

## *The Question Box*

*A Worship Service by the REV. JEFF BRIERE*

*Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga*

*June 8, 2008*

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### CONNECTIONS

Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. My name is Jeff Briere, I'm the minister of this congregation. We begin each Sunday at this time with Connections. Connections is a time of community and contemplation, where we share the joys and the sorrows going on in our lives. This is not a time for announcements, political statements or expressions of personal anger, but a time of deep sharing, where we are reminded that we are all human beings and we're all in this together.

Enjoy the experience of sitting in restorative silence until you are moved to speak. Please allow a breath of silence after each person speaks, so that we may focus our attention on what has been said.

Let us pause to dwell inward. Spirit of Life, please meet us where we are, in the struggles we choose for ourselves; in the ways we move forward in our lives, and bring our world forward with us. It is right that we pause to remember those who need love and support; who are ill or in pain, either in body or in spirit; who are lonely or have been wronged. Let us open our minds and hearts to a place of quiet, to a silent prayer for the healing of pain, and the soft, gentle coming of love. In this time of silence let our thoughts be with those who have spoken or been spoken about this morning.

Amen and Blessed Be.

I ask you now to rise and greet your neighbors at the door. Please welcome them into the sanctuary with a hand of warmth and a smile.

*HYMN 163, For the Earth, Forever Turning*

### GREETINGS

**Daidee.** Thanks so much for joining us in worship today. We hope you find the service rewarding and that you leave here inspired and uplifted.

Please note the emergency exit over here to my right, now is the time to put your cell phone in "Worship Mode," childcare for the young and the restless is available downstairs in the nursery. After the service today, please join us for coffee and conversation in the fellowship area right back there. If you have a particular joy or sorrow or something you'd like added to the prayer of the people, please clearly write it on an index card and drop it in the basket back there. You may sign it or not, as you wish.

A complete listing of announcements is included with the bulletin and is available on our web site. The best way to find out what's going on around here is to sign up for a weekly e-mail. To do that,

please see Chris in the office.

About a year or so past, Mary Hunter reported that a church she visited was singing her favorite hymn every Sunday until the war in Iraq ceased. As far as we know, they are still singing it and today, our choir will join them. This is *Dona Nobis Pacem*.

*PRELUDE: Dona Nobis Pacem*

*LIGHTING THE CHALICE*

In the light of truth and the warmth of love,  
we gather to seek, to sustain, and to share.

*QUESTIONS & ANSWERS*

A couple weeks ago, I asked Jamie to encourage you to ask questions that I could answer today. Do you remember that? You came up with some very interesting questions. The adults asked questions, too. But you asked some real hard questions and I had to think for a long time about my answers. So thanks for making this service a good one.

**Rosa asked, “Why did the Civil War start?”**

Rosa, there are many answers for that question. The Civil War happened more than a hundred years ago, and many people have studied it and many people have written books about it. It may be the best-known war ever fought by Americans. We know an awful lot about the Civil War, but people still disagree about the cause of it, why it started.

One thing we know for sure is that the northern states, like Michigan and New York had very different cultures and lifestyles when compared to southern states, like Georgia and Virginia. Wealthy

people in the southern states had slaves and northerners did not. Southern states were farming states and northern states were more industrial.

The President, Abraham Lincoln, and most northerners wanted the slaves to be freed, but the southerners did not. They wanted to keep their slaves; they thought the slaves were their property. There was no way to compromise on this subject, so they fought a war over the idea of slavery.

Now another person might say the Civil War was fought over the idea of states’ rights; the idea that within the borders of a state, like Tennessee, the citizens could run their government the way they see fit. That sounds like a pretty good idea, except when that idea tramples the rights of American people. You see, people are not just Virginians or Yankees; they are also Americans. So you might say that the Civil War started because people had to decide if they were a citizen of a country, like the United States of America, or were they a citizen of a state, like South Carolina. Or could they be both?

