

"We Are Family"

a Sermon Delivered on Homecoming Sunday, by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, September 12, 2010

Did you hear about the mother who couldn't get her son out of bed on Sunday morning? She said, "Honey, get up it's time for church." He said, "I don't wanna go to church!" She said, "Give me two good reasons why you don't want to go to church." He said, "First of all, I don't like those people, and they don't like me." She said, "Well, I'll give you two good reasons why you should go to church: First of all, you're 52 years old, and second of all, you're the minister!"

I want you to know my mother is here today and she did *not* have to get me out of bed this morning. Because I love Sundays at this church. I love the music; I love the feeling; I love the people. I love it all. You know why? In this hour or so every week, I feel transported. This is special time; this is time outside of time. It is sacred time – and when we are in the midst of sacred time – things are different.

I don't know about you, but there are times during my week when I get loaded down with life; when I turn on the news and see the empty faces of another set of parents, wife, and children of the latest soldier who will not be returning to his hometown or family; when children with grief-stricken faces come into my office because their parents are divorcing and they cannot understand why, and I wish I had some magic words to make things better. When another young mother of two gets a terminal diagnosis and everyone around gets numb. Or, I read stories of the daily disasters of domestic violence, where people live in fear and terror in their own homes. When I visit Africa and talk to parents who explain that they don't have enough food for all four of their children, so they are trying to rationalize not feeding the one child who is HIV-positive. Or the widow here in the United States trying to decide between paying for her medicine or paying her rent. Often, none of it makes sense and it starts to feel deadening and demoralizing. Too much of the time, I realize, I walk around so caught up in my own pity party for my petty problems that I can forget how fierce this life really is.

But then, once a week I get to put on these vestments and say a prayer with the worship team and then walk into this sanctuary – where music is filling every corner of the air and most likely a choir is singing; where we come together from many homes and disparate roads to arrive here; where I know we will keep it real and tell it like it is; where our children come forward to listen to us or to sing for us – and for those brief moments – the world, and my life, begins to make a little more sense again. My choices feel important, and most of all, my hope is renewed, so that when I leave, I'm ready to face another week of whatever comes. I leave with a little more

courage to live my values and risk speaking my truth no matter the consequences. And to me, that's church.

When the choirs came in this morning singing *We Are Marching Up To Zion* – “that beautiful, marvelous, glorious, and victorious city of God” – that is what worship is about. It's a journey into a time outside of time; a realm where a large group of people sit in silence together; where we might hold hands with a stranger; where even those of us who don't sing, sing. In this time and place, the rules, and the customs, and the conversations are different from other places we go. We are going to Zion, to the holy city, to the kingdom of heaven, right here on earth. And the choir sings for us, “Come, we'll take you there!” To a place where nobody has to feel excluded and everyone can feel welcome; where the lamb can lie down with the lion, the rich with the poor, and the young with the old. Outside, in the rest of our lives we are divided by all kinds of walls. By fear, by racism, homophobia, by politics and pieties; but in here, for one hour a week, we create the city of God, the family of humankind.

Jerusalem, Zion, Mecca, Nirvana, or the Kingdom of Heaven: by whatever name you call it, these are not meant to be literal geographical locations, and we are not meant to wait until the next life to discover them. They are symbols for the world we are meant to create wherever we are. So every week here, we create that holy place where the sacred can meet the human, where the infinite and the finite can mingle and dance, where the ephemeral and the eternal come together and there is no difference big enough to separate or divide us. We do our best to create heaven right here on earth for at least one hour, so we can get a taste of it.

The ultimate goal is to create such a world out there – every day, everywhere – but that is the work of a lifetime, probably many lifetimes. So we come here to heal and feel and let go and let down and get lifted up, so that we can have the moxie to go back out into the world and keep building a holy land. It's a filling station for the mind and spirit. “A garden in the wilderness”, as Dr. Wolf has called it. In other traditions they say that Sunday morning is a rehearsal for the world to come. And they are right! Except that the world to come is no *by-and-by*, *pie-in-the-sky*, *after-you-die* kind of place. No; we join a church to embody the world we hope to create, to be the change we want to see. We come to give the spirit of love, flesh. We come to be an incarnation of the world we know is possible, when human beings can rise above what divides us and learn to celebrate our differences. A world where no child goes to bed hungry and every child has a chance to succeed. Where no one is shamed because of who they love or what they believe or don't believe. So yes, indeed, every time we come to this church we rehearse the world to come, the world we hope will one day come, the world we are called to create. We come to embody it, and celebrate it, and to deepen our faith in its possibility.

