

**“To Be So Bold”**  
**A Sermon by the Rev. Lee Bluemel**  
**Preached at The North Parish on October 4, 2009**  
**Association Sunday**

In some places, good and upright Unitarian Universalists like you and me are treated like outsiders, like a cult, like heretics. It can't be all that much fun.

It can't be fun to be in *such* a significant minority that one must constantly spend energy explaining oneself, defending oneself, protecting oneself... not to mention re-doing the church's sign when it is vandalized, or removing the little cards about eternal damnation as they do every week in Ellisville, Missouri at the Emerson UU Chapel.

This need to constantly explain and defend oneself is often the case for those who belong to a minority— whether of culture, ethnicity, sexual orientation, politics, or religion. It gets exhausting, no doubt. At times, one must long for a few good allies to take the lead, to stand beside you, to feel the same urgency as you do, to offer a public witness.

The trouble is that those who are comfortable- and I put myself in that group-- those who don't need to defend themselves often forget or simply don't understand how urgent are the times at hand. Straight people can miss how urgent the times are for gay and lesbian people seeking equality. The upper middle class can miss how urgent the times are for the poor. Those with health insurance can miss how urgent the times are for those without. Those with European ancestry can miss how urgent the times are for those facing institutional racism. Those who are part of the Establishment can miss how urgent the times are for those outside the Establishment. Humans today can miss how urgent the times are for the upcoming generations.

When this happens, minorities are left to defend for themselves while the rest of us carry on with our lives. Individuals suffer, society and Congress chases its tail in circles, the Kingdom of God on earth continues to elude, and exhaustion reigns rather than justice and compassion, rather than respect for the interdependent web of existence, rather than a world community with peace, liberty and justice for all. And *everyone* misses an experience of the transforming power of love; we miss the oh-so-human and oh-so-divine call to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Now I'm curious- if you feel comfortable sharing: How many of you have felt yourself part a minority as some point in your life? How many of you have been a Unitarian Universalist in another part of the country, perhaps the South or the Midwest? Did it feel different there than here?

When I heard some of the story of the Unitarian Universalists in Ellisville, I felt like writing a letter to the editor of their local paper myself, saying that it's *really* not all that heretical to affirm transcending mystery and wonder, to heed the words and deeds of prophetic women and men- like Jesus or the Buddha. It's not heretical to try to avoid idolatry, to try to renew the spirit. We do it all the time, and look how respectable we are!

I figured I'd send along a photo of our Meeting House and point out that we gather in the church of this town's Founding Fathers and Mothers, the prettiest Meeting House in town I dare say, featured- as we are- on the front page of the town's website.

As I wrote to the folks in Ellisville, "The North Parish was the very first institution of our town, town meetings were held in the Meeting House for decades. The names of our founders are also the names found on the street signs around the "Old Center", where our Meeting House sits overlooking the town green." You can't get much more respectable than that.

Not only that, but our history is that of our nation. Our burial ground has soldiers from the Revolutionary and Civil Wars to prove it- and you can't get much more *American* or *patriotic* than that! In fact, we were humming right along before Missouri was even a U.S. territory! Just try calling us a liberal cult and see how far you get! Just try sending the police to see if we have a permit to worship! We may be a minority faith in a highly Catholic area, a minority faith in our nation, but we've got history on our side and we're not afraid to use it!

How foreign a feeling that must be to the Unitarian Universalists in Missouri. In fact, I thought about titling this sermon "Pride and Prejudice", to account for the pride that people take in this place- at least as a historic landmark- and the prejudice felt outside St. Louis! Of course *we* don't live in St. Louis, so why, perhaps, should we care?

Imagine if your you or your spouse were transferred there, to St. Louis. No doubt, it would feel a bit different-- less crowded, moving from a state of 6.5 million people packed into 7,840 square miles to a state of 5.9 million people spread out over 68,886 square miles. The city of St. Louis might seem small at 344,000 people compared to Boston's 560,000 people. Of course, one can get lost even in a smaller city. To find your niche, one of the first things you would do before going would be to research the UU congregations.

After surfing the web, imagine how delighted you would be to find the Emerson UU Chapel—a very warm and friendly congregation of 92 members. You might be delighted upon your first visit to find a serene, peaceful, airy and bright sanctuary full of large windows, a spiritual and prayerful service and excellent music. No doubt you'd be glad for similarities— the chalice, the hymns, the familiar sound to the readings, sermons and their newly adopted mission: "*To provide a liberal, welcoming community that*

*nurtures people on diverse spiritual paths through engaging worship, collaborative learning, and social action.”*

You might not be surprised to learn that they, too, sent 27 adults and teens to New Orleans for the rebuilding effort. You might be excited that they are planning a Annual “Habitat for Humanity weekend” as an annual church outreach event. If you found yourself missing the Red Bow Fair, you might enjoy their all-congregation Christmas fundraiser— a Madrigal Dinner at Christmas time.

You might notice that the church has a ministry to the gay and lesbian community, even if it is not officially a “Welcoming Congregation”. You might *even* notice- on page 15 of their website-- a photo of two North Parish members—Pat Grimm and Tina Klein, holding a banner that says “Standing on the Side of Love”! “Wow!” you might say, “It’s a small UU world after all.”

Of course, there would be reminders that you weren’t in North Andover anymore... no box pews, since their sanctuary was built in 1993, not 1836. There would be no organ or Paul Revere bell, and at Coffee Hour you might meet some of the congregation’s founders- the 25 year members who started it all! You’d have to be more than 364 years old for that to happen at North Parish.