Another thing I know for sure is that all wars are ultimately about money and power. And the Civil War is no exception. If the slaves were freed, the southern land owners would have no slaves to work their farms and they would lose a lot of money and they would have no power. And so you can say that the Civil War started over the way that people make money and how that gives them power.

**Zoe asks, “Why do people tell us to clean up the world when others will just mess it up again?”**

Because it’s the right thing to do, Zoe. We must keep the world clean, for if we don’t, we’ll die from the pollution. Yes, there are many people who don’t do what they should to clean up after themselves. Someday, after enough education, they will understand that what they do affects everyone, and what other people do affects them. Someday, everyone will recycle paper, plastics, glass and

metal; someday, everyone will know they cannot just dump their garbage in the river; someday, everyone will understand why it's critical to keep the air clean. Until then, we'll just have to clean up our own mess and theirs, too. It's just the right thing to do.

### **Taylor wants to know why people killed God, that is, Jesus.**

Taylor, I don't believe they killed God. The man Jesus was killed, that's certain. The police and the lawyers in his time thought that Jesus was a troublemaker. So they tried him in a kangaroo court on trumped-up charges and convicted him and had him executed.

I believe they killed Jesus the man. I believe Jesus was a man like any other man, but some people believe he was God. I don't. Other people will argue loud and long about this, but I believe the simplest explanation is the best. Jesus was a man and he scared the people in charge so they killed him.

### **Morgan asks, "Why do people kill other people?"**

Because they are afraid, Morgan. Fear is what makes people kill other people. They are afraid of other languages, other cultures, other habits.

They are afraid of being killed by other people, too. And this is an understandable fear, Morgan. Killing from this fear is called self-defense. And most people forgive killing in self-defense. It's unfortunate, but it happens.

You can say that they are envious or jealous or they want revenge, but the basic reason that people kill other people is because they are scared.

### **Hannah wants to know why wars start.**

I sort of answered this one earlier, Hannah, when I talked about why

the Civil War started. Wars begin because the leaders of one country get scared they might lose power or money. And so they start a war with another country to get money and power.

Now Hannah, people will say that they start wars because their security is threatened. That seems to be the universal excuse. But I think that they are afraid to lose money or power and they think that fighting another country will restore their reputation or make them rich.

### **And the last question from Glory, "Why are people different?"**

For the same reason that other living things are different from each other. For instance, Glory, all apples are not the same. Some are red, some yellow and some are pink. Same for beans: There are green beans, brown beans, black beans and lima beans. Same for horses and cats: Some cats have long fur, some have short fur. Some horses are brown and some are gray.

Diversity, that is, the quality of being different, is the engine that drives evolution. It's the reason that we continue to live, prosper and reproduce. If everyone were the same, life would be no fun; it would be very boring. If everyone were the same—say like Matt Hoyt or Mary Hunter—there would be no Kristi Yamaguchi or Brad Pitt. Every man would be like Matt and every woman like Mary. There would be no me and no you.

No George Bush, either. Which may have some merit.

So, Glory, you can say that people are different so you can be yourself. People are different so that Glory can be Glory. And Glory wins the prize for the most provocative question in the under-18 division. And don't ever be afraid to ask a question.

OFFERTORY: *Let There Be Peace On Earth*

Martin Luther was a German monk who became the first Protestant theologian. He will be forever remembered for writing out 95 complaints about the way the Roman Catholic Church was governed and nailing them to the door of the cathedral in Wittenberg. He died in 1546. But not before he was questioned by his students.

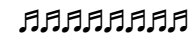
Cornered by a persistent young theologian with the question of where God had been before the world was created, Luther snapped, “He was building hell for such presumptuous, fluttering, and inquisitive spirits as you are.”

And to another overly inquisitive student who wanted to know what God had been doing before He created the world, Luther replied, “He sat under a birch tree cutting rods for those who ask nosy questions.”

But Luther had his own questions as well. He was vexed by his colleague, Phillip Melancthon. Melancthon was quiet and virtuous; Luther was outspoken and ebullient. “For goodness’ sake, why don’t you go and sin a little?” cried Luther in exasperation. “Give God something to forgive you for!”

