

“A Gift of Gladness”

A sermon by Reverend Jill Cowie

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UUSMV

Last fall as I spoke of this chapel as a house of hope I said these words of Elie Wiesel.

*What is Sanctuary? Sanctuary is often something very small. Not a grandiose gesture, but a small gesture toward alleviating human suffering and preventing humiliation. The sanctuary is a Human Being, a dream. And that is why you are here, and that is why I am here. We are here because of one another. We are in truth each other's shelter.*

Since then, I have found them to be not just metaphorically true, but exactly true. This sanctuary is a shelter for all those who come here from the crazy storms of secular society, from the hatred and confusion that abounds out there sometimes, and from the loneliness and sorrows that are inevitable. We are each other's sanctuary, we are each other's shelter. This house is an ingathering of those who seek the embrace of this sheltering promise.<sup>1</sup>

Victoria Safford, who serves the White Bear Unitarian Universalist church, says sometimes she hears one of her congregants say that Unitarian Universalism doesn't demand much, after all we don't have to learn any creeds, or confess any sins, and she likes to reply, “but friend, we ask you to be each other's shelter, we ask you to be sanctuary to each other. We ask you be human beings.”

We ask you to help teach each other's children and to teach each other how to be wise parents. We ask you to prepare meals for each other, to drive each other to doctor's appointments and to visit sick loved ones on the mainland, to help each

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<sup>1</sup>[1] Victoria Safford, “Caution Church Ahead”

other move, to celebrate birthday's and anniversaries, we ask you to look out for one another.

We ask you to risk confessing your faith which means taking the risk to find it. We ask that take a journey of a lifetime with courage and integrity, discover your questions, your vulnerability. And we ask you to celebrate our pride in being a welcoming congregation, to celebrate the gay lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual rainbow we have become.<sup>2[2]</sup>

Above all, Safford says, we, Unitarian Universalist, ask each other to defend our free faith, to understand that this is a rare and rather fragile place, a temple of free speech, dedicated to spiritual pluralism, to intellectual wandering, and to mystical wondering. We ask that each of us stand tall with our faith.

That is the question we are asking today as we launch our annual pledge campaign, what does it mean stand tall with our faith, to stand tall with **this** congregation. This is not a new question or one unique to Unitarian Universalist. But the answer almost always is found in the moments we follow our hearts, and go against conventional wisdom and expectations. We can find these stories from many faith traditions, think of Buddha and Jesus, but the one that I keep coming back to me is the Book of Ruth. Naomi King tells the biblical story this way.

The book of Ruth begins with three women, Orpah, Ruth and Naomi, who have lost everything-their husbands, their social standing, their homes, their means to make a living, a chance for children. And in their society, this is clearly a sign that they are not blessed

In that time and place, Ruth and Orpah, essentially belong to Naomi, their mother-in law; they enter the family and they cannot leave. Naomi could demand that they do everything in their power to make her comfortable and to care for her. But she does not. Instead, in a powerful act, she says to Orpah and Ruth, "Don't stay with me because that is not fair or right to you; the only future

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<sup>2[2]</sup> Ibid

you have with me is slavery.” Naomi knows that she has to return to her husband’s village and that along with his property, she will be sold to pay his debts. If Orpah and Ruth go with her, they will be sold too.

Orpah and Ruth think about this troubling gift Naomi makes. They care about her. They are worried for her. They know the choices they are facing. To go home is to choose of a social outcast, a path of suffering and to enter slavery is to choose a path of suffering. But then they listen to their hearts and go where they are called. Orpah returns to her family, and Ruth says to Naomi, “What ever happens to you will happen to me.” What is holy and sacred for them is the right to make this choice.

Ruth and Naomi return to her husband’s village where they seek shelter inside the city wall and Ruth goes out to glean in the fields. Now I don’t know how many of you have ever gleaned, its not much in vogue with these days of mechanical harvesters that take every last bit of grain. Gleaning is hard work. You have to find the spare strands of wheat that remain on the ground behind the cutting. Gleaning happens along the edges of the fields, where the owner of the field, who in the story is Boaz, has set aside one tenth of the land for the destitute as required by religious law.

Boaz, watches Ruth work hard, and he is so moved by Ruth’s choices that he makes a faithful choice too. He shares with Ruth how much he wants to help. She becomes very excited about the possibility and tells Naomi, who is excited by what Boaz offers.

But then comes the estate sale the next day, were Ruth and Naomi are to be sold along with the rest of Naomi’s dead husband’s estate. It is the end of their hope for freedom. Boaz does not have the money to buy out the debt and set Ruth and Naomi free. He must ask his friend for help. Boaz’s friend is interested in the land, but had no use for the women, so he gives Boaz charge of them.