And that's what our 2021 Vision says in no uncertain terms. It says All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa in 2021

is an embodiment and celebration of the world as we hope it will one day become. A climate of profound hospitality, love, and acceptance radiates from our campus and our members. Our sanctuary is bursting with people from a diversity of theologies, philosophies, ethnicities, cultures, colors, classes, abilities, generations, sexual orientations, and political persuasions, all dwelling together in peace, seeking the truth in love and helping one another.

Now that's a church I wanna be a part of! That's the church of All Souls!

For the next three weeks, the other ministers, and the choirs, and I, will be lifting up different aspects of this Centennial Vision for 2021, which, mind you, is also the Centennial Anniversary of the Tulsa Race Riot, or race massacre, to be more accurate. How meaningful it will be as Tulsans to be part of a community that, leading up to the anniversary of Tulsa's most deadly and divisive day has, as part of its vision, to be a living antidote, a solution to that poisonous period of our past.

If you are in our sanctuary, you have a copy of the vision; please take it home. If you are listening to a podcast from iTunes or watching this on YouTube, or if you are worshiping with us live this morning through our Livestream video link, please go to our website www.allsoulschurch.org and read it – because on October 3 during the service everyone, including our children, will be invited to come onto the chancel to sign the original vision statement, and then we are going to frame it with all of our signatures and hang it on the wall as a reminder and guide as we approach 2021, of who we are and where we are headed. And we're going to ask each person to do more than sign, but to also make a commitment on that day of time, talent, and treasure as well as a commitment toward personal and spiritual growth in order to help us make this vision a reality over the next decade. You'll be hearing more about this each week leading up to October 3.

Of course, there are people who say, "You can't create community with that much diversity!" "You can't bring together that much difference!" Especially not in Tulsa, Oklahoma – a city with a history like ours. And when I hear that, I think of a sermon I heard from Rev. Tony Compolo. He's a white guy but he serves a black Baptist church. He says, "Every year we have a preach-off at my church." He says, "That's not what we call it; we say we're coming together to glorify God. But the preachers know why they're there – to prove who's the best!" He explained that in his church, you know when you're doing well because even when you're not doing well, they let you know. Once he was halfway through a sermon and a woman started yelling, "Help

him, Jesus! Help him, Jesus!" and he knew it wasn't going well. In the same vein, they let you know when you're hot. They say, "Preach it!" And the women waive at you like this and they go, "Well!" And when you're really hot, they say, "Keep going!" It reminds me a little bit of our 11:30 service when things get going – or when they don't get going! I think a few times now I've heard, "God help him!" coming from these pews.

During one of these preach-offs, Tony Compolo said the better he started preaching, the more the ladies started waving and the men started cheering, and the more they were cheering and waving, the better he preached. Gerald and Tamara, you'll appreciate this; he said, "It was going so well, I got going so good," he said, "I wanted to take notes on me!" And by the time he sat down, he thought he had done exceedingly well. But the next speaker was a Dr. Wolf-kind-of preacher, and the old lion tapped him on the knee and said, "Good job. Now let me show you how it's done."

And he did, with one simple line. He said, "It's Friday – but Sunday's coming." This preacher knew something about expectation. He knew something about vision – and what happens when a community of people knows where they're headed. It's Friday, but Sunday's coming. It was Friday and darkness was in the land and darkness ruled the land. But that's because it's Friday – Sunday's coming! On Friday people are saying, "As things have been, so they shall be. You can't change nothin' in this world." But they didn't know it was only Friday! Sunday's coming! Friday people are saying you can't lift the darkness; you can't bring in the light. You can't bring people together and have them feel like one big family. That's because it's only Friday – but Sunday's coming! Yes! Sunday's coming! On Friday, darkness may seem to rule the land, On Friday, *family values* may be a slogan used to divide the human family by placing some families over others. But when Sunday comes, *family values* is gonna mean we are all family and everyone is valued! And we know it's Friday, but Sunday's coming. The old preacher just ended the sermon by yelling, "Fridaaaaaay!", and with one voice, the people yelled back, "Sunday's coming!" Because of you, because of this place, because of what Dr. Wolf has done for us – even though we may still live in a Friday world – we have hope and a vision that Sunday's coming! You are family. Welcome home. I love you.

Amen.