We’ll collect the morning offering now, for the support and ministry of this church. And please be generous when the plate comes your way; don’t give God something to forgive you for. If you have a check for your annual pledge, please mark it that way. As always, the Dolores Wood–Louis Wilhoit Memorial Food Bank is happy to accept your donations of non–perishable food and household items, and the collection basket for that is by the front door. And thank you very much for your generosity.

If you wish to light a candle of personal joy or sorrow, you may step up here and Daidee will assist you.



Eternal Spirit of life and love, we are profoundly thankful for the blessings we experience everyday. Would that we recognize what is truly valuable to us every day and be thankful for it. Jennifer, please lead us in our *Hymn of Thanksgiving*. The words are in your program.

*HYMN OF THANKSGIVING*

Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day,  
For all gathered here, and those far away,  
For this time we share, with love and care,  
Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day.

*ORISON*

*Dona Nobis Pacem.* Give Us Peace. *Dona Nobis Pacem.*

Carl Anderson is home now, after his operation. Connie reports that he is feeling much better.

Gun violence is never too far from our lives as the shooting of Deputy Shane Tate reminds us. He was killed earlier this week as he attempted to serve a warrant. He leaves a wife and five children. The troubled man who pulled the trigger also shot himself, compounding the tragedy. I hope you keep their families in your thoughts and prayers.

I hope that someone, somewhere will find the cure for this epidemic of gun violence. It takes too many of our best people.

My own family is saddened this week as our youngest daughter lost her child at about 10 weeks of pregnancy. And it was doubly hard for her and everyone because it happened last weekend when we were all together for Charlotte Elmer’s memorial service. Kate made

a scrapbook of cards that you sent her along with some other photos and items. You can see it in the fellowship area.

Thou, who art everywhere,  
Many are your names.  
May thy presence be with us,  
May thy wisdom guide us,  
In our deeds as well as in our dreams.  
May we have what sustains our body and soul;  
Lead us to forgive the mistakes of others  
As we hope our own mistakes will be forgiven.  
May we resist the temptation of the quick and easy,  
And be delivered from that which demeans and destroys life.

May we live purposefully and joyfully  
in every moment,  
in every encounter,  
now, and in the time to come;

Amen.

About a year or so past, I learned that a Unitarian Universalist choir in a Unitarian Universalist church was singing *Dona Nobis Pacem* every Sunday until the war in Iraq ended. I thought that if they could sing for peace every Sunday, I could pray for peace every Sunday. And so I have. At times, it seemed to me that I might be praying for a very long time. I pray that I can stop soon. In these few moments of silence, let us hold near to our heart all those who are suffering in this world, especially those who suffer the fallout of war.

*Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.*

#### RESPONSE

When our heart is in a holy place,

When our heart is in a holy place,  
We are blessed with love and amazing grace.  
When our heart is in a holy place.

#### MORE QUESTIONS ⊕ MORE ANSWERS

Unitarian Universalism began with a question. Or rather, a questioning spirit.

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Unitarian question was, “How could three beings exist as one?” There being no reasonable answer to this conundrum, Unitarians determined that three could not exist as one and denied the Trinity.

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Universalist question was, “How could a loving God consign his creatures to an everlasting torture?” There being no reasonable answer to this conundrum, Universalists determined that God could not do such a thing and denied the existence of hell.

To say that Unitarians and Universalists were out of the mainstream would not be incorrect. Then, as now, most Christians find some way to live in peace with the concept that God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit co-exist as three separate entities in one being. Then, as now, most Christians seem content that God has devised an everlasting punishment for those who violate his laws and die unrepentant.

Then, as now, Unitarian Universalists are in the minority of historically Protestant religions. So we are accustomed to asking questions. “Question Authority” might well be the motto of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Now, I don’t think of myself as an authority on anything other than myself, but that doesn’t stop me from answering questions. I know

a couple things about a couple things. And so, for the last month, this little box has been out on the table in the fellowship area collecting questions from congregants in need of answers. Not wanting to disappoint, I will begin right away.

