

Many People, One Faith

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Rev. Liz McMaster

For those of you who've been hanging around Restoration for a few years, you know that I applied for this pulpit once in 1997—came in second—applied again in 2003—scored—and spent a year here as your Interim Minister and fell in love with you. This church and you people created the best year of my ministry and I am deeply grateful to you for that and for allowing me to be present with you today.

My sermon focus is in two parts: us as individuals and us in community, together. For this reason I've separated the morning readings, as each is relevant to one of the two parts.

Our first reading is “The Journey”, by Mary Oliver

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice—
though the whole house began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
“Mend my life!”

each voice cried.

But you didn't stop.

You knew what you had to do,

though the wind pried

with its stiff fingers

at the very foundations—

though their melancholy

was terrible.

It was already late

enough, and a wild night,

and the road full of fallen

branches and stones.

But little by little,

as you left their voices behind,

the stars began to burn

through the sheets of clouds,

and there was a new voice,

which you slowly

recognized as your own,

that kept you company

as you strode deeper and deeper

into the world,

determined to do

the only thing you could do—

determined to save the only life you could save.

The poet has told us much about what it means to be an individual: that there will always be those around us giving us their two cents worth of advice, which may or may not help—usually it doesn't!; that it takes courage to do what we know to be right; and that the struggle to live our lives as we see them is the only way if we want to live as whole selves. Often we're not sure which road to take, but mostly we do. Robert Frost takes 'the road less traveled', as do many of us Unitarian Universalists. Many of us were nineteenth century abolitionists; many of us in the early twentieth century took a stand for women's voting rights and against war as an answer to dispute; two hundred of our ministers and many UU laypersons marched with Dr. King in Selma and two, James Reeb, the minister, and Viola Liuzzo, the laywoman, gave their lives for justice; we fought in the seventies for women's rights, in the eighties for gay rights; and many of us today stand for marriage equality, troop withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan, and preservation of the world's ecology. In a nation that values money and fame, commerce over the arts, glitz over depth, we UU's have mostly chosen 'the road less traveled' as our primary path. Theologically, we have chosen to make this life productive and worthwhile, over believing we are saved through faith, and that in itself makes a difference in our daily living; not thinking about the hereafter, we can spend more thought on the here and now—thought and, hopefully, action. I think our 'way' is gaining traction—more and more of the traditional Christian faiths are lowering their gates to welcome those who have formerly been denied entrance. In Albuquerque a neighborhood Congregational church has a sign on its busy street corner welcoming and affirming all, and it houses the local

chapter of PFLAG, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. I went to a Lutheran service a few Sundays ago in Albuquerque to hear Dr. Robert Ray's *Gospel Mass*, a work I had heard several years ago and loved. Dr. Ray is a composer/conductor, a professor of keyboard studies at the University of Missouri at St. Louis and has composed this magnificent choral work that rocks the Catholic Mass to an African-American beat that could almost make me a believer! That Lutheran church is part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, which stated in 1991 that it welcomed gay, lesbian and bisexual people to its open communion table. And in practice, this local Lutheran church, St. Paul's, indeed is a welcoming church, if it has taken no stand on gay marriage as yet. Instances abound of Christians from all denominations, both from the Catholic Church, for instance, Catholics for Choice, and many Protestant denominations of believers in equality and fighters for justice. We make a mockery of our own religion by denigrating that of others. As for our eschewing consumerism and our strong belief and actions in saving this precious earth, I do believe that this current economic bust has caused many other Americans of other faiths and non-faith alike to be turning toward living a simpler life, valuing this precious earth more, being more savvy in how we save and spend our money. Our parents and grandparents came out of the Great Depression knowing the value of the dollar; perhaps it can rub off on today's Americans as well.

We UU's value our individualism. Historically, we have been proud of standing up to the masses—for fairness, for justice, for freedom. Our Unitarian, our Universalist and our UU history books

are replete with our heroes who were scorned at best, killed at worst to defend these values. We honor them in our Purposes and Principles, in our celebrations and on our T-shirts.

