

WEAVING A TAPESTRY OF LOVE

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ATKINSON MEMORIAL CHURCH
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READINGS

The Free Church by James Luther Adams

I call that church free which enters into covenant with the ultimate source of existence,
That sustaining and transforming power not made with human hands.
It binds together families and generations, protecting against the idolatry of any human claim to absolute truth or authority.
This covenant is the charter and responsibility and joy of worship in the face of death as well as life.
I call that church free which brings individuals into caring, trusting fellowship,
That protects and nourishes their integrity and spiritual freedom; that yearns to belong to the church universal.
It is open to insight and conscience from every source; it bursts through rigid tradition, giving rise to new and living
language, to new and broader fellowship.
It is a pilgrim church, a servant church, on an adventure of the spirit.
The goal is the prophethood and priesthood of all believers, the one for the liberty of prophesying, the other for the ministry
of healing.
It aims to find unity in diversity under the promptings of the spirit "that bloweth where it listeth and maketh all things new."

And New Years Day by Billy Collins

Everyone has two birthdays
According to the English essayist Charles Lamb,
The day you were born and New Year's Day—

A droll observation to mull over
As I wait for the tea water to boil in a kitchen
that is being transformed by the morning light
Into one of those brilliant rooms of Matisse

"No one ever regarded the First of January
with indifference," writes Lamb,
for unlike Groundhog Day or the feast of the
Annunciation,

This one marks nothing but the passage of time,
I realized, as I lowered a tin diving bell
Of tea leaves into a little body of roiling water.

I admit to regarding my own birthday
As the joyous anniversary of my existence
Probably because I was, and remain

to this day in late December, an only child.

And as an only child-
A tea-sipping, toast nibbling only child
In a colorful room this morning-
I would welcome an extra birthday,
One more opportunity to stop what we are doing
For a moment and reflect on my being here on earth.

And one more might be a small consolation
To us all for having to face a death-day, too
An X in a square
On some kitchen calendar of the future,

The day when each of us is thrown off the train of time
By a burly, heartless conductor
As it roars through the months and years,

Party hats, candles, confetti, and horoscopes
Billowing up in the turbulent storm of its wake.

SERMON

I love McDonald's in the morning. Or at least I used to until my cholesterol got too high and my caffeine sensitivity became too acute. There is nothing in all the world like a McDonald's Egg McMuffin and a cup of McDonald's coffee. Nothing quite like that high on caffeine, salt and saturated fat to help me truly see that we are all one people, one nation, and one with the cosmos. Alas, I indulge only very rarely these days.

There is a sense of community at McDonald's, especially in the morning. People from every walk of life, from every race, class and generation come to McDonald's. In my younger and more indulgent days, I would take along my journal and sit in the corner writing my deep thoughts about the unity of all creation.

My favorite McDonald's was on Telegraph Avenue in Oakland, where a regular group of older men of all races would sit in the same corner by the door and talk each morning. They were not prosperous men, but middle and working class folks struggling to get by in retirement. They would discuss the events of the day, politics, society, culture. They ribbed each other in that particular kind of male camaraderie. They carried a dignity and wisdom – down-to-earth and common sensical – that I loved to listen in on. They would look up at me and smile as if they knew I was listening and they really didn't mind. I wondered had I been more regular, would they come to know me and tease me and accept me as they did each other? James Luther Adams, 20th century Unitarian theologian and ethicist, said that in our day people are looking for two things in a religious institution – a sense of ultimacy and a sense of intimacy.

Ultimacy is about the “vertical dimension” of our lives. We spend much of our time living horizontally – feeling flat, rushed, disconnected – lived only on the surface. Ultimacy takes us deeper, connecting us to the center, urging us to slow down. It lifts us up, raising our eyes in reverence and awe. Intimacy is about human connection, being part of community of shared value and meaning, with whom you mark the passages of life, giving thanks, offering compassion, gathering strength and celebrating, going deeper together.

It is not coincidental that the two go together. Sharing our sense of ultimacy, what we hold highest and best in our lives, deepens our connections with one another. The safety and support of community encourages us to explore the ultimate questions more fully. When we share our different perspectives, we indeed go deeper, together.

Now my McDonald's days were mostly long before I found the church and entered the ministry. I didn't realize it at the time, but it was one of the few places that I found both ultimacy and intimacy – a sense of depth and connection with the cosmos, and connection with other people. Not that either were satisfying in the end. The caffeine high ran its course in 15 to 20 minutes and I never did create meaningful community.

This is perhaps a sad statement on modern culture, for McDonald's is a poor substitute for what James Luther Adams – who we affectionately called JLA in seminary – what JLA called the Free Church. A place that “enters into covenant with the ultimate source of existence, that sustaining and transforming power not made with human hands... [binding] together families and generations, protecting against the idolatry of any human claim to absolute truth or authority.... [bringing] individuals into caring, trusting fellowship,... [protecting and nourishing] their integrity and spiritual freedom”

The Free Church points us to ultimacy and intimacy.

One of the things that JLA understood is the depth of what it means to be in a covenantal faith. At the center of creedal faith is a creed – a right belief for all to espouse and aspire to. The Free Church is “open to insight and conscience from every source. It bursts through rigid tradition, giving rise to new and living language, to new and broader fellowship. It is a pilgrim church, a servant church, on an adventure of the spirit.”

Yet because it has no creed at the center, people often wonder what can possibly hold us together on this grand adventure? We are held by covenant, by the promises we make to one another. As Jewish theologian Martin Buber said, humans are “promise-making, promise keeping, promise-breaking, promise-renewing creatures.”