After a while, you might find it a bit lonely to be in a state with only nine UU congregations- five of which are large enough to have a minister- after living in a state with 142 UU congregations. It might feel a bit lonely to be one of only 2,000 UU’s in the whole state, after living in a state with 23,000. You might both treasure and resent the fact that the congregation is a tiny oasis in Mega-Church land, a land of religious conservatism and fundamentalism.

If you stuck around even longer, the painful stories might begin to come out... stories about defending the congregation’s right to be. You might begin to witness with your own eyes people weeping with relief upon finding a congregation that shared their values and theology, a congregation that honored their integrity and search for truth, and accepted them for who they are. You might shed your own tears in that sanctuary if your marriage no longer had standing just because you happen to be gay or lesbian and were now living in Missouri.

Towards the end of her reflection, Rev. Taves writes, “To be a religious liberal in Missouri is to be an outsider. Our challenge is not to retreat in fear, because clearly, our witness is badly needed. We often say that we’re not about saving souls. We’re literally about saving lives. We see the truth of this every day.”

“Our witness is badly needed.” Today’s connection with the UU’s of Missouri reminds me that *our witness is badly needed, too—more than we may know*. I say this, even as I recognize we are “in-between” social action committees, and are waiting for a workshop on October 13<sup>th</sup> to begin setting a new social justice structure and direction. I say this, even as I recognize many in this congregation do amazing

things on their own, or act for social justice in church groups or teams. I say this, even as I recognize that offering public witness is not *necessarily* part of the basic character or constitution of North Parish.

We are a bit more used to people coming *to* us, not having to go *out* to them. We might enjoy the stories of Rev. Blanchard marching in Lawrence against the Vietnam War, but we haven't held any regular anti-war vigils outside our front doors since Chrissy Middleton led some at the start of the Iraq war when she was in high school... and she's now graduated from college. Maybe when you've been around for 364 years and expect to be around for 364 more, you tend to feel that you've seen it all, and lose a sense of urgency.

I also think of what our Director of Religious Education, Danielle Gerrior, said when I first showed her our sanctuary with its old box pews. She said something like, "Oh my, this *is* a place for the upstanding and righteous citizens of town!" We just don't emit that "rebel with a cause" kind of image. But wouldn't it be fun to try?

I am truly curious about what *you* think and feel- what causes *you* are passionate about. Some may feel our witness is badly needed on October 24<sup>th</sup>, when we ring the bell for climate change. Some may feel our witness is needed next week, when many Unitarian Universalists will join in the civil rights struggle of our time by marching for equality in Washington or by setting up phone banks to make calls on behalf of same sex marriage in Maine. Some may feel our witness is needed on the topic of health care, or the current wars, or simply to let more people know what Unitarian Universalism stands for and that they are welcome here.

Some may be interested in following the lead of other congregations who vote on two issues to focus on in a given year. Some may feel these things are for home and not church; some may be waiting for someone else to organize it all. Some may feel they're too new here to offer a suggestion and put together a sign-up sheet.

In fact, I am curious-- How many of you feel like you're still "new" here, that you're not insiders at North Parish? How many of those with hands raised have been here longer than a year? To all of you, I say, *you don't have to be a descendent of a Puritan to belong here!* It's time to jump in, to know this is a place where you *do* belong, where we *need* your voice.

Congregations, like individuals, are shaped by our founding stories- in conscious and unconscious ways. These stories can give us strengths, gifts and a valuable identity. But they can also hold us back in curious ways. Our story, historically, is one of the Establishment, the Respectable, the Insiders in town.

In her closing words to us, Rev. Taves says: "This is our gift to you: Each of us bears a powerful witness. Sometimes bearing our witness calls us to live against the grain, and in doing so, we are saved every day. We have the responsibility to offer others the chance to be saved as we have been."

What would it take, what would it mean for us to go against the grain, to be as bold as the Unitarian Universalists of Ellisville have to be, just to gather together? Whom might we stand beside? What might we call attention to as religious people? How do we feel called by each other, by God, by the divine, by Great Compassion? How might we witness to all that we have found to be good and beautiful and true?

As some of us being a conversation about the future of social action efforts at North Parish on October 13<sup>th</sup>, I hope many of you will share your thoughts. I don't know what the answers will be, or if there will be some answers. What I *do* know is that for some-- for the UU's way out in Ellisville, Missouri, for soldiers and refugees, for married couples and ill people and the next generations-- there is a lot at stake these days.

And if anyone here wants to be a rebel with a cause, a heretic in the *best* sense of the word, we have an awfully good location to offer public witness and some really good credentials if you want to give it a try. I invite you!

Amen.

*Benediction:*

When I wrote my piece to the folks in Missouri, I ended with these words:

“Here is a gift we would offer you today: the reminder that you are part of a long and worthy tradition with deep historical roots in this nation, and that from small beginnings great things can come. The twelve so-called “free-holders” who founded our congregation in 1645 could never have foreseen that their effort would not only survive but evolve through the centuries— to promote greater religious and personal freedom for all people.

May you and your founders be so unexpectedly blessed. We thank you for creating and keeping the flame of Unitarian Universalism alive in Ellisville, and wish you many blessings and triumphs in the year ahead.”

May we, too, find blessings and triumphs. And may we be as bold as those in Ellisville, as bold as the world and our own hearts need us to be. Amen.