**“I have questions about things going on in this church, but I don’t know how to find my answers.”**

Chris Tregaskis probably knows more about more things in this church than anyone else. You can ask Chris casual questions, like “When does the board meet next?” or “What’s our fax number?” For sure, if she doesn’t have the answer, she knows who to ask.

Procedural and policy questions, like “Who’s in charge of the garage sale?” or “What’s the agenda for the annual meeting?” are better directed to a member of the Board of Trustees. And will the new Board of Trustees please stand? Roger Davis, Past President, Maddie Kertay, President, Eric Papendorp, President–Elect, Kay McCurdy, Secretary, David Reed, Ways & Means, April Waggener, Religious Education, Elaine Watkins, Treasurer, Diane Davison, Assistant Treasurer. Diane is not technically a member of the Board, but as she learns how to be Treasurer, she will become more aware of the financial machinations of the church. She, like anyone else, is welcome to attend Board meetings.

Kate Briere can answer questions about the music program, Jamie Sullivan can answer questions about the religious education program and I can answer questions about the ministry of the church.

There are many committees and special interest groups in the church and you can find answers about their activities by asking them. Here are a few:

Art on the Walls, Nancy Anderson; Buildings & Grounds, Paul Adler; Caring Committee, Bonny Sinclair & Pat Mann; Committee on Ministry, Catherine Long; the endowment, David Reed or George

Helton; Finance, Daidee Springer; The Forum; Claire Hale; Green Sanctuary Initiative, Sandy Kurtz; Interfaith Hospitality Network, Charlotte Davis; Twisted Knitters and other crafters, Nicole Barnhart, Betsey Hoyt or Maddie Kertay; Membership, Elaine Hill; Memorial Garden, Kay Spehar & Pat Mann; Wednesday Night Out, Leslie Walters or James Joyner.

Beyond that, to learn what is happening around here, please read the newsletter and the weekly announcements carefully.

**“Please explain the difference between the governance model of Unitarian Universalist churches and the governance model of other Christian churches.”**

There are three types of governing systems used by churches: Episcopal Polity, Presbyterian Polity and Congregational Polity; “polity” being another word for a governing system. This church and all Unitarian Universalist churches practice congregational polity. Decisions about the future of this religious society are made by the congregation. We decide how to raise operating funds, we decide which architect to hire to build the church, we decide who to call as minister and we decide what coffee to buy. We are independent and beholden to no one but each other. We can do pretty much what we please around here.

We belong to an association of similar churches called the Unitarian Universalist Association. We band together in this voluntary association for mutual support and camaraderie. The UUA doesn’t tell us what to do and we don’t tell the UUA what to do. We pay annual dues of \$54 per member to the UUA and \$20 to the Thomas Jefferson District. In return we avail ourselves of their services when needed.

The Roman Catholic Church is governed by the pope and a the College of Cardinals. What they say goes. The local guy in charge is the bishop, who takes his marching orders from the Cardinals and

then tells the parish priest what to do. It's a pretty tight system. For lack of a better term, let's call this system, "Papal Polity."

Now, if you take Papal Polity and subtract the pope, you will have the system used by Anglicans, Episcopalians, Methodists, Lutherans and a few others. It's called Episcopal Polity. Churches which practice Episcopal Polity are governed by bishops, who have authority over dioceses. Their presidency over the diocese is both sacramental and political. Bishops in this system may be subject to higher ranking bishops, variously called archbishops, metropolitans, or patriarchs.

The third type of polity is Presbyterian Polity. Many Reformed churches, notably those in the Presbyterian and Continental Reformed traditions, are governed by a hierarchy of councils. The lowest level council governs a single local church and is called the session or consistory; its members are called elders. The minister of the church is a member of and presides over the session; lay representatives are elected by the congregation. The session sends representatives to the next higher council, called the presbytery.

