***“To* Savor *or Serve”: Sermon December 2013 North Shore UU Church***

***Rev. Karen Hutt ----- December 8th 2013***

*I arise in the morning torn between the desire To save the world and to savor it To serve life or to enjoy it The question beats in upon the waiting moment-To savor the sweet taste of my own joy Or to share the bitter cup of my neighbor; To celebrate life with exuberant step Or to struggle for the life of the heavy laden? What am I to do - Let me cast from my eyes all troubled folk! No, you will not let me be. You will not stop my ears To the cries of the hurt and the hungry; You will not close my eyes To the sight of the afflicted. No, you will not! What is that you say? To savor one must serve? To savor one must save? The one will not stand without the other?* -------------------

These words of UU minister Richard Gilbert can be really irritating early in the morning when all I really want to do is crawl back into bed, curl up and get cozy with coffee and my iPad lover. . Some of you might agree with me that it is too early in the morning to save the world. It is always easier to savor the sweet taste of our own joy than cast my eyes on the troubled world I live in.

Recently, I was asked to cast my eyes on the troubled world within our own Ministerial Association. I was asked to be on a national committee of ministers to address cultural competence and racial equity among my UU ministerial colleagues. When I shared with my partner Ashley that I had been asked to join this group she said “great”, that is important work they need your voice”. When I heard her say that, I thought, “What voice? After over 25 years as a UU, and 15 years as a minister, I have grown weary, of dealing with issues that seem intractable or impossible. There are still far too few Black UU’s called to serve churches, insensitive comments are still made to me at GA. *I would rather celebrate life with an exuberant step than to struggle for the life of the heavy laden.* I have become accustomed to being a Unitarian Universalist that affirms the most beautiful principles and values but I had lost interest in going beyond an affirmation to take action. There was a gap between what I was willing to affirm on Sunday and what I would do within my ministerial community the rest of the week. My partner pointing out this inconsistency in my thinking and behavior and called me out to reconsider. Reconsider I did and I realized that being cynical was easy. Being annoyed and angered by others was easy. Bonding with others over the same complaint was easy. Dismissing something and saying that it has been done before was easy. Saying what you don’t believe will ever change is easy. In fact giving up on change was easy. I needed to be shaken out of this comfort. I needed to shaken out of this savory position of platitudes and affirmations to remind myself of why I am a UU.

n the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophet Micah says, “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” The prophet Amos rails against temple ceremonies which overshadow ethical religion by saying, “I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies…But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like and ever-flowing stream” (5:21, 24).

James Luther Adams, one of our great Unitarian theologians of the 20th Century, reminds us that the prophets were not just foretellers, but also forthtellers. He also expands on Martin Luther’s notion of the priesthood of all believers to become the prophethood of all believers, saying that, “

“The prophetic liberal church is the church in which all the members share the common responsibility to attempt to foresee the consequences of human behavior (both individual and institutional), with the intention of making history in place of merely being pushed around by it. Only through the prophetism of all believers can we together foresee doom and mend our common ways.”

Friends, What John Luther Adams said then is pertinent to you today North Shore Unitarian Church.

**As you embark on the complicated and serious work of calling a minister over these next two years, and even beginning in January with your consulting minister, you will be asked, what your call is this congregation’s call to social justice Some will answer this question with a head nodding affirmation to the sound of these two words….social justice. Others will have a readymade list of project and coalitions that may range from charitable giving, volunteering at a soup kitchen or trying to impact social policy on immigration. And some may simply have a feeling that they want to be engaged but do not know with what and how to start. SOME ADVICE BEFORE YOU DO ANYTHING, ask yourselves some questions. With whom do you want to be in relationship as you work for justice? What does justice look like? What relationships do you need to build and strengthen? What work do you need to do as a community before you engage? How are you already engaged? If you have not been particularly engaged in social justice ministries, why has this been so? Will your engagement depend on committees or a minster, or will they depend on all of you to lead?**

If you are to be more than individuals with your own passions and interests, if this Unitarian Universalist Congregation, is to be more than a collection of lovable, quirky, talented, beautiful, thoughtful, passionate individuals, you will have to figure out how to put your collective energy to work.

Your approach to prophetic practice might look different as you come to understood it as a covenant obligation – as one of the clauses in your sacred contract with each other – rather than simply as volunteer work that you *might or might not decide to take on.”*

The reason we UU’s gather in covenanted community is that we have, together, the power and agency to create meaningful change, change in our own tired hearts and change in the world weary from systems that oppress, degrade, and destroy our fabric of community for the gain of a few. There is evil in all the ways that earth and person are used and abused to feed the insatiable greed of a few.

