

**First Unitarian Universalist Church of Berks County**  
**Rev. Sandra Fees**  
**October 12, 2008**  
**Grow the Spirit**

**Sermon Reading – by Barbara Merritt**

I love the description of Jesus' fishing lesson to his friends after the resurrection... Jesus has already shown himself to his disciples indoors. Then, on another occasion, he has even allowed the doubtful Thomas to stick his hand through his body. John claims Jesus showed himself over and over again to his skeptical disciples; so many times in fact, that they are not even written down. Then Simon Peter says, "Ok, time to go fishing," After a night of unsuccessful fishing, Jesus appears to them again and speaks to them from close to the shore directly asking, "Have you caught anything?" And the disciples (who like all disciples, are as dumb as posts) are reported to have come to this conclusion: "The disciples knew not that it was Jesus." Now, I guess at this point, Jesus could have preached a sermon to them, or scolded them, or pointed in a vigorous manner at himself.

Instead, he asked for them to do something differently, to lower their nets on a new side of the boat. Now you can just hear the rational arguments: Why change? (Same water on the left as on the right; same Sea of Tiberius; the fish didn't bite last night, or this morning—why would they bite over there, when nothing is going on over here.) We human beings have strong convictions that we know exactly how the universe operates, and if we only keep doing what we have been doing, eventually things will improve. But Jesus says, "No, do something new." Change your orientation; imagine that a stranger on the shore might know something that you don't. And when the disciples moved to the other side, it wasn't only their nets that became full of fish; their eyes opened, and their hearts awoke and they understood that there were miracles in every direction.

[This] is a story, an important story, about how all of us can see things we've never seen before, how we can move past the old, imprisoning assumptions and beliefs. How the world keeps getting larger, if you pay attention.

### **Sermon**

Part of our spirituality as Unitarian Universalists has to do with how we relate to one another. We are bound to other people by our relationships and the promises we make to one another.

This may sound like a call to some kind of lofty behavior. And it is. But it seems to me to be practical as well as virtuous. When times are good, really good, it may seem that we are able to make it on our own. The relationships we have are wonderful and may make our lives happier.

When times are lean, we realize that our relationships are essential to survival. We need others, and they also need us. When we experience financial difficulties, when we have crises in our lives such as a death or job loss or relationship break up, we are struck fully with this reality. When we see others going through these difficulties, we also recognize the power we have to sustain and heal.

Our relationships, our bundle of sticks as we talked about in our Time for All Ages, can help us grow the spirit. People support and help one another. People can also encourage each other to spiritual growth. That's part of what we do for each other.

When we are together, we share in rituals. We explore what it means to be a religious person in today's world. We work on programs that will improve people's lives. We have fun. We grow our group spirit, the human spirit, the holy spirit, the spirit of life, the spirit of love. We grow the spirit inside each of us and the spirit around us. And that transforms lives. That's really what our coming together is all about, transforming lives.

When I think about transformation, the first image that comes to mind is the caterpillar becoming a butterfly. That process does not happen without some challenges, as we know. Change requires something of us. The caterpillar provides a metaphor for our own ability to become more fully the person we hope to be.

This week I attended the Justice Awards Breakfast for the prison society, Berks Connections/Pre-Trial Services. I'm on their board. Our keynote speaker was the Honorable Michael Eakin, Justice of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania. He told us a story from the days when he was district attorney, and I want to share that with you. One day on his way home from Harrisburg, he stopped off at the mall. When he went out to his car, it wouldn't start. He went back in to call AAA. He says this was before the days of cell phones.

As he walked toward the phone, a woman in the mall recognized him. She came up to talk with him. She was someone who he had helped send to prison years earlier. As the woman approached him, he did not know what to expect. At first, he did not even know who she was. Imagine his surprise when she told him what he done for her. And then she thanked him. She said he had made it possible for her to have a break from her life. Going to prison, she said, made it possible for her to end an abusive relationship and stop running drugs for her boyfriend.

It turned out that being in prison gave her a chance to get her life back together. And she took it. After prison, she was able to get help and things were going well. She was even in a healthy relationship with a loving and caring person.

In getting her sent to prison, this was exactly what Eakin was hoping for. He wanted to find a course of action – besides simply letting her off – that would be in her long-term best interest. He wasn't suggesting that prison is the answer for everyone who has ever broken the law. He just wanted to find ways for the justice system to actually make a genuine difference in a person's life.

Eakin himself was so moved by this encounter that he walked back outside of the mall, forgetting that his car wasn't running. He hadn't even yet made the phone call to AAA.

We can see in this story how we sometimes need something dramatic to happen to us for us to be open to change. Most of us are afraid of change, or we just don't know how to get out of what we've gotten used to. Or we may like the changes we think we can control, but not so much the other ones.

When we think about change, we may worry that we'll be asked to give more of ourselves than we think we have to give. We may worry that we'll fail. We may be uncomfortable being challenged to change our behavior. But often we need a little or big nudge to change old patterns. Prison was that nudge for the woman Eakin talked about. But she still had a lot of work to do when she got out.

