



Celebration! Sunday

*A Worship Service
by the REV. JEFF BRIERE*

*Unitarian Universalist
Church of Chattanooga*

March 16, 2008

Gathered Here

Minister. Good morning. Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. My name is Jeff Briere and I am the minister of this church. Let's begin our service with a round. It's called "Gathered Here," and we sing it so often around here that we thought you would know the tune and don't need the hymnals. The words appear on an insert in your bulletin.

ANNOUNCEMENTS & GREETINGS

Daidee. Good morning! Our worship service will begin shortly, but here are a few important announcements: IHN volunteer training happens tomorrow night at 7; UU 101 meets Tuesday night at 7. This class has two more sessions and is recommended for new members. Please see me or Steve Hollingsworth if you wish to attend. *Spirit of Life* meets Thursday night; the choir rehearses Thursday night; and

Wednesday Night Out is at Seoul on Lee Highway near the Sportsman's Warehouse.

We're set up a little differently today with these tables and all the beautiful decor. After the service today, you are welcome to join us for coffee, quiche and conversation.

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 receive weekly announcements via e-mail. To do that, please see Chris in the office. I invite you now to extend a hand of warmth to two or three people near you. And make a special effort to find someone you don't know and make that person feel welcome. So please rise now and greet your neighbors. [*Meet & Greet*]

[*Chime*] 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, 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.

For a prelude, the choir will sing about their passion, singing!

PRELUDE

Come Lift Your Voice and Sing

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

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

STORY: A Love Story

Minister. The enormous redwood tree, ancient and failing, trembled. With a cracking, tearing sound, the unimaginable began to happen. Near the base, one side of the giant trunk began to crumple, like the first three floors of a collapsing building. On the opposite side, more than twenty feet away, a split suddenly appeared in the massive bark. The split grew vertically, slowly for a moment, then more rapidly as it widened.

Ever so slowly the mountain of wood, hundreds, thousands of years old, began to move. In a canopy above the forest floor, the top swayed in the wind, but this time, when it reached the end of its sway, it continued downward. The ripping, tearing sound grew until it was louder than the roar of a freight train. Tons of fiber, centuries in the making, began their last journey.

As the giant fell, it sheared huge branches, larger than oak trees, from neighboring redwoods. Down and down it fell with awesome force. Nothing could stop it now, and nothing did. It hit the forest floor, bounced once, and came to a final rest.

For a moment, it was silent in the forest. In a few minutes, thousands of years of reaching toward the sun ended in one final embrace of the Earth. Slowly, the sounds of the forest returned. Insects buzzed, and leaves rustled in the breeze. Small animals reappeared cautiously, and larger animals began to move again.

This is part of a love story. The leaves, the trunk, the branches, and the roots were in love with each other.

Their love was continual. New leaves gently replaced those that turned brown. The redwood remained green for centuries, but none of the leaves on it were centuries old. The bark loved the roots, and the roots loved the branches. The trunk held them together, and the

leaves nourished them all.

The love story of the redwood tree had other characters in it, too. It loved the Earth and the sky. It reached for both from the moment it sprouted to the moment of its dramatic fall. It loved the birds that nested in its branches, the animals that sheltered beneath it, and the insects that fed from its bark. They were one family, full and complete.

Does this story sound familiar? It should. You see it everywhere you look, inside and out.

The cells in your body love each other. Your blood loves your heart and your lungs. Your spine loves your brain. Your body is a love story that continues day after day. Every part of your body gives what other parts need, and receives from them what it needs. You are a walking, talking story of love.

Every love story is part of a larger love story, and every love story, no matter how large or small, has endless stories of love within it. The Universe has countless galaxies. Each galaxy has countless stars. Each star has countless molecules, atoms, and subatomic particles dancing within it, becoming one another, splitting apart in different ways, and coming together again.

The biggest love story has no beginning, like we do, like redwood trees do. It doesn't have an end, either. But we are parts of that story. Sometimes when we glimpse it, we are awed and delighted. Scientists call this big love story "interconnectivity." Nothing exists without everything else. When we think that anything can exist without us, it is because we are only seeing a small part of a few love stories. Sometimes, we don't even see our own. The love stories happen whether we see them or not.

The love story of the tree does not end when the tree falls. A new chapter begins. The tree decays and gives all of itself back to the

Earth. Insects devour it, and birds eat the insects. Bees make hives in it, and bears eat honey from the hives. Even when the tree disappears, the story is not over. More trees appear, and more insects, birds, and animals, too. When the forest disappears, the story does not end. Even when the Earth ends, which it will do some day, the story does not end. It has no ending.

Love and reverence go together. When you see the big love story, you realize that you are in everyone's story, and everyone and everything is in yours. Even people you haven't met yet are part of your story, and you are part of theirs. Their suffering is part of your story, and their happiness, too. Your suffering and happiness are part of theirs. The big love story includes everything.

When your story becomes everyone's story, and everyone's story becomes yours, that is love.

The children may leave now to go to their classes, and I have a basket here for any child who wishes to make an offering.