Where would we be without this streak—this large swathe—of individualism? The earth has been saved, countries have been rescued by those who stand against the power of the state—think the rescue of Jews out of Europe in the Thirties and Forties--or even at times the dictatorship of the proletariat—think Proposition 8 in California. Those who go along with the masses, who don't speak up, perhaps even toddy to power, can cause all sorts of evils in the world. We know—we've been told throughout history—that those who refuse to speak out are as guilty as those who create dictatorships of ruthless power. Mass hysteria has caused people to be trampled in the rush out of a burning building or the downfall of a greedy financial empire. It has contributed to military might becoming tyrannical leadership. Examples of mass hysteria abound. From ancient times to the present: the death of Jesus, the rein of the Inquisition, the scourge of Hitler's Third Reich, And currently: Myanmar, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Darfur—that list can go on and on—election shenanigans in many countries of the world, including our own. And the soaring world economies of the nineties and early twenty-first century becoming the second largest depression in two hundred years. We let bad things happen to good people when we don't speak out, even if it causes us recriminations and rejections.

Here at Restoration, individuals of the past as well as currently, have spoken and acted out of their innermost sense of what is right. Abner Kneeland was the last person in the United States jailed for blasphemy in 1838; earlier, he had been your minister here at Restoration. In the 1960's your minister, Rudy Gelsey, was instrumental in the formation of East Mount Airy Neighbors that fought racially-inspired redlining. You have a proud history of individuals, both ministers and laity, standing up for, fighting for fairness and justice.

So let's hear it for the power of the individual. Keep in mind Mary Oliver's sage advice, that doing what we know to be right is the only way to a fulfilled life.

But, there's another side to full living as well. Our second reading this morning is titled *All Life is Meeting*, by Richard Gilbert.

All life is meeting.

When we encounter one another,

It is two biographies that intersect.

Two stories come together in a moment of discovery.

Each of us brings our hurts and joys with us as we come together.

Little we know of the other's journey—

Its tortuous paths and grand vistas.

How, then, can we help one another in our ignorance?

Be reverent toward all you meet—

They too have their story, even as do we.
Be attentive to the tales they tell even as we share our own.
Be gentle in your judgment, even as you seek compassion.
When biographies intersect,
Something of beauty happens—
Our lives become entwined in the great tree of life.
Our individual lives become part of the mosaic of community.
There is no greater joy than the sharing of stories,
The telling of tales,
The intermingling of people.
Be reverent before the miracle of meeting.
All life is meeting.

Individualism has at times turned the world around, but, as historian David McCullough said to this year's University of Oklahoma's graduates, "There is no such thing as a self-made man or woman." We don't live as hermits, alone in a cave in the world's remote regions. We live in community, "the intermingling of people." We simply must find ways to both stand and act for our convictions as individuals and at the same time get along with others and build healthy communities.

I believe that the religious community is our best laboratory for learning how to do this. I know there are some forms of religion that foster hate and bigotry; ours is not one of those. Although many religions say similar things about freedom and justice in their creeds as we do in our non-creedal Purposes and Principles, I believe there

is an inherent difference that divides us from American mainstream religion: conventional American protestant and Catholic religion says that we are born in sin; it says that Jesus died for our sins and we are saved through him. UU's believe we are not born in sin, but through grace and good pre-natal nutrition, and then, after we are born, by what we do as we live our lives. We are not a religion that believes we are saved through faith, but a religion that believes we are saved—if indeed we need saving at all—by our works. And we make our lives count for something when each of us knows where we stand, what we have faith in, and what we're willing to die for. If we are more prone to stand up individually and speak out and act, we are dangerously more powerful when we do it together. I do not believe Rudy Gelsey, brought an end to red lining in Mt. Airy all by himself; he simply could not have been able to do this alone. I am sure that there were many members and friends of this church—perhaps all—who made that happen. The Civil Rights movement in this country was not successful because of only Dr. King, but because millions of blacks and browns and thousands of whites stood together and demanded justice. The Feminist movement of the Seventies stood on the shoulders of brave British and American suffragists, who, decades before, marched together and demanded equality. The Gay/Lesbian/Bi movement of the Eighties happened not because of a few gays at Stonewall or the actions of Brenda Howard, the Mother of Gay Pride, but because millions of men and women and transgenders rose up en masse to demand rights for all people. Gilbert calls it the intermingling of people—when we come together to help the arc of the universe bend toward justice and, in that

communal action, make ourselves more whole. As to the role of the church in all this, Tom Chulak says, “Church is where the ‘we’ allows the ‘I’ to become.”

