

Sermon Future Tense  
The First Unitarian Universalist Society of Middleborough  
June 7, 2015 10:30 a.m.

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp-stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works....”

-Matthew 5:14-

You are the light of the world. But, with all due deference to Matthew, you are the light that shines in the darkness to light the way for the young Liza and Sean and Emily and Caleb who are going before you. That’s right, they’re in front. And they need to stay there if our denomination – if any liberal religious denomination – is to thrive and be a force for good 125 years from now.

“The United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing is a religious sect, also known as the Shakers, founded in the 18th century in England, having branched off from a Quaker community. They were known as "Shaking Quakers" because of their ecstatic behavior during worship services. In 1747 women assumed leadership roles. Shakers settled in colonial America, in New York first.

Shakers today are mostly known for their celibate and communal lifestyle, pacifism, and their model of equality of the sexes. They are also known for their simple living, architecture and furniture.

At its peak in the mid 19th century, there were 6,000 Shakers. Today there is only one active Shaker village, Sabbathday Lake Shaker Village in Maine with three remaining members. Brother Arnold Hadd, 57; Sister June Carpenter, 76; and Sister Frances Carr, 87, are busy and content and run their farm with the help of volunteers. Many of the other Shaker settlements are now village museums, like Hancock Shaker Village in Massachusetts.” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shakers>)

What do we have in common with the Shakers? No, we’re not celibate. But we are going to succumb to simple arithmetic. Less than 20% (I think it’s closer to 12%) of our children remain active Unitarian Universalists after leaving home and going to college. We are part of a trend for all but the most orthodox of religions. The fact that we are not alone is no comfort. Other religious denominations have greater numbers and will last longer.

Mind you, many people of other faiths, or humanists or people who have never been part of an organized religion have found their way to Unitarian Universalism as adults. In fact, over 80% of Unitarian Universalists have” come into our faith.” But, statistically, it is likely that the great teens we honored today will not become active in our faith as they grow older – unless we ourselves make some changes. And if they do not become active in our faith, our faith will become a quaint memory and our meetinghouses and churches lovely museums.

And I must point out that, although our numbers of active church members are under 200,000 in the United States, there are 629,000 who identify themselves as Unitarian Universalist – the extra 400,000 or so just don’t belong to any congregations. We are .3% of the American population. So we’ll have lovely museums with a lot of earnest visitors flocking to see our remnants and wondering what happened to us.

So, why does this happen, and why has it happened for generations? Almost ten years ago, when Caleb and Sean and Liza were about seven or eight, our denomination commissioned a study of our youth. The findings were very suggestive.

The teens interviewed had been involved in their congregations and youth groups, half were active in district activities and a small percentage were involved in continental programs. So, one might suppose, these kids were going to be lifelong UUs, right? Well, maybe. Most of them felt welcomed and respected by their congregations and youth groups. But there were some profound disconnects for them.

“On all levels of youth ministry and across all ages and identities, youth report that their spiritual needs are not being met.” They may not say this outright. One junior high youth said “I have no solid beliefs; I just believe that there is something greater than us humans out there. My congregation has shown me many beliefs, and given me ideas and started to lead me down the right path. The only reason I do not have a more concrete belief is that I have not fully figured out what I think.” Fifty years ago, I could have said the very same thing.

While most kids thought highly of their youth advisors, RE directors, ministers and teachers, only half thought other adults or board members supported youth ministry. When the teens didn’t see grownups involved with local, district or national youth programs, they felt alienated from adults in their congregations. When they didn’t receive information from our denomination about opportunities and resources for them, they felt even more disconnected.

So what can we do here and now? And not just us, but any house of faith?

We can put our youth first. We can be the light that shines the path ahead for them. We have done pretty well with these wonderful kids, but we can do more for the sake of our denomination, and for our rising teens. Let’s not consider their religious lives separate from ours. Our future depends on their religious selves. So, I urge you to join me in creating truly multigenerational services which everyone, including our youth, can enjoy.

It’s time to be clear about our own spiritual lives; to speak out loud how we live religion and live our theology.

It’s time to give our youth a chance to practice their leadership abilities in our congregational life.

Let’s get out into the world with our kids. Help create projects and mission trips we can experience together so that we see them and they see us living our faith.

We are investing more in programs for them, designed for them. That’s what our UUnited collaborative is all about.

But it’s time to bring their programs into the life of this congregation.

It’s time to pay attention to their life situations and to help them explore ways to deal with them.

It’s time to support their spiritual, racial and social identities as a central aspect of our congregational life.

There are values we can teach that are not found anywhere else in their lives.

This will take time, years even, but with your dedication and commitment, we will see a future that holds all the wonder, joy, celebration and love of life we can hope for.

So Liza, Caleb and Sean:

Here and now, we celebrate your amazing qualities: your warmth, your energy, your sensitivity. We invite you to explore your richness and depth. You are now ready to uncover a sense of your self, your values, your needs and the things you are most passionate about.

Seek people you can trust, seek new experiences, seek those things in which you can have faith.

As you have grown in years, so shall you grow into yourself, so shall you grow into your beauty and strength.

So you are growing in your power to choose.

So shall you grow in integrity.

So shall you grow in compassion.

So shall you grow in honesty.

So shall you grow in love.