

Love Changes Everything

## CLF SERVICE

The Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt

June 22, 2006

So, what do you get when you bring together a Pentecostal and an evangelical Baptist and a Roman Catholic and a Unitarian Universalist and an agnostic and seat them at a dining room table? Well, you get my family of origin at Thanksgiving dinner. Every year the four of us, along with our respective children, converge on Mama's house in Chicago to eat till we can't move, gossip about everybody we haven't seen for a year, and talk about our two favorite topics—politics and religion.

It doesn't really seem like Thanksgiving until we stand around the table crammed with food, until Mama asks me to say grace, because as the minister in the family I am the designated prayer; it's not Thanksgiving until my mother picks up where I leave off, ending her prayer with her heartfelt "In Jesus' Name," and until one of my brothers, the only Republican in a houseful of

Democrats, says something nice about the president and sets the rest of us off into howls of exasperated laughter.

No wonder Jane and I had so much fun at lunch last year, sitting on the floor and talking theology—though we grew up under vastly different circumstances, we share the common ground of big families, lively dinner conversations and a certain courage when it comes to speaking about matters of faith.

Now, our churches or congregations or fellowships are not families, they are spiritual communities of choice. Neither is our association a family, but it really is hard not to see us –just for a second—as a big noisy family, clamoring for attention and space, cross with each other on occasion, but quick to love and to defend one another against those who would impose rigid doctrine on our spiritual brothers and sisters, even if we don't always agree with what they're talking about. It's kind of neat to think of us all at some enormous dinner table, passing the Brussels sprouts and candied yams and speculating about the existence of heaven.

Sitting at a table, talking about theology—there are moments when I wish I could spend my whole life that

way, because for me, theology is so much fun. I love trying to figure out why we're all here, and what we're meant to do, and compare notes with folks who are sure we are born with a mission, and folks who think life is all one big random roll of the dice, and folks who just don't know, but who still want their lives to count for something.

I love the idea of worshipping with people who can feel the heart of God beat within them, with those who hear the voice of the Goddess whispering to them in the dark womb of night. I admire the courageous clarity of the atheist, who thinks life is too important to threaten people with stories about it, who live with rigorous honesty about creation, unwilling to embrace what cannot be proven. I hunger after the simplicity of Buddhist practice, its clear-eyed and hard-won serenity about the terror and the beauty of life. As for myself, I hold close the memory of my experience of God as an all-loving, all-embracing Presence, one that never forgets us, never abandons us, a Presence that, even in the midst of sorrow and failure, showers us with blessing. One of the biggest blessings of my life is getting to serve as a parish

minister, working in community with people who think and believe all kinds of things about God.

On the best days of my ministry I love it—it's just like Thanksgiving at my mom's house—only at a bigger table. But that's not always the ministry I get to do, and as I travel and preach, it's not always the ministry I get to experience. That's what gave me so much energy on the floor with Jane; it was all kinds of little moments I've experienced over the 20 years I've been a Unitarian Universalist, moments that exemplify what we collectively call “the theist/humanist controversy,” words that sound deep and intellectual, but that we experience personally.

I don't know anyone who hasn't had such a moment: the whispered conversations I have had with members of churches that I visit who thank me for using the word God in my sermon and say with a kind of yearning, “We don't get to talk much about that around here.” The member of my congregation who told me, a couple of years after I'd been called, “When we looked at your packet, the fact that you were black wasn't a problem, and the fact

that you were a woman wasn't a problem. But the fact that you believed in God had us worried."

I won't even touch on the list of more egregious comments, including someone who suggested that I might not want to talk so much about Jesus in future sermons; it is a comment I might have been able to hear with better grace had I not been preaching about Jesus on Easter.

I am one of those people who is grateful to our president, Bill Sinkford, for opening the conversation on the language of reverence. It has been clearing the air in congregations across the country and I thank him for starting it every chance I get. But the more I have thought about it, the more I have come to believe that ours is not a language problem; ours is an attitude problem. The word God is not the enemy; our fear of it is. Christianity is not our enemy; fundamentalism of every kind is. Yet some of us are so afraid of being thrown back into the irrational religious past that we have succumbed to a curious fundamentalism of our own. Some of us have oh, so quietly made our congregations into bunkers to protect us from contamination by believers in anything different than our own postures of faith. Instead of living

as communities resistant to the current culture of disrespect, we have embraced one of our broader culture's most destructive qualities—we have stopped listening to one another, in an effort to protect our own hearts and the fragility of our own spiritual journeys.

And we have been cheating ourselves spiritually as a result. We have forsaken the gifts of religious hospitality and the blessings that come from hearing each other into speech about our differing beliefs: the blessings of a broader view, a wider embrace of this wonderful world and its people that are only some of the fruits of a genuinely open mind and a genuinely open heart.

It is my honor to serve as minister at the church that ordained Clarence Russell Skinner, perhaps the greatest Universalist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He wrote these words about God that have guided many of us in our congregation as we work to move on: “The Universalist idea of God is that of a Universal Immanent Spirit whose nature is love. It is the largest thought the world has ever known; it is the most revolutionary doctrine ever proclaimed; it is the most expansive hope ever dreamed.”

There are many Unitarian Universalist communities that have actively chosen to embrace Skinner's revolutionary and expansive hope. They are choosing to move on from fear; they are choosing to do church differently. There are atheists sitting next to followers of Jesus, and they are in real conversation. Theists are learning ritual from their pagan sisters and brothers. Ministers are preaching about the Hebrew Scriptures and quantum mechanics. There are prayer groups and healing circles and sanghas too, and best of all, best of all: no one is apologizing to anyone else for being fully who they are.

Unitarian Universalists are moving on again, this time by bringing together the very best that human beings have learned about how to live and how to die and how to care for one another. We are moving on by creating community among those for whom community was said to be impossible. We are moving on by modeling in church what Jane and I learned at home, what I am reminded of every Thanksgiving, what many of us have learned in our families and in our lives—it is amazing what can happen when we let love lead the way. Not that sticky, icky sentimental and anemic love, but gritty,

hands-on, long-haul love that may give us the only glimpse we ever get of what heaven looks like. It is that kind of love that changes everything. Amen.