

Life Calls Us

Readings: 'A Prayer among Friends' by John Daniel
'We Have Not Come Here to Take Prisoners' by Hafez
'Praise Song for the Day' by Elizabeth Alexander

We are called to, in the words of Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner, "the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger." There are a lot of ways to find this place where the hunger and the gladness meet.

Today's readings offer up possibilities.

John Daniel, a contemporary white American poet from Oregon, offers this:

May we spend generously
the time we are given.
May we enact our responsibilities
as thoroughly as we enjoy
our pleasures. May we see with clarity,
may we seek a vision
that serves all beings

Hafez's words cross time and space and culture from 14th Century Persia to tell us

'We have not come here to take prisoners,
Or to confine our wounded spirits

But to experience ever and ever more deeply
Our divine courage, freedom, and Light!

And Elizabeth Alexander, an African American woman who teaches both poetry and African American Studies, speaking nearly eight years ago at Barack Obama's inauguration reminds us of these ways of orienting a life, these personal mottoes:

'Some live by *love thy neighbor as thyself*,
others by first do no harm or take no more
than you need.'

Today, we starting a process to find where the deep gladness of People's Church meets the world's deep hunger. What is our mission? What is People's Church here for? What is life calling People's Church to be? What is the purpose of this congregation?

The answers won't become clear in the next 25 minutes or so; we are just starting the conversation... and this question is largely yours to answer. In our church, you all are the highest authority. You, the membership of the church acting together, are the ones who elect your board leadership and call ministers and make the most important decisions in the life of our church. You are the ones who set the course and direction for the church. I am here to work with you to make your dreams for this community real.

For an individual the answers to the big questions might be found in a credo or a personal motto. In an institution like this one, we answer the big questions like what is life calling People's church to be? – with our mission and our vision.

It's time for People's Church to have create new mission and vision statements, to reimagine what we are here to do. This is not any slight on the current ones – I know some of you worked hard to create them. These sorts of texts don't have a long shelf life. They expire quickly. They aren't like the Bond of Union that has endured since the 1890s with only slight editing. The best practice is for mission-driven organizations to take time every 5-7 years to reengage the question, 'What is life calling us to be?' 'What is life calling People's Church to be?' Where is the world's hunger and where is our gladness? From those conversations, new mission and vision statements emerge. In our case, there has been changes in the church and the wider world since you all last did this. Many new people have joined this community, including me, bringing with them their own hopes and aspirations for what People's Church can be. The world beyond these walls is changing too. What does Kalamazoo and the wider world need from us? How do we orient ourselves to meet the challenges ahead?

It is time to set out our path for the next 5-7 years, so we can move with clarity and intention as we create meaning and connection within these walls and act for justice beyond them. It is time to build on everything that brought us to this moment, the generosity and dedication, the commitment and courage, all of the generations down to us who, in the words of the poet,
'laid the train tracks, raised the bridges,
picked the cotton and the lettuce, built
brick by brick the glittering edifices
they would then keep clean and work inside of.'

We are the grateful heirs of all who came before, who founded our church, who gathered together in search of meaning and connection, who kept the church going through conflicts and crises, who taught Sunday school and sang hymns and stayed at meetings till the very end to make sure everything was discussed, decided, and done.

'We cross dirt roads and highways that mark
the will of some one and then others, who said
I need to see what's on the other side.'

So many have brought us to this moment, so many have made the path smooth beneath our feet – and it is our inheritance and obligation to be faithful stewards of this community and to draw on our past strengths to chart a course forward. It is our privilege and obligation to name our goals and aspirations for the next several years and to do our best to keep our metaphorical jeep out of the ruts on the road and the mud puddles, and away from trees.

It is time to renew our mission and vision.

Mission and vision matter because they are our road map and guide. Having a mission and vision that we are commitment to and inspired by allows us to orient ourselves, measure success, explain ourselves to those around us, and determine what sort of ministries and programs are worthy of our precious resources. If the sheep in a jeep from our story earlier had a clear, inspiring mission, they might have not have moved from crisis to crisis to crisis, squandering resources and relationships. We are all the driver sheep – and we can't forget to steer. we all need to know where we're going. Having a mission and vision gives greater purpose to what we're doing here.