In some Presbyterian churches there are higher level councils called synods. Each council has authority over its constituents, and the representatives at each level are expected to use their own judgment. Hence higher level councils act as courts of appeal for church trials and disputes, and it is not uncommon to see rulings and decisions overturned.

And a follow up, "**Why is our system better?**"

Well, there are times when I think it's not. For instance, theological education and preparation for the ministry in a faith that practices Congregational Polity is very hard on the student minister. When I was going through it, I thought that a good description of my seminary experience was, "Every man for himself!"

In some traditions, all seminary expenses are covered by the bishop. Of course that gives him the right to design the curriculum. In some traditions, all health expenses and retirement are paid by the central authority, which lifts a great burden from the minister's shoulders.

It's all about money, in a way. Imagine what it would be like if we had a bishop who would pay our mortgage, pay the electric bill, cut the grass, paint the sanctuary and find a minister for us when we need one—and pay him, too! Of course, that minister and the building would belong to the bishop, not us.

Another weakness of congregational polity is that it is theoretically possible, but practically impossible to get all the churches aligned behind some issue or enterprise. Every Catholic church can line up behind whatever the pope says. But can you imagine every Unitarian Universalist church agreeing to support a particular endeavor as proposed by the president of the association? Never happen.

Our system is better because it allows us to do what is best for our church. It's not so good because it leaves us on our own in the bigger social, political or spiritual issues of the day. We are free of external authority, but we have to pay for whatever we do.

Next question: "**How can I find out more about the Church of God building rental?**"

Quick answer: attend the Board of Trustee meetings or read the minutes.

I am probably the person who knows the most about the arrangement we have with the Church of God. I wrote an article for the newsletter explaining the basics of our agreement with the Church of God and it was published a couple months ago. You can read that, and if you have more questions, please ask me.

Paul Adler has been working closely with the Church of God to

address building issues, so you could ask Uncle Paul about that. Daidee Springer, Eric Papendorp, Maddie Kertay and Catherine Long are working on a comprehensive rental agreement right now, so if you want to know about that, you can ask them.

**“We have parts of our service that seem to be aimed at theist!”** Exclamation point. What I believe the questioner means is that, for her, some elements of our service seem to invoke a deity. For examples he quotes, “Our heart is in a holy place,” the word “holy” being underlined; *Dona nobis pacem*, and she wonders who is granting the peace. **“What do we do that explicitly (underlined) recognizes the beliefs of freethinkers rather than tolerate?”**

First, to answer the question in the words of the questioner, everything we do recognizes the rights of freethinkers, that’s for sure. We profess no creed. There is no confession to which all must subscribe. In this church, everyone is free to think the way they see fit. That freedom doesn’t extend to behavior. We are bound by our Agreement for Fellowship and good manners and civility.

And to address the underlined passages in this question, for me, the word “holy” does not imply a deity nor anything theistic. My marriage is holy, but it’s certainly not theistic. As to who is granting the peace, no one is. I think it’s just granted, like rain is granted to a drought-stricken farmer who cries in frustration, “I want some rain!” I certainly have no particular entity in mind when I say, *Dona nobis pacem*.

Now, what the questioner implies, I think, also needs addressing. I sense, in his words, that the questioner feels the service, to her, seems out-of-balance and shows an overly-theistic bent. And I think he might feel slighted, too, as if her views were merely tolerated, and not held in high esteem.

A colleague of mine once confessed to being an atheist. “But,” she said, “I’m not an anti-theist.” I would caution the questioner that

agnostic beliefs, theistic beliefs and atheistic beliefs are fine. But anti-theistic beliefs are problematic. Don’t go there. Anger and bitterness over previous religious experiences need to be worked out in private, not in the public sphere of this church. If we are freethinkers, we are free to think theistically or atheistically.