Anyone who seeks a vibrant life has got to be willing to change and to work for change. Anyone who wants to grow spiritually has to be open to seeing things in new ways. A church that wants to grow has got to be willing to change and work for change. We don't change for its own sake – either individually or institutionally. We strive to change in ways that make us stronger, happier, more compassionate – as individuals and as a group.

As we heard in this morning's sermon reading, if we can't learn to fish out of the other side of the boat, and to teach others to fish out of the other side of the boat, we are all going to go hungry. We will starve spiritually, and perhaps physically too. Spiritual growth does not happen because we hold tightly to the way things have been, to the way we have always done them. We know this, but it still isn't easy.

Our congregation is learning to fish from the other side of the boat. We are connecting our two buildings – this one and the one next door. In a few months, there's going to be a pretty big hole punched through the wall in the next room and we are going to become one building – rather than two.

Offices will move next door. Our older children and youth will finally have a great, renovated facility in which to meet. We will have more meeting rooms. The project is going to be a dramatic and tangible symbol of our growth as a church – our growth in numbers, our growth in spirit, our growth as a liberal religion.

It's a big deal. This project declares that our liberal voice matters. It matters to us. It matters to the city of Reading and to this County. It acknowledges and supports our real growth in numbers, our growth in young families, our growth across all age groups, and our growth in people from all income levels.

It acknowledges and supports our real growth of ministry within and outside the church. What we are doing with this project is transforming our spiritual home in order to transform people's lives.

I also want to say a few words about the larger faith of Unitarian Universalists. After all today is Association Sunday. It's not just about our one church. As important as our relationships locally are, our relationship to our larger movement is also important. Being part of something larger than just our local church helps us to hold a bigger vision of our liberal faith.

Sometimes people mistakenly refer to us as non-denominational. Non-denominational churches are one-offs. We are not. We are associational. We choose voluntarily to be a part of an association of independent, self-governing congregations. We choose to be part of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

We support each other. There are many ways this happens. There are workshops offered at the district and regional level. There are discussion groups on a wide range of topics. Ministers, board presidents, DREs and others form networks across our congregations to share resources and experiences. Each year there are also gatherings of UUs at the regional and national level. We gather to worship, study, and work. Grants are provided.

Social justice efforts are made strong by the larger network. We can effect greater changes at the state or national level when we work across congregations. For example, there is a group called UUPLAN that is helping Pennsylvania UUs advocate for liberal religious values. This network brings visibility to Unitarian Universalists, and it gives us an opportunity to be a voice for the oppressed, the needy, and the poor with legislative leaders. We need to have our voices heard on these concerns. This is how change begins to happen at the societal level.

It is inspiring and uplifting to know we are part of this larger association of liberal religious people. It is practical too. We can know that if we move to another area of the state or the country we can find other people who share our spiritual values and ethics.

Some of you moved here from other areas where you attended a UU church and were grateful to find this one when you moved to Berks. We know that if we go to any of our 1,000 congregations across the country we will find spiritual companions. We may find them in other places too, but we know with some certainty that we will find them in Unitarian Universalism.

We know that they will for the most part care about many of the same core values we care about – compassion, justice, kindness, fairness. We know they will seek to advance

liberal religion and all that means. Like us, they want to keep the voice of liberal religion alive in their own lives and in this world of ours. There are many guardians of our principles and concerns.

For a lot of people, the world is looking a bit scary right now. There is a great deal of uncertainty. Being part of a religious community and being part of a larger religious tradition can be reassuring.

We have the strength of our congregation and the support of the larger denomination. More simply put, we are not alone. The dreams we have for the kind of ethical and religious world we want are shared by many other people.

I am part of an online discussion list of Unitarian Universalist ministers. It's a confidential list, but I can tell you that we are talking about the economy and Association Sunday as part of our discussion right now.

One of my colleagues in ministry, the Rev. Theresa Novak who serves our congregation in Ogden, Utah, reflected on preparing to preach about Association Sunday in such economically uncertain times. I asked Theresa for her permission to share her words. She was happy to grant it.

She said:

It is times like these when we need each other the most. We need our religious communities and we need our UUA. This Sunday is Association Sunday, and we definitely aren't cancelling it here.... It is a matter of faith. Times are hard. We are an economically diverse congregation, and some of our folks have been struggling for a long time. They are still generous with their church. It makes them feel wealthy to be able to give. Cut back on consumer spending, reuse, recycle, but don't abandon your dreams. It is a matter of faith. ...we are a generous people, and we will be here for each other and for the surrounding community. Hope and power, that is what I think I need to preach.

Today is Association Sunday. And it seems to come at just the right time. There are a lot of people hurting and afraid. We need each other especially at times like this.

We need a strong faith that will give us hope and power so we don't abandon our dreams. We need to have the courage to be there to help each other especially at times like this. We need to grow our faith, grow our church, grow our relationships, grow our spirit, especially at times like this. It is a matter of faith.

Blessed be and amen.