most, that's not a very inspiring vision – giving just to keep the lights on.

Our programming also costs money – if we want our religious education program to lead the way into the future, that will take money. If we want our music program to stay as robust as it is, that takes money. Look again at your vision – were there staff people involved? Were there outreach efforts? Leadership training? Participation in marches on Washington, DC? These all require financial resources.

Is your vision compelling enough, big enough, broad enough, to inspire you to dig deep and give? If not yours, is someone else's?

Because this year, it better be. How do we get there, to the place where your vision comes to life? This year, it all rests on you. How much is this liberal religious community worth to you? As much as a coffee per day? What about going out to lunch every day? Is it worth more to you than that? What about season tickets to the Louisville Orchestra, or Actors Theater? How does what you get out of being here compare to what you get out of being there?

The board is committed to giving you a balanced budget to approve at the annual meeting. This year, there is no capital assets fund to borrow from, there will be no endowment distributions. The members and friends of this congregation will be responsible for approximately 85% of the income of the church – which, actually, according to church professionals, is a very healthy number. But it is a substantially higher percentage than it has been in recent years past. This year, it all comes down to how much this community means to you, and how much you are willing to give.

Now, if you have heard me talk about this in one of the many meeting I attend, you have heard about how excited I am by this opportunity. For a while now, I think this church has been living in a murky future. The idea a number of years ago was that we needed to increase staff for growth – growth which didn't happen to the degree expected – to the degree necessary to fund the increased staffing brought on. We have lived beyond our means, taking money from the capital assets fund in order to balance the budget. We have tried to be a 300 member congregation, when, in reality, we are closer to a 200 member congregation. But there is nothing wrong with being a 200 member congregation! In fact, its a pretty awesome thing.

We have lived beyond our means trying to be something, that, frankly, we aren't. At least not right now.

Which may sound dreary, but really, its not. This is a fabulous time to figure out who we are. Why put on the size 300 pants if the size 200 looks better and feels more comfortable??? This is a time to figure out who we are – not just in terms of a budget, but in terms of a compelling mission.

I am excited by the opportunities this canvass presents. This year, the board is committed to giving you a balanced budget. Even with the loss of endowment and capital assets income, we are committed to fiscal responsibility.

Hopefully those of you who are not visitors received a letter in the mail inviting you to this service. In that letter, you were introduced to the idea that, in 2015 – 5 years from now, we hope that a vast majority of you will be contributing to this congregation at 5% or more of your adjusted gross income. We won't get there overnight, of course, and this is a brand new initiative, so this year, we are hoping that most of you will be generous enough to give at 2% or more of your AGI.

I believe that our message is even more valuable, more important, and more life saving than the message of churches that get 10% off the top of their members earnings. And so John and I are putting our money where are hearts are. We are pledging to give 5% of our AGI.

I know some of you don't like hearing that. For many of us, money is something private, not to be talked about. But as with so many other issues, if we don't take it out of the closet, the issue will continue to haunt us. I know firsthand how our cultural silence around money hurts – in my very first job out of college I found out I was paid substantially less than a less qualified, less experienced male coworker. When I brought this to my boss, it was immediately fixed, but I was only able to help them do the right thing because my coworker and I had broken the taboos on talking about money. I believe that we need to start talking about money, as hard as that may be to do. In fact, over lunch, I encourage you to talk to others at your table – if you raise your pledge, and particularly if you give at 2% or more of your AGI, let others know you are doing so – and why! I know it might seem difficult at first, but the more we stretch ourselves, the easier it will become – and the more inspiring we might be to others.

Meditation

Take a moment to get settled in your chair. Close your eyes, and take a few deep breaths.

Imagine. Imagine that you are here, in this room. The year is 2015. The pledge cards have been handed out. You take yours out of the envelope and look at it. In the past few years, our pledge has meant some sacrifices on your part- but they have been worth it: they help bring your life more into alignment with your values.

Once everyone has filled out their pledge cards, those who have given generously at 5% or more of the AGI are asked to come to the front and drop their pledge cards in a basket on the alter. You hesitate before standing up – not wanting to call attention to yourself. But then you see others begin to rise and move forward. Many, many others. In fact, it looks like almost the whole congregation is giving as generously as you just did. Again, you are filled with joy. You rise and bring your pledge to the front.

Visitors look around in wonder – amazed at the love and generosity they feel from the congregation. They can tell that this is a special place – something that they want to be a part of.

When everyone is done, beautifully wrapped boxes appear in front of everyone. You gently unwrap the box. To your surprise and wonder, in the box is all your hopes and dreams for this church. As well as the hopes and dreams of all the others here. You feel yourself filled with joy. As you look around, you see that same joy and wonder in the eyes of everyone around you.

Your generosity, and the generosity of those around you, brought your hopes and dreams to reality.

...

Take a moment now to slowly come back to the present. Consider what this congregation means to you. How much are you willing to give in order to bring your vision to life?

We don't ask you to give out of guilt, or out of fear of damnation. Instead, think about this church and ask yourself if it has made your life better – helped you on your journey? Have you been accepted and loved here? What is that worth to you?

Commitment

Now that you have taken a few moments to consider where you want us to go in the future and what this congregation means to you – I invite table hosts to now distribute the envelopes. As you will see, there are two pieces of information for you today – first, there is a directory update form – we want to make sure we have accurate information to contact you.

The other card is the pledge card. If you need help filling it out, your table hosts will be able to help you. I ask that you please note the checkbox that indicates a pledge of 2% or more of your AGI – please don't forget to check this box!

Hymn #402 From You I Receive, To You I Give

Also available at <http://revdawn.wordpress.com/2010/03/>