In his book, The Prophetic Imperative, Dick Gilbert picks up where James Luther Adams left off, saying that “the prophetic church is a religious community that seeks to intervene in human history for the sake of social justice…The imperative to be stressed here is that which emerges from the disciplines of freedom. Freedom is not merely the absence of restraint, but the will and capacity to act in one’s environment…Freedom, by its very nature, places an imperative claim on the free person to expand that freedom to all”

Gilbert is saying in practical terms….. you will have to harness your freedom to ARTICULATE what you do believe in and construct a vision, create a plan, develop a structure and show your faith(s) in action.

Church life is centered on worship, but we couldn’t imagine ourselves to be a congregation without religious education or spiritual care. Similarly, we need to know that we cannot be a community of liberal faith without service, advocacy and justice. Each one of these – worship, religious education, spiritual care, and justice – is nuanced, intertwined, and involves each one of us.

…Worship derives from the Anglo-Saxon weorthscipe, pointing to and celebrating that which is of worth. Religion is derived from the Latin, religare and means to bind together… this leads to an understanding of worship as a binding together or coming together of people to fashion ceremonies pointing to what they regard as of worth.

While the act of worship is in itself a religious activity of intrinsic worth, it is also instrumental in motivating and sustaining human efforts in serving the mandates of the prophetic imperative. It serves to strengthen and maintain commitment to social change by pointing to justice, freedom, equality, and the Beloved Community as ends to be sought

This is exactly the wisdom Dick Gilbert attempts to impart. He asks us to imagine the congregation as a circle within a circle, where the center circle is worship, HE says, “*Out of this spiritual center grows what we think and do as individuals and as a community. Our connectedness with the cosmos, world, history, and each other is confirmed and celebrated here.” Worship, he says, “Serves to strengthen and maintain commitment to social change by pointing to justice, freedom, equality, and the Beloved Community as ends to be sought.” With the spirit and memory of Nelson Mandela on our hearts and minds this weekend.*

Our worship today can be a moment that points this church toward justice, freedom, equality, and the Beloved Community as ends to be valued and sought after. Yet we will need to be mindful that our way – that is, what we care about most – is not the only way. Given the nuance of the world and the intertwined nature of our human relationships, social justice work these days depends not on individualism, but upon how well we work together with other people. Making a difference today requires being able to work in coalitions across faith, race and class, and to partner with marginalized groups.

With our blinders of individualism firmly attached to our Unitarian Universalist heads, it will be easy for us to rush to judgment about what is wrong with the world and what needs to be done to fix it. With the blinders of individualism on, we will think that the most pressing needs are the ones we care about the most. With our blinders of individualism on we will dismiss interfaith social justice gatherings that include prayer, and we will work alone fantasizing that our congregation of 200 people can do all the work to save the world.

If we honestly wish to be a faith community genuinely involved in social justice, we must enter into it with eyes wide open, with the blinders taken off, and with the certain knowledge that our assumptions will be challenged, our good will and theology questioned, and our faith severely shaken. If we honestly wish to be a faith community genuinely involved in social justice, we must listen and engage the needs and the voices of those who are marginalized in our society, lest we marginalize them even more by telling them we know what they need.

Our reward for honest and genuine social justice engagement will be the knowledge that we are fulfilling the prophetic imperative to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly in our relationship with all the forces in the universe beyond our control. Our reward for honest and genuine social justice engagement will be a deeper and more meaningful relationship with our neighbors and with the world. Our reward will be pain and joy and a deeper experience of the human condition. Our reward will be an altered social order that expands freedom to all. Our reward will be a release from cynicism and an increase of love in the world. Let us remember the words of Rev. Theodore Parker whose words were quoted Thursday by President Obama, in response to he death of another prophet Nelson Mandela, Parker said “the arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice.” It is our task to task to create a better world. Friends , we can begin now to live up to our prophetic imperative by proclaiming those moral values in the public square, and soon politics will not be able to coopt religion but it will be held accountable to undeniable truths that we religious people demand. As Jim Wallis puts it “we must stop being the thermometer that measures the temperature of the world and begin to be the thermostat that turns the heat up and melts the dams of injustice.

AMEN