

Everyone Matters

Rev. Roger Butts

Let's begin this morning with a question. A simple but crucially important question. Why does High Plains Church exist?

There are any number of reasons. Maybe as many different answers as there are people who count High Plains as their church home. And this is the point, yes? We will allow your answer to be sufficient. Everyone and their particularity matters for a religiously liberal community. So, as I wrestle with the question: Why is High Plains here --- I come to the conclusion that it is part of a long string of church's that have said--in every generation--everyone matters.

Every Sunday we affirm: Every individual has inherent worth and dignity.

Because of our name Unitarian Universalist, we stand in a long line of Unitarian and Universalist voices who went against the grain and with courage and persistence said: Look, despite the overwhelming popular notion that some are favored and others are out of favor-- we will say the less popular thing, that everyone matters.

So, let's take a little journey through time.

Imagine, it is the mid 18th century. All around, the Great Awakening is flourishing. This means lots of pop passion, shallow emotion, group think is suddenly all the rage in religion. Imagine, being a lone voice in that setting. Imagine being Charles Chauncey, the 60 year minister at First Church in Boston. In the face of the great awakening the dominant narrative that said that all had to learn to get in line, and get down with a religion that said, "stop thinking." Chauncey said: remember the individual and her reason.

He recognized the rigorous logic of his arguments ended up affirming an innate moral sense in human beings, a belief in human free will, an affirmation of universal salvation and thus the spiritual equality of all. First Church in Boston is now UU. And we stand in that line. Imagine being around a few decades later, The democratic spirit that started in places like First Church in Boston is now sweeping the country. The American Revolution has ushered in a new country. And out of that soil, a new American religious expression--Universalism--the belief that all would be reconciled to God's self in the end, is emerging in this new country.

And in 1803, at an early gathering of that new established religion of Universalism, the conversation begins: if we truly believe that God's love embraces the whole human race then we must speak clearly and with authority on the issue of slavery, which is precisely what they did.

Imagine, in 1803, saying that our religious conviction compels us to say that everyone matters, including even the slave that nearly everyone else believes is at best 3/5th human. Still, though our numbers are small, speak we must, and what we say: everyone matters. We stand in the line of those brave and generous souls. And I dare say we at High Plains exist to continue to say loud and clear: in a time when some are favored and others are outside the bounds of the favored: Everyone matters.

Imagine being around a few decades later. The general view of Jesus, even among liberals, is that his miracles are evidence that he was the Christ of God. And amidst this debate, which at time was raucous, a voice emerges. A voice that belongs to Ralph Waldo Emerson. And

Emerson, our great trailblazing ancestor, says that that Jesus is worth paying attention to is that he pointed to what is true in you and me and every other person on the planet: the human worth and dignity of every person.

Oh, he was called all kinds of things--atheist, heretic, dangerous--and this by the Unitarians! But he said something that forever changed our Unitarian tradition, that we are all pieces of the divine walking around, and, consequently, that everyone matters. We stand in that tradition and we must say that in ways now that are clear and powerful, despite the misunderstandings and name-calling that will come our way.

Imagine a few years later, 1850, Boston. Imagine what people thought of Theodore Parker, a student of Emerson's. Among the people who came each Sunday to Theodore Parker's church in Boston were William and Ellen Craft. William was a carpenter, and they had a nice home in Boston, where they had lived for some years. Theodore Parker knew them well. He knew the sad story of their past lives, which was a secret from other people in Boston: years ago they had been held as slaves by a cruel master in Georgia. They had managed to escape from slavery, and had fled, until they had finally come to safety in Boston. The Crafts lived peaceful, hard-working lives in Boston until 1850, when the United States Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law.

The Fugitive Slave Law allowed slave owners to take former slaves who had escaped to freedom. To demonstrate the power of the new law, some supporters of slavery decided to pull off a high-profile capture of escaped slaves — they decided to capture William and Ellen Craft. The slave-catchers came to Boston. And at risk of punishment Theodore Parker hid Ellen in his home. Parker said, "I will [help a fugitive slave] as readily as I would lift a man out of the water, or pluck him from the teeth of a wolf or snatch him from the hands of a murderer. What is a fine of a thousand dollars, to the liberty of a man? My money perish with me if it stand between me and the eternal law of God!" And what, for Parker, was that eternal law? That everyone matters. That every person's inherent worth and dignity is inviolable.

Imagine, the response to the idea that everyone matters, in relationship to women. In 1839 in Boston, Margaret Fuller began hosting conversations, akin to French salons among women interested in discussing the "great questions" facing their sex. In 1845, Fuller published *The Great Lawsuit*, asking women to claim themselves as self-dependent. Fuller said:

"We would have every arbitrary barrier thrown down. We would have every path laid open to women as freely as to men. If you ask me what offices they may fill, I reply -- any. I do not care what case you put; let them be sea captains, if you will." Everyone matters, Margaret Fuller said, even those who are assumed to be subservient, even those who are assumed because of the dominant narrative within religion to be lesser than.