Gather the Spirit

Jim Scott is a singer and songwriter who has long been active in the Unitarian Universalist Association. He has visited this church a couple of times. At more than three hundred UU churches, he has led services, presented concerts, and offered workshops. Three of his songs are in our hymnal and "Gather the Spirit," is a favorite across the denomination. Please stand now and blend your voices in "Gather the Spirit."

ORISON

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

Julie Kurtz-Kunesh and tom kunesh are the proud parents of a girl.

Her name is Ceallaigh Fae Wiyakaskawin Kunesh Kurtz or Kelly Fae White Feather after tom's great-great-grandmother. Ten fingers, ten toes, everyone's fine.

Bruce Hollingsworth is out of the hospital and we're glad to see him back at church. Bill Keiss was in Erlanger for a week or so, and left on Sunday, but went back in on Monday and is now in Siskin. He's having trouble breathing, but would welcome friends for short visits.

You may remember Ralph Yates, a long-term member who winters in Florida. After removing a nodule in January, Ralph had some stomach pain. They have discovered two more nodules. He is now waiting for an appointment with his surgeon. He and Laura are also going to go to Tampa for a second opinion. He discussed this with Chris and was more talkative than usual concerning this new problem.

Jan and Trish Allen write from their home in Alabama that late Thursday their grandmother took a turn for the worse. She was improving and was expected to go home, but she suddenly stopped breathing. She was resuscitated and is in ICU now. They don't know what happened or what caused her to stop breathing. They ask for your continued prayers and hopes that when her time comes, be it soon, or weeks or months from now, that it be with as little suffering as possible.

The minister who preceded me, Dana Reynolds, is leaving his church in Lawrenceville, GA after five years. An interim appointment is possible for Dana, but not assured. I'm sure he'd like to hear from you.

Former member Jim MacComber will be installed as minister in the church in Sandy Springs, GA, northwest of Atlanta on Sunday March 30th. Jim preached his pre-candidating sermon here about a year ago. Former member Bruce Russell-Jayne will also be installed March 30th in Cincinnati and an invitation appears in the newsletter. Bruce

preached a sermon here a year ago last summer. You'd be more than welcomed at either of these installations. Please remember these ministers in your thoughts and prayers.

It wasn't until I was about fifty years old that I heard—really heard—the Lord's Prayer. I knew the words; I had said them many times when I was young. But I hadn't heard them until Daniel Budd said them. He said,

O 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;
and may we forgive the mistakes of others
even as we long for our own mistakes to 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 with You as our constant companion,
in every moment,
in every encounter,
now, and in the time to come;
Blessed be
Amen.

In these few moments of silence, let us hold close to our heart all those who suffer in this world, especially those who suffer the fallout of war.

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

From the Fragmented World

Phillip Hewett is a Unitarian minister who served several churches in Canada and wrote the standard reference book about the history of Unitarianism in Canada. He is retired and living in British Columbia. He wrote this piece. Your words are in italics.

From the fragmented world of our everyday lives we gather together in search of wholeness.

*By many cares and preoccupations, by diverse and selfish aims
are we separated from one another and divided within ourselves.*

Yet we know that no branch is utterly severed from the Tree of Life that sustains us all.

We cherish our oneness with those around us and the countless generations that have gone before us.

We would hold fast to all of good we inherit even as we would leave behind us the outworn and the false.

We would escape from bondage to the ideas of our own day and from the delusions of our own fancy.

Let us labor in hope for the dawning of a new day without hatred, violence, and injustice.

Let us nurture the growth in our own lives of the love that has shone in the lives of the greatest of men and women, the rays of whose lamps still illumine our way.

In this spirit we gather. In this spirit we pray.

Does this church look great or what? Is this a great church or what? Today we celebrate this congregation!

The word celebrate comes from the Latin meaning famous, concerning festivities, rituals, birthday parties and the such like. The meaning then and now is pretty much the same. Celebrate has as much to do with dancing the night away as it does with a quiet moment of thanksgiving.

But what are we celebrating and why? We are celebrating that life is good. This is not too much of a presumption, but I presume that you are glad to be alive.

Consider the alternative, that life is the pits; that you might as well be dead. I confess to being depressed now and then, but it's not the way I start my day. First time I got real depressed, I said I felt like a bucket of slop, and now that expression has become customary in my family. Poking fun at ourselves take all the tension and fear out of depression.

There are people who believe that life is the pits and they live each day with that in mind. But they don't live around here. Life is good.

We are celebrating that the outlook is good. I am not a fortune teller, but I believe—and I think you believe—that the future will come true for us in the best way possible and in exactly the way it should for us. It may not be what we dreamed about; it may not be a bowl of cherries, but it will be what we deserve.

Consider the alternative; that the future will be a living hell and that we ought to fear for our sanity. I confess to being scared now and then, but it's not the first thought I have upon awakening. We certainly can't do anything to bend the future to our will. The best we can do is work in the present moment to make ourselves available

to receive the future willingly.

There are people who are frightened of the future, people who will go to great lengths to improve their lie on the fairway of life. But they don't play in this church. The outlook is good.

I often think of this church as a ship, floating on moderately choppy, but navigable seas. Calm seas would be boring and a storm is dangerous. The voyage is interesting and fun and we are learning to be a growing community. Our destination is unknown, but I think it will be better than what we left behind.

