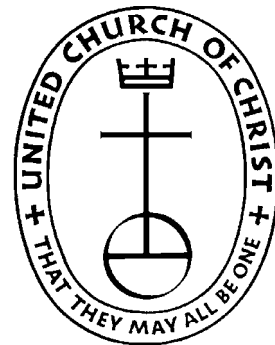


A House for Hope, Part 1

A Sermon By —
LIBBY TIGNER
August 22, 2010



Progressive theology has the capacity to provide hope – hope that things can be different, hope that our religious lives and communities have relevance, hope that we can, indeed, all get along, and hope that we can all work together for the common good.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

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241 Cedar Avenue, Long Beach, California

A House for Hope

August 22, 2009

There is an old Chinese blessing, or maybe it's a curse, "May you live in interesting times." I think that we live in interesting times. Our country is embroiled in the longest war in which it has ever been engaged. We are living the least stable and most frightening economic environment in a century. Our politics are so polarized that we find it difficult to hold civil conversations with people with whom we disagree.

Culturally, we have been at war for my whole life: the civil rights movement, the women's movement, antiwar and peace movements, the struggle for equal rights and marriage rights for lesbian, gay, transgender and bisexual people have been making headlines and been splashed across the TV screen for as long as I've been able to read.

The religious voices that have been heard the loudest and the most clearly in the past 25 years have been predominantly from the religious right. Organizations like the Christian Coalition and Focus on the Family are well-oiled and well-funded machines, and it seems that much of the perception in the market of ideas is that American religious folks are anti-gay, anti-abortion, pro-war, anti-immigration, and, well, you see the headlines and you know the perceptions.

Those of us who are claim to be part of a liberal or progressive religious movement know that there are people of deep and abiding faith who do not see eye to eye on many, if indeed any issues, as, say, the good people at Focus on the Family. And we have forgotten that until a little more than a generation ago, the religious voice in the United States was more progressive than otherwise.

A very brief review of American history will remind us that it was largely religious leaders in this country who championed for the creation of free schools and public hospitals. It was religious communities who led in the movements to end slavery and to give women the right to vote. It was members of the clergy and good church people who marched with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King to bring full and equal protection under the law, including unhindered voting rights, to black Americans.

Progressive religious thinking has been, until very recently, a loud and clear voice in the public arena. And it needs to be again. You see, we may think that the arguments about war, about health care, about secure borders, about marriage rights are political or social issues. But I'd like to offer that they are, at their root, theological issues.

I think that our politics and our social policies are merely reflections of how we have, as individuals and as a society, respond to the three most basic of all theological issues: who or what is God? What is the nature and the purpose of the human being? Why do bad things happen? And I say that our political questions are theological questions because, no matter our creed or religion, no matter if we have gathered weekly into a faith community, we Americans claim overwhelmingly to believe in God.

A poll released just three months ago states that 92% of Americans say that they believe in God. Of course, what they mean by “believing in God” is widely varied, but it does seem to follow that if most of us believe in God, then how we understand God and the nature of humanity has a big part in shaping our public life. We don’t need to be concerned about taking our religious beliefs into the social sphere – religious beliefs already dominate social policy making and social mores in our country. What we need to do is to be bold about bringing a progressive religious voice into our public discourse.

In their new book, *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-first Century*,ⁱ Unitarian-Universalist ministers and educators John Buehrens and Rebecca Ann Parker make the claim that in such a tumultuous time as this, progressive theology has the capacity to provide hope – hope that things can be different, hope that our religious lives and communities have relevance, hope that we can, indeed, all get along, and hope that we can all work together for the common good.

The methodology that they employ in their book is the metaphor of a house. Walls that define and support us, a roof that shelters us, a garden which sustains us, welcoming rooms where we gather around a common table, and a threshold over which we step to enter into the larger world – these are used to help us understand how a progressive theology can shape, protect, nurture and prepare us for how we live our lives.

As our schedules have worked out, with Jerry’s vacation and study leave time, I will be preaching on four of the next eight Sundays. I am planning to use this book as my guide for three of those sermons, exploring this metaphor of house to articulate the “frames that give our dreams shape and meaning” and which fill us with hope.