Beginning about 1920 and running through the 80’s, you could see a strong streak of humanist thought among most Unitarian Universalists. This church was part of the humanist movement. I don’t profess to have a crystal ball that will show me the future, I can only report on the trends I observe. What I see these days is a resurgence of the spirit; a renewed emphasis on the spiritual aspects of life among Unitarian Universalists. And I am part of that movement.

Ten years ago, when I entered seminary to prepare for the ministry, I was a flat-earth humanist. Would not admit to anything beyond the horizon. If I could not touch it, see it, taste it, hear it or smell it, it was not part of my theology. But the longer I am in the ministry business, the more that viewpoint fails to satisfy. In the end, I think straight-ahead humanism is hollow. I cannot prove it, but I think there is something more to this life that what I can sense.

And from what I see of the people who come to this church, they, too believe that there is another aspect to life, another plane of existence. Call it “woo-woo” if the words spiritual or theistic bother you.

If you examine the worship services I create, you will find a gradual shift towards more spiritual aspects and elements. I don’t deny it. But like a TV station accused of bias, you should look at the whole before critiquing the individual. You might want to compare the service today with the services I produced in the last three or four years. Doing so would show you that overall, the balance tends greatly to the humanist perspective.

To answer the specific question, here’s how I recognize the beliefs of

freethinkers in the services I create: We light a chalice to symbolize our search for truth; we avoid Christian or Jewish scripture that assumes anything supernatural; the sermons preached here are inspired by a variety of topics and the preachers are not all priests, rabbis or ministers.

And most of all, we have the Forum. I consider everything that happens in this church on Sunday morning to be part of one big worship service: The Forum, Lotus Sangha, Connections, religious education, the nursery, the sermon and the coffee and doughnuts. It's all worship to me. So all of that recognizes the beliefs of freethinkers, especially the Forum. And the person who asked this question wins the prize in the over-18 division. See me later to claim your prize.

If you wish to contribute to the worship on Sunday morning, I encourage you to meet with the Wowsers at your convenience. The Wowsers are the people in the Workin' On Worship group. Along with the minister, they are responsible for worship in this church. This is not an invitation to complain; this is an invitation to contribute. The Wowsers are a working group. They will produce worship services this summer and next and when I am on sabbatical or out of the pulpit.

Last question. **“What is the Dolores Wood–Louis Wilhoit Memorial Food Bank? How did it get started? Where do the items go?”**

For many years, long before I came here, this congregation collected food and other household items for the Chattanooga Community Kitchen. Louis Wilhoit made it his personal ministry to transport the collected items to the Community Kitchen each week. When he died, the enterprise came to be known as the Louis Wilhoit Memorial Food Bank, and that's where it was when I arrived.

Dolores Wood, a member who, at various times, was the church

administrator, the RE Director, a board member and the social conscience of this church, constructed a large basket to hold the donations. And she took up Wilhoit's ministry of delivering the items. When she died, someone suggested adding her name to the Memorial Food Bank, and everyone thought that was a good idea.

As to where the donations go, the Chattanooga Community Kitchen began in 1982 when seven downtown churches formed Chattanooga Church Ministries to establish a free meal program to help feed the growing homeless population. From there, the Chattanooga Community Kitchen developed into a full service agency sponsored by many churches, businesses, organizations, foundations and private citizens.

The Community Kitchen and the Homeless Healthcare Center provide 3 meals and a snack every day of the year. They have a day center, which provides a safe place to sit, toilets, showers, phone and mail access. They offer clothing, job skills training, educational tutoring, transitional housing for families, St. Matthew's Night Shelter for Men and St. Catherine's Night Shelter for Women and Children. The Chattanooga Community Kitchen is a volunteer organization, supported by the citizens of the Chattanooga area who have a heart for the homeless.

*HYMN 131, LOVE WILL GUIDE US*

*EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE*

We extinguish this flame,  
but not the light of its truth  
the warmth of this community  
nor the fire of our commitment.  
These we carry in our hearts  
and share with all the world.

POSTLUDE: *There Is More Love Somewhere* (No. 95)