We say it still.

Let's skip forward, one hundred years later. 1950s, Washington, D.C. Powell Davies is the minister at All Souls Church, Unitarian. In 1950s Washington, there was a great divide and it was a divide among racial lines. And it sounds nearly quaint now.

In 1953, in the midst of a divided city, Powell Davies suggested that he would only eat at restaurants that served both black and white people. And so he and his staff at All Souls called around and they made a list and distributed a list of restaurants--the Willard Hotel Coffee Shop,

the Union Station coffee shop, the Methodist building cafeteria, the Mayflower hotel, the YMCA, the federal building cafeterias. Imagine, in a city so divided, that All Souls Church decided to lift up those restaurants that served all, regardless.

Everyone counts, everyone matters.

Imagine, in 1970, forty years ago now, the Unitarian Universalists saying:
Calls upon the UUA and its member churches, fellowships, and organizations immediately to end all discrimination against homosexuals in employment practices, expending special effort to assist homosexuals to find employment in our midst consistent with their abilities and desires;
Urges all churches and fellowships, in keeping with changing social patterns, to initiate meaningful programs of sex education aimed at providing more open and healthier understanding of sexuality in all parts of the United States and Canada, and with the particular aim to end all discrimination against homosexuals and bisexuals.

Everyone matters.

Today, Unitarian Universalists continue to affirm that gay and lesbian people, transgendered people, have human worth and dignity.

Today, Unitarian Universalists will have our 2012 General Assembly in Arizona and bear witness to the humanity of all people, including the unfavorably viewed “immigrants.”

Today, in Burlington, Vermont, the UU Church hosts the occupy protesters, and on land owned by the UU church in Ogden Utah, occupy protesters are housed.

Today, at All Souls Church in Washington, DC, bridges continue to be built. You see, there is no restaurant imaginable that would possibly refuse to serve a person of color in the District of Columbia. But divisions still exist.

Today, the divide is between young, wealthy whites who have come in to the city in droves and long-term black residents whose families have lived in the District for a long while who are in threat of being displaced. In this city, when those communities are at each others’ throats, All Souls did something radical.

Here is how Rob Hardies, the senior minister puts it:

All Souls recently called as our associate minister an African-American United Church of Christ minister who grew up a Baptist just a few blocks from All Souls. Right now, D.C. is a city divided between older, African-American residents and younger, white transplants. The Rev. Dr. Susan Newman and Rob Hardies represent each side of that so-called “divide.” We are not supposed to be the ministers of the same church.

Yet they are. Building Bridges. Sending a message that everyone counts, no matter what divides exist in our culture.

And so we return to the question this morning.

Why does High Plains exist? In large part, we exist to say: Everyone counts. Everyone matters.

In this city, Colorado Springs, we stand as a model of cooperation and covenant, in a city where so many distrust atheists or pagans, we count them among our ranks. In a city where the term God stands for a judgmental, hater of difference, we say and sing that God's love embraces all. We say that we will not count difference as a threat but rather as a sign of grace.

And so what does that mean for us? What does it mean for my vision of ministry for High Plains Church at this time and in this place?

ABOUT HIGH PLAINS CHURCH AND ITS MINISTRY

1. First, it is why I am so pleased that an earth-based pagan group is emerging at High Plains Church, an indicator of our Unitarian Universalist commitment to religious pluralism and diversity.
2. Second, it is why I am so pleased that the social action team is sponsoring a gay couple who serve as foster parents as part of our new Fostering Hope initiative, a couple that other churches might not consider helping.
3. Third, in order to build bridges, we continue to engage in as many interfaith coalitions as possible. Coalitions that include Jews, Muslims, Christians of all stripes, the non-churched.
4. Fourth, in order to confront our own growing edges, within these walls, I've made specific and targeted efforts to build coalitions with evangelical Christians, rallying around areas upon which we can agree, in order that we might understand the diversity and complexity of our neighbors.
5. Fifth, in order to stand over and against a kind of christian-nationalism in this town, made up of those who believe that god favors the American way, and especially bestows favored blessings on our hyper-militarism, I have made special attempts to build coalitions with our Catholic brothers and sisters who are standing for peace. That is why, this spring, even with budget constraints, we are able to bring in two remarkable Catholic individuals who have been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize--Kathy Kelly director of the Center for Creative Non-Violence in February and Father John Dear, who was nominated by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who said about John Dear that he is the embodiment of a peacemaker.

Why does High Plains Church exist?

To be one voice saying with power and authority, everyone matters.