Let us begin our exploration with the framework, the walls that establish the boundaries of who we are and how we understand our common work. In the introduction to the book, Buehrens and Parker include this poem called “Prayer for this House” by American writer Louis Untermeyer, who lived from 1885 to 1977:

May nothing evil cross this door,
And may ill fortune never pry
About these windows; may the roar
And rain go by.

Strengthened by faith, these rafters will
Withstand the batt'ring of the storm;
This hearth, though all the world grow chill,
Will keep us warm.

Peace shall walk softly through these rooms,
Touching our lips with holy wine,
Till ev'ry casual corner blooms
Into a shine.

Laughter shall drown the raucous shout;
And, though these shelt'ring walls are thin,
May they be strong to keep hate out
And hold love in.

Our conversation about “these shelt’ring walls,” that keep hate out and love in, is, in theological terms, our ecclesiology. From the Greek word *ekklesia*, which means “called together,” ecclesiology asks what is the nature and the purpose of a religious community? Obviously, how we answer that question depends upon our theology, but my progressive, incarnational theology tells me that each person a child of God, and therefore is worthy and deserving of the same grace, love, attention, affirmation, comfort, care, compassion, guidance, friendship, support that I would wish for myself. And therefore, in a faith community of which I would choose to be a part, there must be care-taking, and generosity, and compassion, and truth-telling.

And there is both an inward and an outward thrust in how that is lived out. Within the community, we need to care for one another, to know each other, to spend time together. If we participate together in the sacrament of holy communion, then there are other tables around which we need to break bread together. We need to spend time listening to each other over lunch at the First Church Café, or walk to a nearby restaurant in groups after church for brunch from time to time. Our responsibility to the children whom we name as God’s beloved in the sacrament of baptism doesn’t end once the water has dried from their heads; rather it is required of us to play with them at the picnic, or teach them in church school, or to be a chaperone for their youth outings. We pray for one another during the pastoral prayer, and we’ve got to turn

those prayers into action by sending cards that say “I missed you in church,” or calling someone who has lost a life partner and inviting them to a movie, asking someone who you know is low on funds to go to lunch, and you pick up the tab.

And there is an outward thrust. Our compassion and caring cannot be limited to our own personal or communal well-being, as tempting or as cozy as that might be, because we are not the only ones who are made in God’s image, and we are not the only ones who are living with hurt and neglect and abuse. There are so many ways to make a difference. Want something really easy? Come down here to church on the third Saturday of the month at 5 p.m., and work shoulder to shoulder in the kitchen downstairs with other volunteers to prepare a hot meal to take to the New Image shelter for homeless folks. Often it’s only hot dogs, but to someone who hasn’t eaten all day, a hot dog tastes pretty darn good, and you just might get a standing ovation from those whom you serve.

Want something that will really utilize your great organizational skills for one event a year? Gather two or three of your detail-oriented friends, and volunteer to do the leg-work for our participation in the Martin Luther King, Jr. or the Gay Pride parade, so that this church can continue to have a visible public presence in affirming the full human rights of every person, no matter race or skin color or sexual orientation.

Do you secretly, or not so secretly, enjoy getting up into somebody’s face a little bit? You know what? There are lots of demonstrations that could use your enthusiasm and your fearlessness – demonstrations for peace, demonstrations for worker’s rights, demonstrations for immigrant’s rights, for the rights of persons with disabilities. We’d be happy to introduce you to just the right organizer.

Because here’s the thing. Once again, it’s about theology. If we believe that God loves all of us, if we believe that God’s spirit dwells in all of us, if we believe that we encounter the divine in our interactions with each other, then we have to act on that. Or maybe I should say that backwards – if we treat one another with kindness and generosity, then that just may be that it’s because we believe that all other people are part of the spirit of our living God. There is a slogan that used to appear on UCC bumper stickers. It said “To believe is to care. To care is to do.”