Here at Restoration you have the best kind of laboratory to make justice happen, to become more whole yourselves. Unlike the vast majority of UU churches, you are mixed in age, in race, in sexual orientation. It’s the reason I knew I was going to like you—even before I got to know you and fell in love with you. You have your own history on your side, but you also have those of you today who have been loyal members of this church for years, for decades. A few of you have been here long enough to have stood with Rudy Gelsey against the Mt. Airy racist realtors. My year with you in 2003-2004 was a revelation to me as to a church’s potential. When I arrived I was shown as well as told how loyal you were to each other. That loyalty was affirmed as you saw that the building, although beautiful, was strikingly inaccessible. Not only this lovely sanctuary was virtually impossible to enter if you were in a wheelchair, even the bathrooms in Hale Lounge were inaccessible to those same wheelchairs. You managed, within the short month of February, to raise \$6,000 on a match from Steve Workman to a total of \$11,000. And that turned the following year into an accessibility study and the erection of the ramp to make access to the sanctuary possible. There were many who said a ramp would destroy the beauty of this building, but you voted for people over stone and frankly, I think the building looks even more beautiful today.

The reason I believe you have a greater-than-most opportunity to both fulfill yourselves as individuals and bend the world toward justice, is because you have a better ethnic ratio and a better gender orientation ratio than any other UU church I'm aware of. You can't just speak of race and sexual orientation as theory—you have a lab in which to see how these mixes can really work. You have, every day, front and center, the opportunity to learn how it is to live in someone else's skin. And although there are hard lessons to be learned, learning them can be the best way to live a more full life. Do you socialize together, blacks and whites, gays and straights outside the church walls? If you do, that's terrific. If you don't, you might begin learning how. My daughter married an African-Cuban man and they have adopted two children, one African-American and the other Chicano. That's my laboratory for learning. Every day, I learn from my son-in law, Cesar, what it means to be black in American society. I have a lesbian daughter. Every day I learn what it means when actions by mainstream America impede the rights of gay and lesbian men and women to full equality. Every day. You have your lab right here at Restoration. I urge you to take full advantage of it.

In such a laboratory, if you're to succeed, you've got to know that change is difficult to achieve and you've got to be constantly on the lookout for those who would impede your goals. Those who, both within the church and without, would be the strident individual who gets their way by going it alone to achieve their own goal, regardless of whether that goal is shared by others. That'll slow you down. Those who, perhaps out of fear or insecurity, see the down-side in

everything—“We can’t afford this.” Or “We’ve never done it before.” Or “Oh, we tried that before.” Those are glass-half-empty folks who need to be encouraged to stop and listen to some of the glass-half-full folks. What it takes to overcome these negative forces are two things. First, you have to decide as a congregation what it is you want to do. Through communal discussions that are conducted fairly and with kindly and open and honest communication among all. And, secondly, when anyone begins to speak stridently or by abusing the thoughts of others, you need to say something like, “We don’t speak that way around here.” Or, when anyone acts in a way that is detrimental to the health of the entire congregation, you need to be able to say to that person, “Stop! Stop what you’re doing that is hurting others.” When you do that, you’ve got to know that you are helping the world as much as if you shuffled Jews out of Europe or women, gay men and lesbians, and African-Americans to achieve equal citizenship. I mean it. When we help strengthen the beloved community, when we make of this place a true sanctuary where people feel safe, feel respected, we are helping the arc of the universe truly bend toward justice. Maybe even more important, we are enriching each of our own lives and the lives of others as we, as they seek to reach our full potential. Believe me! I don’t say it’s easy. But I do say it’s the making of community and, by making a truly healthy community, we make more healthy each of us.

Building a church, whether it’s a brand new dig in the ground or has been established since—oh, 1821 even—demands teamwork. It demands honest sharing of ideas in an atmosphere that promotes

safety. No one is going to say how they really feel if they think they'll be laughed at or scorned. Church is—or should be—a safe place for all those who enter to feel they're valued for who they are. That's why it's called a sanctuary.

Building a church, new on the block or long-beloved institution in the neighborhood, demands that each of you, individually, speak out when you see someone acting inappropriately or hurting others. In many instances, in wanting to keep the peace, we bury hurts and insults and allow them to grow and fester and become large future problems. If you know what you believe, and you know when you see wrong or injustice, I urge you to gather up your courage and speak out, remembering the long and honored history of this church on Stenton Avenue that has stood for close to two centuries as a beacon of fairness, of justice and of compassion.

Take a page from the Obama campaign and say—each and every one of you—yes, we can. Restoration can be a brighter beacon of light on this busy corner of Mt. Airy. For the sake of each one of you and of this community and—yes—the betterment of the world, I wish for you a productive, caring and generous future. Together.