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Sermon Delivered at Unity Church-Unitarian

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Transforming the Church

When Amy and I first gathered to begin preparation for this service, we began with a question. So… what do you mean when you say church? Is it a place? Is it a feeling? Is it history? Consider it for a minute. Think of, maybe, what you might say to a co-worker, a friend, or another parent at school asks: "What do you mean when you say church?"

Maybe this when you might offer your "elevator speech" about Unitarian Universalism. Or maybe when you remember back to the Bond of Fellowship that you and the congregation recited together when you joined, a few weeks or a many years ago in the words "those who believe that a church is a brotherhood of helpers." Perhaps you find church in worship: the serenity of the sanctuary, the moments of poetry and prayer and the movement of a sermon, or the joyful melody of the choir and the Unity Singers. Church for you might be found in the creativity of religious education, the sharing of a meal together on a Wednesday or Sunday, or the meaningful service of community outreach work.

My guess, is that church for you is dynamic, a beloved collection of activities, people and stories, that shifts and changes and grows, from hour to hour, day to day, and throughout the years. Unity Church is a family of families, as Unity Church Minister William Channing Gannett once named this place.

Let's go back in time for a moment… way back to 1648. What did some of our earliest American spiritual ancestors think about church? Our Puritan ancestors in New England set out first to purify the Anglican church on new soil, only to find that they wanted to completely redefine the meaning of church to make that happen. They no longer wanted the smells, the bells, or the creeds of the near Catholic Anglicans, nor the hierarchical power structure of the Presbyterians, nor the financial corruption of the state's

involvement. Instead, they wanted a more horizontal, connected faith where the transformational power of a spiritual life enabled all to participate fully in the formation of a loving, flourishing community.

The Puritans wanted to begin again, as the disciples of Jesus in the early church, just using the words and life of their teacher and their own desire to have self-governing communities like the early Christians did. A new religious movement was founded out of their vision, the Congregationalist movement, whose polity, or way of being together, we still follow along with many other liberal Protestant denominations.
The Cambridge Platform of 1648 is perhaps the most important document to outline and define the structure and vision of the early Puritan congregational churches in Connecticut and Massachusetts.

Only the original, archaic language can really capture the spirit of how Colonial Congregationalists defined church:

> Saints by calling must have a visible political union among themselves, or else they are not yet a particular church, which the Scripture makes use of to show the nature of particular churches; as a body, a building, house, hands, eyes, feet and other members, must be united, or else (remaining separate) are not a body. Stones, timber, though squared, hewn and polished, are not a house, until they are compacted and united; so saints or believers in judgment of charity, are not a church unless orderly knit together.

My translation goes something like this:

Seeking spiritual growth, people of faith (saints) are drawn toward one another in a visible community of like-minded souls. Just as a house is not a house without a kitchen or a bedroom, a group of spiritual people is not properly "knit" together unless by a covenant, the heart of congregational polity. A covenant is not a creed, a requirement of faith. It is a voluntary agreement, that members of the church body enter into for their agreed upon purpose and "mutual duties."

The covenant from the Cambridge Platform read:

> A congregational church is consisting of a company of saints by calling, united into one body by a holy covenant, for the public worship of God, and the mutual edification of one another in the fellowship of the Lord Jesus.

While you might not identify with the language original church covenant of our Puritan ancestors, you might hear echoes of it in the Original Preamble to the Articles of Association of Unity Church, from 1872.

> Recognizing the Fatherhood of God, Brotherhood of Mankind, receiving Jesus as Teacher and seeking the Spirit of Truth as the guide of our lives, in the hope of immortal life, we the undersigned, associate ourselves to maintain the public worship of God and promote the welfare of humanity.

Just our early New England congregations were shaped by the Cambridge platform, throughout its history Unity has been shaped by its own early expression of church. The language resonates with the founding energy of Unity's first families, but this covenant is not timeless: it has been transformed over the years by ministers, boards of trustees, members, friends and communities who together co-create Unity Church Unitarian.

Unity's minister William Channing Gannett was perhaps one of the most foundational in these transformations. A Boston born and bred Unitarian, influenced strongly by Transcendentalists, Gannett cared little for the larger Unitarian Association and prioritized freedom and ethical living. Clear from the start how he would serve Unity church, he moved away from Unity's original covenant, challenging the church to transform theologically in the future direction of Unitarianism: away from its Biblical Christian roots and towards freedom in religion and ethical living.

He believed in the church as a creed-free place to explore meaningful moral life in the world, writing: "Ethics thought out is religious thought; ethics felt out is religious feeling, and ethics lived out is the religious life."