That “doing” will be different for each of us, based on how we individually and collectively interpret our ecclesiology – the nature and the purpose of church. But for me, it’s also important to remember that to really be able to get to the “doing” part, I need the church. I need the community, I need the support, I need the structure to do the things that, if left to my own devices, I wouldn’t think of, wouldn’t have the energy

for, or wouldn't seem important. The structure and the support that are the walls of our community give me focus and meaning and purpose and hope.

In the book, Rebecca Ann Parker tells a story about her cousin, Megan. A few years ago, Megan was going through a bad period in her life after a painful breakup, and all of her friends and family were worried about her. One day Megan invited Rebecca to lunch, bursting with good news.

"I've been born again!" she announced happily. Rebecca, remember, a Unitarian Universalist minister, waited, warily. "I was driving my car and listening to a radio preacher," Megan went on, and I can imagine some of what might have been going through Rebecca's head. But Megan continued, "The preacher didn't say that if I would just believe Jesus was the one and only Son of God, my personal savior, who died for my sins, I would be saved. He said everybody is a child of God – everyone can be like Christ. I was so excited," she said, "I talked back to the radio, 'that's what I believe! I believe everyone can be a savior and that we can save the world by loving it and each other.'"

Megan went on, "Then it came over me in a rush that if I believed everyone was a child of God, it meant that I was a child of God. If anyone could be a savior of the world, then I could be a savior of the world. I felt a great sense of love surrounding me, surrounding everything, and I felt like the whole purpose of my life had suddenly become clear.

"When I woke up the next morning," Megan continued, "I still felt great love all around me. I decided to try to bring this love into every encounter during the day. To help myself, I started each morning by sitting quietly to meditate and concentrate my awareness on love. I created an altar to help me remember my sense of purpose. I put up a picture of earth from outer space. I arranged a vase of fresh flowers. I lit candles. I'd become peaceful and focused. But the minute I'd get into my daily routine, it would all fall apart. I'd go to the grocery store, the checkout person would annoy me, and I would forget that she was a child of God and that I was a savior of the world. How was I going to stay focused on love and put it into practice?"

Rebecca Parker goes on to tell of Megan's discovery that being involved in an active, caring, compassionate community of faith gave her the structure, the framework, the supports that she needed to live out her faith as she had discovered it. We all need that compassionate community to give us the structure, the framework, the support that we need to make through these "interesting times" in which we live.

Parker writes, “Much in our dominant culture can lull people into numbness, complacency, or compliance. Staying awake, becoming active rather than passive in the world, requires something more of us – something that we cannot do alone. Religious communities can enable people to claim and deepen the values that the dominant culture is ignoring or denying. They can convert us from lifestyles that disregard the earth and are heedless of the environmental damage and danger we are courting, to lifestyles of reverence and gratitude that enable us to be less materialistic and more attentive to the goodness of life’s intangibles. They can free us from consuming unsatisfying intellectual junk food and give us deep nourishment through the bread and wine spiritual traditions, sacred texts, intellectual quotes, meditation and prayer.”

Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh has written, “I hope to see communities like that everywhere, as a kind of demonstration that life is possible, a future is possible. There are many things that regulate us, rob us of our serenity, our peace, our time, ourselves. So, a community that shows abundance of life, that is an example of the wholeness of life, would be an eloquent sign of the possibility of the future.

One last citation: In her spiritual autobiography, *Traveling Mercies*, Anne LaMott, who is a convert to progressive religious thought and practice, talks about why she insists that her son, Sam, go with her to church. She is aware that this is not the norm for her left-leaning friends, and that it’s not always popular with Sam himself. She writes this:

“The main reason [I make him go] is that I want to give him what I have found in the world, which is to say, a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want, which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy, are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community, who pray or practice their faith, they are Buddhists, Jews, Christians, people banding together to work on themselves and for human rights. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle, and they are a part of something beautiful.”

These sheltering walls, this community which calls us, supports us, defines us and strengthens us, is a place where God’s spirit is found and shared. As we each contribute to and are nurtured by one another, may this community always be a source of joy and of hope. Amen.

ⁱ John A. Buehrens and Rebecca Ann Parker. *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-first Century*. Beacon Press, 2010.