Mission and vision are vital to my work as a minister – and to all the ministries and programs of our church. A fellow Unitarian Universalist minister tells this story:

'When my congregation was in search for a new minister, they conducted a workshop on welcoming their new settled clergy person with the [a staff person from the Unitarian Universalist Association]. When she asked, "What is the minister's primary job," somebody answered, "To make us happy." "To serve our needs," somebody else chimed in. The [UUA Staff person] replied, "Guess what? The minister's job is not to make you happy. The minister's job is to serve the mission of the church."¹

And it's not just my job to serve the mission – it's everyone's job. All of our programs and ministries – religious education, social and environmental justice, welcoming new members, our music program worship, pastoral care, everything else serve the mission. And, if we have a mission worth serving, those of us who serve it will be happy and have our needs met along the way.

It is vital for us to have an inspiring and engaging mission. How are we going to get there from here? What's the road map to creating the road map? How are we going to do this?

We are going to have a workshops where you'll get to share with one another about the strengths of our congregation and the dreams you have for its future. A team of facilitators volunteer to lead these 90 workshops. I led a workshop to train the facilitators last month. It was an inspiring process to be a part of. You are going to leave these workshops feeling excited about the future of our church and knowing one another better. The workshops will be happening at a variety of times and places beginning next weekend and continuing through January. You'll have a chance to sign up for a workshop in the foyer after the service and online. In these workshops, we'll begin by looking back at some of your best experiences as part of this community. Then, you'll imagine what might happen if we continue to grow on our strengths. Please attend. Your stories, your dreams, and your visions are vital to the process.

Then, notes from each of these workshops will be given to our writing team, a group made up of some of the poets among us, to distill and refine into mission and vision statements. The mission statement will be short and inspiring and the vision will give a more fleshed out picture of where we hope to go as a community. The mission statement will be short, easy to understand, and inspiring. It will be able to fit on T-shirts or bumper stickers or in a single tweet. More importantly, it will live in our hearts and inspire and guide all that happens here for the next several years.

The plan is that the writing team will have something to present to the congregation in April. They will welcome your feedback, maybe do some editing, and present mission and vision statements for members of this church to approve at our annual meeting in May. Once you all adopt it, it will guide all we do here.

So what might this mission be?

I have a few examples for you, to get you imagining. Some Unitarian Universalist Congregations live by these missions:

Curiosity. Courage. Compassion.

Inspiring and empowering all souls to live bold and compassionate lives.

Create community. Celebrate life. Change the world.

¹ Boullata, Peter. 'The Liberal Church Finding Its Mission: It's Not about You.' *Held in the Light: On Spirit, Power, and Transformation*. December 29, 2011. <https://peterboullata.com/2011/12/29/the-liberal-church-finding-its-mission-its-not-about-you/>

Where reason and wonder thrive.
Unleash courageous love!

These are great missions – and I know part of me and maybe part of you wants to just pick your favorite from that list and adopt it and save us all some time. But the process matters just as much as the product. The opportunity to reflect on where we've been, the strengths of our community, and how those strengths might carry us forward is precious and powerful. Sharing stories and dreams with one another matters. Reflecting together will let us to create a mission that is rooted in who we are and where we are going. We are unique. What we will create is different from what any other congregation would create.

Please participate in the workshop. I am excited to see what you all create – and excited to have an inspiring mission and vision to serve as your minister.

And as poet Elizabeth Alexander spoke on that January day nearly eight years ago:

In today's sharp sparkle, this winter air,
any thing can be made, any sentence begun.
On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp,

praise song for walking forward in that light.

On this brink, on this brim, on this cusp,
May we share our precious stories. May we share our precious hopes.
May we know discover what life is calling us to be.
May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.

And today, your chance to begin making it so starts right now. In the mission and vision workshops I mentioned earlier, we will be looking back at our past to see what strengths might carry us forward. I invite you now to begin this conversation. Turn to a person or two or three seated near you and *Tell the story of a time when you experienced inspiration, compassion or connection at People's Church*. If this is your first Sunday with us – or one of your first Sundays – and you don't have a story yet, I invite you to enjoy listening to your neighbors. You'll get a sense of what this community has meant to others and what it could be for you. You all have five minutes for this conversation.