JLA wrote, “the biblical idea of covenant is what I call a covenant of being. That is, the old testament asserts that the people's covenant is a covenant with the essential character and intention of reality. It is not merely a covenant between human beings; it is a covenant between human beings in the face of reality.”

How do we make a covenant – a promise to one another in the face of realities both harsh and sublime? The joys and wonder of simply being alive, heart-rending sorrow, nobility of spirit, earth-shattering betrayal.

A covenant between human beings in the face of reality – I never found that at McDonald's. Of course I didn't. McDonald's is part of the superficial, horizontal, fast-food culture that works against depth and connection in our lives. That I found any ultimacy or intimacy there speaks to the power of my yearning for both.

That is why church came as such a revelation to me. I hadn't known that what I yearned for could be met so powerfully.

There is a professor of religious studies at George Fox University who gives students an assignment to interview someone from a faith tradition other than their own. I've had a couple of different students come and interview me, and I have found the interaction fascinating. One young woman, a devout and conservative Christian, already knew a great deal about Unitarian Universalism and I was impressed by her intelligence and the depth of her faith. Our theology didn't work for her – would never be able to satisfy her yearning for ultimacy, but she could see how well we create community connections and intimacy with one another.

She told me that in her church people would never share about their failures, pain and loss because that would be evidence that there was something amiss in their relationship with God. There was a wistfulness about this when she spoke. She knew that she wasn't able to bring her whole self to her church community. She knew that her spiritual life was diminished by this. I was astounded. I had not imagined that a church could feel this way. For if we have a failing it is around sharing ultimacy; in general, we create and sustain community very well. We do show to all a new community.

This young woman recognized this far better than I did.

It takes constant attention to nurture both ultimacy and intimacy. Which is why Director of Religious Education Annie Scott and I are creating a new program we're calling Tapestry Circles – for the tapestry of love we weave and the wide embracing circles we cast. These will be much like the covenant groups we have had. They are intended as places where you can bring your whole selves, connect to others, and share "the adventure of the spirit." Building intimacy by engaging around questions of ultimacy. People will gather in small groups over the course of 4 months. You will share your lives as you engage in questions of theology, philosophy, ethical living, what it means to be part of a liberal religious tradition, that is "open to insight from every source." You will share each other's lives and come to know one another's mind. People often say that they love this church because they have found here a community of like-minded people. I know what they mean, although they haven't expressed it quite accurately. If all we are is a group of like-minded people sitting around being like-minded then we have failed in our mission, for that fosters neither ultimacy nor intimacy

Rather what we share are enduring values, among them diversity and a spirit of inquiry. We touch both ultimacy and intimacy by living these values. And that is part of what Tapestry Circles are about – not a meeting of like minds necessarily, but a meeting of humans, covenanting in the face of reality to walk together a while. Learning and growing from each other and with each other. Weaving a rich tapestry. Holding a caring circle. Fostering ultimacy and nurturing intimacy.

This is hard work. For in truth, we can trip up around the whole like-minded thing. I told you sometime last year that people have told me they hesitate to talk about their experience of the ultimate, whether they are atheists or believe in a god. I wondered what the heck is wrong with us if this is true. Everyone seems to think that theirs is the minority – and therefore unwelcome opinion. Some simply turn off when they hear the word God. Others fear that if they speak of God, they will be seen as gullible and superstitious.

You want to know the truth? I am just plain tired of this conversation. It is so far beside the point of why we come to church. We want to touch and be touched by the ultimate. We want to connect with one another and in doing both we want to be inspired in service. Don't we really want to be a pilgrim church, a servant church, on an adventure of the spirit.

We are decidedly not like-minded and it is one of the great joys of our tradition that this is so. We should rejoice in it. I ask you again to engage with curiosity about one another's concept of ultimacy – whatever form it takes. I ask you to engage with curiosity and come to know one another all the more intimately.

The kind of ultimacy and intimacy the Tapestry Circles will encourage is a rare thing in our culture. How often do you feel comfortable discussing what is highest, and truest and best in your life? How do you live up to the highest and best? How do you fall short? How can we, together support and encourage one another in our spiritual, ethical and personal lives? How can we find depth, meaning and purpose in a world that encourages none of it? How can we serve in meaningful ways?

Ultimately, we are seeking meaning, purpose and connection in life. Too often we fill our lives with stuff and busy-ness in a futile attempt to find it. The stuff and busy-ness will always fail us. The caffeine buzz wears off. Egg McMuffins don't satisfy our hunger.

Human community also can fail us. We make promises that can always be broken. That can always be renewed. There is a richness here. Power, depth and meaning.

Today is our annual Fire Communion, a ritual of cleansing and renewal, when we consider what it is that we wish to be free of. We clutter our lives with so much. So on this day we consider how we might burn away that which gets in our.

Making and holding a covenant between human beings in the face of reality. Fronting that reality and letting it call us into ultimacy and intimacy, can be frightening. Indeed, that's another reason we fill our lives with stuff and busyness.

Not that Tapestry Circles will be so scary. I suspect they'll be both fun and meaningful. But it will ask something of you. You will need to show up. Be seen and cherished for who you are. Perhaps challenged to live more fully by the values you hold dear. I always say that the work of the church is weaving a tapestry of love. I invite you to engage in this work tenderly, joyfully, seriously. I invite you to be a pilgrim church, a servant church. Come along on this adventure of the spirit. Let us go deeper, together.

Amen.

May it be so.