We are celebrating that we have this church, which is sometimes a way station on the road to another church and sometimes a destination in itself. Every church in this country experiences membership “churn,” the revolving door of membership. We are not immune, and I am not too concerned about it. Our churn is positive—we may lose one or two, but we gain two or three.

We are celebrating that we have each other, and that can be both fun and frustrating—not unlike a family of 165 members living under one roof. Sometimes we get along; sometimes we don't; some of our family members are cantankerous; some are easy going; some are old, some young, and some in between. I was an only child, so this family life in the church is something I am learning.

We are celebrating that we support this church and that can be both easy and challenging. Some support with large donations; thank you very much. Some support with donations of time & talent; thank you very much.

We are celebrating that we support each other, and that can be both heartening and heart-wrenching. Some support with hugs, some support with hands; some support with personal care, some support with a card. Thank you very much for your support of each other.

Do we need anything? Yes.

My colleague Victoria Safford, in her sermon, “Caution! Church Ahead,” says that our needs are pretty simple.

Dez. Our desires and our decisions may be boundless, but our needs, if we’re honest, are really pretty basic.

We need shelter and food and clothing.

And beyond this, we need friendship.

We need comrades in the struggle.

We need art.

We need a way to hear music often.

We need noble work, paid or unpaid,
in the home or out of it;
we need, each of us, a calling.

We need trees and grass and water fairly close by.

We need religious grounding.

Some of us need a mature and sustaining experience of God.

Some need prayer.

Some need glimpses of the transcendent,—
a sense of something larger than themselves.

Some of us need ethical clarity.

We need religious grounding.

We need solitude.

We need community.

We find the sources of these things we need, and then we choose to sustain them, to nurture them, not by willpower, not by some sense of duty or obligation, but because we care passionately about them and find them central to our lives.

Minister. So we celebrate the church today, we hold each other up, we lift up our lives and we celebrate. It’s good to be alive, the outlook is good and I hope you’re having as much fun as I am.

What’s in front of me here is our SUUPER BOWL. It’s a basket woven by Dolores Wood several years ago. She found all the vines and twigs and branches and sticks near her house in St. Elmo and she said we could use it one Sunday for a communion of sorts. As the Super Bowl was scheduled that day, I called this basket the SUUPER BOWL. 2 U’s. Get it?

Everyone brought to the service that Sunday some little something—or—other that represented them in the life of the church. The membership churn I spoke of earlier tells me that many people who are present today didn’t have the opportunity to participate on that Sunday. Today they can and if you participated before and want to hang something on it again, you can do that, too.

If you could find nothing at home, or if you want to add to what you hung before or change it, Kate & Diane Davison prepared some things for you to use and you can see them right over here at the table. F’rinstance, Kate put a bit of yarn on the SUUPER BOWL before because she was just learning to knit. Today she might put a musical note on it. See Kate or Diane and you will probably find the perfect little something—or—other to put on the bowl. Line up over here and tell us about your something—or—other and then place it in the SUUPER BOWL.

OFFERTORY

It probably did not escape your notice that the offertory is in an unusual place in the order of service. The reason is that this will be a special collection—not only of whatever you would customarily donate, but also your pledge of support for next year.

Coming around right now are stewards who will give you a packet of

information about the church and our stewardship campaign. Inside the packet you'll find three insightful and inspiring letters designed to weaken your resistance and find that soft spot in your heart.

You'll also find a letter from me explaining what we'd like to do next year. And you'll find a pledge card, which you can use to let us know your contribution for next year. We need to know what everyone's contribution will be in order that we can prepare a responsible budget.

The most common question we hear is "What was my pledge last year?" Anticipating this, the grand pooh-bah of church finances, Daidee Springer, has a crystal ball and can answer that question for you. You are welcome to ask her what your pledge was and any other financial question like who made up the budget or who signs the checks or why the housing market is in a tailspin.

In the unlikely event that she cannot tell you what your pledge was last year, in the space for your pledge, you can write, *Last year's pledge plus \$100* and we'll check with you later for your approval of the total.

If you wish to ask questions in private, our respected, circumspect and knowledgeable chief steward, David Reed, will be happy to accompany you to a dimly-lit, secluded room and discuss the matter with you. Now Diane, you cannot take advantage of that.

Also coming around now are special pens with a full supply of indelible ink that you may use to advertise this church to all your friends and with which you can sign your pledge card. These pens are precision writing instruments, far superior to those cheap things from pharmaceutical companies; they have a padded grip and come in assorted colors, too. Not the ink, just the pen. The pen is our gift to you. It's a small gift, but behind it is a big, big "Thank You."

Lastly, a steward will come around with an offering basket, and after you've completed your pledge card, please drop it in the basket. You may also deposit your customary weekly offering, too. Wouldn't want to forget that.

We have about \$73K pledged already, so the stewardship committee feels pretty good about our prospects.

We'll collect the pledge cards now, for the stewardship campaign, which funds the support and ministry of this church. The children may also give their offering now. 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 Mary will assist you.

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: Go Out with Joy