Asking for help from his friends, requires Boaz to stretch his pride and incur a major social debt, but because he does so, his friend buys out Naomi’s husband debt and Boaz sets Naomi and Ruth free. Boaz and Ruth marry and provide a

home for Naomi. Slavery turns toward freedom, and death turns towards life on the basis of making free choices, practicing generosity of heart and listening to where we are called. The choice even when it means hard work and sacrifice is always for freedom to listen to the heart's voice calling.<sup>3[3]</sup>

You have listened to your own heart's voice and come to this place. Whether you were raised UU or in another tradition or no tradition, you have made and continue to buck conventional wisdom and work this faith, to follow your heart. Perhaps you here, you discover and rediscover your calling, or here you find relationships of value, or here, you discover ways of being you want your children to experience. Perhaps your choice is like Ruth's, a decision to lead a caring life, and perhaps like Boaz, you give with abundance and find richness and love beyond measure. I hope this is all true.

This year our hearts are leading us in a vision which includes sustaining the promising ministry we have started together, it includes witnessing on behalf of peace, and feeding the hungry. Our vision involves growing a vibrant music program and deepening the ways in which we make meaning as Unitarian Universalists in our programming for our youth and adults. Our hearts continue to invite everyone to the party because our music is so good, and because what we offer is life nourishing, life saving, and life sustaining.

We are asking unapologetically for you to pay for all of what is the Unitarian Universalist Society of Martha's Vineyard because quite frankly no one else will. We are asking each of you to be each others shelter, to be each others sanctuary.

Like most journeys, the spirituality of generosity has been a gradual one for me. As a parent of young children I spent years gleaning through the meager remains of my finances to support my church after the harvest of essentials like food, housing, loans, and activities for the children. I always felt my contribution fell short. Then one transformative day, I spent the afternoon with a Duncan, a Cherokee story teller who offered a chanupa, a pipe ceremony to help me figure

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<sup>3[3]</sup> Naomi King, "Stand By This Faith"

out how to help my sister who was going through a difficult time. As I held the pipe, made from the stone of the plains, the feather of the hawk, and the wood of the aspen, I felt held by the affirming power of the circle of life, and I found clarity in the kindness of his eyes, and the caring of his words. When we were done, I offered something in payment, he shook his head and said, return something to the circle.

That night as I opened the door the phone was ringing and it was a MA environmental group looking for financial support for its fight against climate change. Thinking of Duncan, I promptly pledged a small monthly amount, with every small legislative victory that followed, I felt I had helped, and with every defeat, I knew I had done something. I was empowered by a feeling of abundance and I gave to the children's international fund, National Public Radio, and the Southern Poverty law center. Giving a small amount of money each month inspired hope and when the world news was really bad, it helped stave off despair.

That was my first experience with the spirituality of generosity. Since then it has become part of my life, and this year I include this church in my giving. But I have learned pledging to a church, especially my church is different is than other organizations. For one thing even though we report our pledge payment to the IRS as a charitable deduction, this church is not charity. In fact, we, the members are often the needy ones. As a member and financial contributor, the joy lies in this wonderful paradox : the gifts demanded of me here are the very gifts I've been seeking my whole life long. Here we are asked to offer our laughter, our compassion, our reason, our faith, our best hope and our humanity and our money-once a year.<sup>4</sup>

As we give, our money takes on our moral stamp. It is coined over and over again in our inward mint. The uses we put it to, the spirit in which we spend it, give it a character which is plainly seen by the eye of our heart.

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<sup>4</sup>[4] Victoria Safford, "Caution Church"

Yet, what happens when the budget items we care so much about are deleted, when what we see happening here doesn't directly correspond so closely to our inward moral compass? Has anyone experienced this? I know I did at UU Dux when what the programming offered to my kids didn't fit with what I thought they needed and I was tempted to pick up my marbles and go home. Yet, instead I decided to stay in relationship, let go of some of my expectations, and to find a way where there once was no way.

What does it mean to stand by our faith, stand by this Church? It means we use our hearts and hands and minds to bring hope to each other, to pick up despair and hug it into tears, to listen to where our hearts are calling us, and to check out that call with our minds, and by putting our bodies to work.

To know where we are called and to what meaningful work and to which relationships is an amazing, life affirming gift, a gift of gladness. This year, I am joyfully pledging just over 900 dollars or 3 percent of my salary to sustain this sanctuary, this shelter. Together may we find our highest aspirations in this place we call sacred, among this blessed community of seekers and doers.

Let us sing together, When Our Heart is in a Holy Place

Closing Words

May the love which overcomes all differences, which heals all wounds, which puts to flight all fears, which reconciles all who are separated, be in us and among us now and always.