



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Traveling Together

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The labyrinth is an ancient symbol found in countless cultures and spiritual traditions around the world, including Greek, Cretan, Egyptian, Peruvian and Celtic. The symbol is not connected to any one spiritual tradition, but rather appears in different forms in many traditions. Many myths around the world describe the maze as a mysterious mediator between the human and the spiritual world.

During the Middle Ages, it was common for Christians to go on pilgrimage to the Holy City of Jerusalem, or to cities bearing shrines and relics around Europe. Stories about the famous Chartres Labyrinth say that it was built for inner pilgrimage, for contemplatives but also regular people, as not everyone was able to make those expensive and often arduous journeys. The Labyrinth developed as a spiritual practice to help people stay connected to their faith journey and to their community throughout their lives.

For many years, I have been drawn to learn about the history and spiritual practice of the labyrinth. At every meaningful juncture in my life, I have sought out a labyrinth, bearing significant questions. During my year of living and serving in St. Paul, Minnesota, I met a Unitarian Universalist colleague, Barbara Kellet, who called herself the “labyrinth lady” and trained me to lead the spiritual practice for others. One Friday night in the beginning of November, I led about forty Unity members and friends in a labyrinth walk in the church’s Parish Hall. Many of us had walked the labyrinth alone, but few had walked together.

The walk began with each person holding a stone and asking a meaningful question or questions to ponder throughout their meditation. The labyrinth has only one entrance and exit. Traveling along the twists and turns, patterns began to emerge. It became natural to feel someone else approach you close on your path. Sharing the path was not always easy. Some people weaved in and out, others stopped to accommodate the other or step off to the side. Some collided by accident, with good will and laughter. At the end of our labyrinth walk, people shared their questions, and how it felt to walk together as a group. There were several children there, and one nine year old girl shared her questions:

Why do people hate other people just because they are a little different?

How can the world be so cold and mean, but so beautiful and loving at the same time?

When asked how it felt to travel the labyrinth together, she said, “It felt like we were walking like one body.” This child was in touch with a powerful teaching from the labyrinth as a collective spiritual practice. A kinship develops within and amongst a group that is unlike any individual journey. Our Unitarian and early liberal religious ancestors used the very same language of “walking together” to describe the process by which members united for congregational worship and fellowship. Over the centuries, our congregations have placed their faith and purpose in the shared commitment to one another and to the religious quest that emerges from walking together, often using the word covenant to describe this process.

Rev. Victoria Safford, senior minister at White Bear Unitarian Church, describes covenant this way:

When we welcome babies in our church, when we welcome new members into the community, when we celebrate the love of beaming couples, when we ordain new ministers, we speak not in the binding language of contract, but in the life-sustaining fluency of covenant, from *covenir*, to travel together. We will walk together with you, child; we will walk together with you, friend; we will walk together with each other toward the lives we mean to lead, toward the world we mean to have a hand in shaping, the world of compassion, equity, freedom, joy, and gratitude.

Throughout your history, Neighborhood has been intentionally created and lovingly sustained by members, friends and ministers who have chosen to travel together. The church began as a collection of families, bound together not by a creed but to a liberal religious faith and a shared connection to Pasadena as a place to put down roots and grow faith. Over time, your journey as a congregation has evolved and changed, taken you from a different location to this beautiful campus, a property that upon initial exploration one prominent member said you “should not let get away.” There have been many points along the way when others from liberal religious backgrounds have been invited to join the journey, and times during which others found their journey took them in other directions to establish other churches. Always, Neighborhood has been a collection of families who traveled together in partnership with religious leaders for the shared purpose of creating and sustaining a liberal religious community.

Over my week here, I discovered a document from the 50s or early 60s, signed by members of the Hubbard, Fauvre and Palmer families. By the account of Mary Fauvre Holmes, this document was created at a time of transition in the ministry and in the religious landscape, when Neighborhood was once again recommitting to its sense of purpose. At the top of the document reads the Ames Covenant, a short statement shared by many Unitarian congregations since the late 19th century, “In the quest for truth and in the spirit of Jesus we unite for the worship of God and the service of man.”

The covenant follows with the disclaimer, “We regard the religious life as a process of continual growth, in which each person tries to achieve an ever deepening faith through his searching and experience. We place no shackles on the religious quest, but respect each person for his own opinions . . . In short, we cherish the best from the past, adapting to the needs of the present, and seeking to grow in understanding and service in the days to come.”

This is an incredible document, timeless in many ways. You can see how the by-laws have evolved and been updated to serve the current needs of the congregation. The by-laws now read, “The purpose of the Church is to create and sustain a religious community. In the spirit of love and in the search for greater understanding, we unite in a religious community which serves the spirit as each individual member understands it, which covenants with one another in acts of compassion and which serves the larger world in deeds of justice.”