When Gannett was ordained to ministry at Unity Church in March of 1879, he presented this written Bond of Fellowship to the members of the congregation to sign as an

agreement, “made up not of the intellectual beliefs, but of the principles and ideals of our religion.”

New members still recite the very same Bond of Fellowship as it was written then:

> As those who believe in Religion,
> As those who believe in Freedom, Fellowship and Character in Religion,
> As those who believe that the religious life means the thankful, trustful, loyal and helpful life,
> And as those who believe that a church is a brotherhood of helpers wherein it is made easier to lead such a life
> We join ourselves together, name, hand and heart as members of Unity Church.

Here, to me, seems a timeless covenant, that has withstood many transformations of Unity over the years. It’s resonance and power still captures much of the spirit of why this church gathers and for what purpose. But I wonder, as we look to the future, how will this covenant endure? Will its power still resonate to future members? Will it still signify what it means to be Unity church? Or will the core understanding of what a “free,” or liberal church means transform, as language and theology change to embrace an ever-expanding universe of faith?

Over these past few months I have had the pleasure of teaching and learning Unitarian and Universalist church history with you, going deep into our past, lovingly sifting through the writings of our religious heritage with a seekers spirit.

What many people have been surprised to find in the study of religious history is how one begins to find oneself in the twists and turns of our religious past. Ralph Waldo Emerson is famously quoted as saying “All history is biography.” I agree with Mr. Emerson. In history, we write our own spiritual autobiography through the study of our spiritual ancestors. We are called to swell and accelerate and deepen our understandings, to enlargen our territory of our own selves, and to seek a chorus of ancestors and to be an ancestor for future generations. At Unity Church, I have added an entirely new chapter to my own biography by learning the history of this congregation and the Western expansion of Unitarianism.

Like your spiritual ancestor Gannett, I am a part of a generation who was nurtured by the free-church but have a vision for its transformation. Living in such a fast past, quickly changing world, I am of a generation who calls churches by new names: Mega. Emergent. Virtual. Branch. Satellite. The meaning of church is not at all certain or universal. Churches meet in bars, storefronts, theaters, sidewalks, parks and people's homes. Church-goers tweet and update online about sermons in real time, taking their focus from their pastor to their I phone and back again. People listen to sermons online, connect in second life churches for prayer and virtual candle-lighting.

As a minister forming in the tensions implicit in this moment in history, I find myself called to face many of the same struggles of our spiritual ancestors. Namely, what are the limits of our free church to address the spiritual and social problems of the day? Does unlimited freedom in religion and technology un-tether us from covenant, and how do we associate and connect spiritually in meaningful ways and what are barriers to such connection? How do we come to a common understanding about the meaning of the church in a world where the word church has in many ways lost its power? And finally, how do we imagine the church transforming as the world transforms?

As much as I have been shaped by the ambivalence of both my spiritual ancestors and my generation's about church, I am a passionate believer in its redeeming power to change lives and change the world. While I know that technology can abate alienation and apathy and generate connection, I am a passionate believer that the genuine bonds of love can only happen face to face, when a group of people covenants to participate in the co-creation of community, worship, and justice making. What keeps me a believer in church is both my experience of the holy and the bond of covenant and mutual accountability. The virtual church cannot fully hold any one accountable for their part in its shared vision, nor can it witness to spiritual transformation in meaningful ways.

I think our Puritan ancestors all those years ago had it right in many ways when they called their gathered congregations, full of promise and hope, the "visible" church.

Church is about visibility, about presence, about showing up and being counted as a part of a living, growing movement of people. And part of being visible is allowing our voices to be heard as part of that living tradition, not as one voice but as one body, a chorus of diverse opinions, beliefs, and gifts.

Alice Blair Wesley, lay scholar of the Unitarian Universalist church, emphasizes from her own work that “Strong, effective, lively liberal churches, capable of altering positively sometimes the direction of their whole society, will be those liberal churches whose lay members can say clearly, individually and collectively, what are their own most important loyalties.”

Next week, this congregation embarks upon important conversations that will shape the future directions of this church. I hope you choose join your voice and your history as a part of this visible, living tradition at Unity Church.

To close, in the words of James Luther Adams, “I call that church free which in charity promotes freedom in fellowship, seeking unity in diversity. This unity is a potential gift, sought through devotion to the transforming power of creative interchange in generous dialogue. But it will remain unity in diversity.”
May it be so and Amen.

Benediction:

Go in peace with these final words from the Reverend Forrest Church,

“We are free to build and nurture a community of faith as stewards of the visible church, who carry its message in our lives.”

Let's go forth today in the spirit of unity in diversity, inspired by our past to build a more brilliant, radiant future for our ancestors and to be ancestors for generations to come.
May it be so and Amen.