Our reading from James Luther Adams, one of the most prominent Unitarian theologians and ethicists of the 20th century, calls the creation and caretaking of covenant a “charter and responsibility and joy.” Thinking back over the church’s history, it is interesting to consider how these covenantal statements might have been formed, and what they ask of us today as we look to partner together for a new chapter in Neighborhood’s history. Children and youth in the religious education classes are often our resident congregational experts on covenants. They might share with you that covenants begin with asking questions.

Who do we become when we enter this space?

Who are we to one another?

What do we promise each other? The world?

How do we hold each other accountable to these promises?

Victoria Safford names this aspect of covenanting “the work of intimate justice.” Intimacy is something we often reserve for romantic relationships or families. These are spaces where intimacy can flourish, but they are not the only places. True intimacy is a genuine sharing of oneself, the good parts and the challenging parts. Popular social worker Brene Brown calls connection “the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship.” This is the joyful, yet challenging work of covenant, of building connection.

So what is the justice part of how Rev. Safford talks about covenant, as intimate justice? This is the responsibility of the charter of which James Luther Adams speaks. Covenantal justice is the work of right relationship, the concrete work of building beloved community. We need tools to create right relationship within our congregation, like deep listening and radical hospitality. We need to take the realities of oppression and privilege seriously, within and beyond the congregation. For example, what are the barriers that a person may face to building intimacy at Neighborhood, or even to cross the threshold of our campus? Take, for example, an older person who has been socially isolated by the death of a spouse? A high school youth exploring their gender identity? A young adult new to Los Angeles? A single mother with a young daughter? A person experiencing homelessness, mental illness or domestic abuse? A person reentering the social landscape after incarceration, immigration or long-term unemployment? What support might people of marginalized identities or experiences need to build connection, across differences in culture, class, language or ability?

The more we widen our view of who is included in our covenant, the more creative we need to be in our strategies to create an intimacy within our congregation which is also just. To keep growing, more and more people must feel empowered to serve as leaders, as stewards of Neighborhood’s future. The call to make our covenant more just also calls us out into the community to be responsible stewards of our resources and gifts. We need to engage what we call the “moral owners” of Neighborhood, people and organizations within and outside of the congregation who are invested in the difference Neighborhood can make in the world. We

need to raise our voices in the interfaith landscape, speaking truth to power and boldly living our values in the public square. Empowering leaders, widening our welcome, deepening hospitality, giving back to the community.

As we consider our future together, I want to return to the image of the labyrinth. It is no coincidence that your campus is adorned with such a rich and meaningful symbol, and that you have chosen to use its image to communicate who you are to each other and to the world. I have heard what a joyous occasion it was to dedicate the labyrinth here several years ago, with elders and children traveling together to inaugurate the spiritual practice. The bricks of the path bear the names of members of this congregation, which continue to grow over the years. Over the next few months, as we begin our journey together remember the image of walking the labyrinth together. Sometimes we will find ourselves walking side by side, deepening our connection. Sometimes we might feel farther away than we want to, on opposite sides of the country as we imagine and plan for a common future. We can be assured that we are traveling the same path, encircling and touching the same bright center of our faith. In many labyrinths, the center is empty. At the center of your labyrinth, you have placed a chalice, a symbol of our Unitarian Universalist faith representing the spiritual quest for truth, beauty and freedom. Not only this, you have chosen to create the chalice in the form of a mosaic. An ancient art form, mosaics are carefully assembled from smaller, sometimes broken pieces of tile or glass into patterns of varying color, shape and sizes.

I want to share a story about the meaning of mosaics from the writer Terry Tempest Williams. After the tragedy of 911, she found "the peace in her heart shattered." She turned to the natural world as a sanctuary. Facing the ocean on the rocky coast of Maine, she asked "Give me one wild word," to which, Williams writes, the sea replied "mosaic." She accepted this charge, which led her on a journey to Ravenna, Italy to apprentice at a mosaic studio. While she discovered she had no skill for the art form, she took on the symbol of mosaic in her writing as an important tool for resilience and sustainability in difficult and dangerous times. She writes:

Shards of glass can cut and wound or magnify a vision. Mosaic celebrates brokenness and the beauty of being brought together. Empathy becomes the path that leads us from the margins to the center of concern. The pattern is the thing. The beauty made belongs to everyone. Finding beauty in a broken world becomes more than the art of assemblage. It is the work of daring contemplation that inspires action.

Neighborhood, cherishing the best from the past, adapting to the needs of the present, and seeking to grow in understanding and service in the days to come, let's create a bright future that binds the beauty and the brokenness of the world into a mosaic of beloved community. We can only dream of the places we can go as one strong body traveling together.

To close, do you remember the one 9 year old girl, who shared her questions?

Why do people hate other people just because they are a little different?

How can the world be so cold and mean, but so beautiful and loving at the same time?

After the labyrinth walk, her parents, two mothers, sent me an email with her journal entry from the evening's practice.

Did you find any answers to the questions?

No not really, they are too big of questions and I am glad I don't know the answers to them. Some questions should not be answered, at least not just yet.

Other notes: Love is hope. Hope is Happiness. Happiness is Love.

Amen, and Blessed Be