

# "Declaration Sunday"

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister  
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, October 3, 2010

I remember attending a church one time where the minister was like a jackhammer; pounding over and over the idea that if you do not believe in Jesus in a very specific way you are going to hell. His sermon depicted a cosmic battle between good and evil, between God and the devil, who were each vying for my soul, and yours, and each was trying to get us to belong to their army. He described a vision of a time in the future when we would all be divided into believers and non-believers, the sheep and the goats. I must admit, I left feeling like a goat. And I remember thinking to myself, when I have children someday, I will *never* expose them and their impressionable little psyches to such a fearful and divisive vision of God and religion. I imagine you have also had experiences in which you became extremely clear about what you do not want, for yourself or for your children. And let's be honest, it's usually much easier to figure out what we do *not* want, than it is to decide what we *do* want.

But today is about what we *do* want. We have before us a vision of what this church family strives to be. And it is not focused on avoiding some scary hell in the next life. If there is any focus on hell, it's a focus on the very real hells that exist in this life: the hells that are born of poverty and prejudice, of addiction and violence. And our *Centennial Vision* also reminds us that if we destroy our planet with waste and pollution, the quality of all life on earth could become a living hell; and so environmental sustainability is also central to this vision. And so these are the things we teach our children here, hopeful they learn that having a positive vision of what we *do* want can change the course of history and deeply enrich our lives.

The signers of the Declaration of Independence had a vision that altered human history toward greater freedom and equality. Those who gave us the constitution gave us a vision of continually working to create a more perfect union. And those 27 men and women sitting in the YWCA in downtown Tulsa in 1921 who signed their names on a piece of paper and established this church, a church of All Souls in Tulsa, gave us a vision of beloved community.

Today, you and I are invited to sign our names on All Souls' *Centennial Vision*. It's not the Declaration of Independence; yet it does offer a vision of defeating oppression and tyranny, and expanding human freedoms, and includes faith in democracy. It's not the Constitution, but it does help us create a more perfect union. And it's not the document that chartered All Souls 90 years ago, but it is the next step in building the beloved community they envisioned. And who knows, your grandchildren and great-grandchildren might one day be standing in these hallowed halls, pointing their fingers at your signature.

You may be wondering how we are going to get this many people to sign it and still be out of church in time to beat the Baptists to brunch. We have worked it out, but we'll need your help. And when we're done, we'll frame and hang the *Vision* with all of our signatures in a special place in the church to guide us on our way to the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of All Souls in 2021. For the next few weeks, as long as there is room, people who could not be here for this historic day, will be able to sign. The way it will work is that we'll be signing on sheets of paper that will be assembled as part of the vision document later, but each piece of paper also has the vision printed on the back of it. And for those who have any kind of mobility concerns, when the ushers come to your row to invite your pew to come forward, we will ask you to raise your hand and we will have someone bring you the vision to be signed in your seat.

Of course, anyone can put their signature on a piece of paper; that's easy, if that's all we're doing. The signers of the Declaration of Independence pledged three things, "...their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor." The signers of our church charter in 1921 pledged their time, their talent, and their treasure, and this is the legacy they have left in our hands. So today, along with your signature, we are also asking you to declare your commitment to support this vision as we go into the first year of this new decade, 2011. If you are on our mailing list, you received a declaration card in the mail this week. And if not, or if you left yours at home, there are more in the pew backs this morning. On them, we are asking you to declare up to three things:

*First:* Declare your intention to further your personal and spiritual growth in the year ahead. This is your personal commitment to nurture yourself, intellectually, spiritually and personally. And keep in mind that a commitment to coming to church regularly is a form of spiritual practice. To do what we propose to do, we each need to be life-long learners who take care of our minds, hearts, and spirits. But please know that we will not be doing anything with this part of the cards; this is for you, as a personal commitment you are making with yourself on behalf of all of us.

*Second:* We are asking you to declare some form of volunteer support in the coming year, either in the church or in the wider community. It's a reminder that we are not a religion of people who believe we can simply pray and meditate our way out of the problems of the world. It takes everyone to build a beloved community like ours and to tear down the real hells that exist. We will pass on your name and interest to the appropriate department of the church.

*Third:* We ask you to consider increasing your financial support of our church in the coming year. This is, of course, for those who are blessed to be able to do so. But remember, last year we decided to stop asking for a new pledge commitment each year from our members. Instead, we have started carrying over your monthly or annual commitment from year to year,

until you notify the church of a change. So, you do not have to do anything on the third line today, if you are already contributing to the church and are planning to continue your support at the same level in 2011; but this is an opportunity to increase, if you can. And I hope if you can, you will; so that we can return our children's and youth programs and our choirs to full funding. There's a big gap that has been created by the cutbacks in the past two years. We want to close the gap and do more for the kids this year.

In a minute, the ushers are going to start with the back rows and invite you to come onto the chancel to sign your name to this historic *Vision* document. We ask you to bring your filled-out cards forward and place them in one of the containers that are on either side of the chancel as you come up. You'll return to your seats down the side aisles and at the end of the service we'll have a closing. However, if you are not ready to sign today, that's okay. You're invited to remain seated and to sing with us and be a witness to others signing. You are also welcome to come forward onto the chancel just to look at the vision statement, even if you do not sign it today. We will be singing, using the commemorative song booklets, while others are signing.

We also thought this would be a great opportunity for those who have never signed our membership book to be able to do so. We started signing a membership book in 2000 upon my installation as senior minister. Since that time we have welcomed \_\_\_\_\_ members who have all signed this book upon joining this church. So if you'd like to, after signing the vision statement, you are welcome to come to the chancel table and sign the membership book. And children, I want to invite you to come forward and sign our *Centennial Vision* as well. In our tradition, children do not sign the membership book until after ninth grade. But everyone who can understand our vision, and all who support it, are invited to sign the *Vision* today.

I want to conclude by coming back to my thoughts as I began this morning. I think one of the reasons that people who believe in hell tend to become so pushy, and often offensive, about their beliefs is that they live with a high degree of anxiety and fear about whether they belong. Some of their agitation comes from worrying about their own sense of worth and whether they are going to be accepted by God. And so they end up projecting their anxiety about belonging onto the rest of us. And in order to feel *in*, they have to place anyone who is different *out*. It reminds me of the poem:

*He drew a circle that shut me out--  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.  
But love and I had the wit to win:  
We drew a circle that took him in.*

When I imagine coming up to this circle this morning to sign our vision statement, I rejoice our vision is an expansion of the circle of love and acceptance. It reminds me of that cool December morning when I penned my name onto a piece of paper and became Lyla's dad. She had just been born the day before. She didn't even weigh five pounds but she was perfect; she came out with long, stunning eyelashes, big beautiful eyes, and a soft little afro. The first time I set my eyes upon her, I began to cry. I felt so blessed that I was going to be allowed to be her father. And when I signed my name on the adoption papers, I was saying, "You are now my family, you belong; and I'll do everything I can to raise you to be the blessing you are meant to be. And I know that you are helping me to be the blessing that I'm meant to be." And in my heart, I could feel the weight of all her past relations who had a stake in what I was doing. And I felt the weight of my ancestors whose name she would be taking and whose legacy she would be helping to shape. And I also knew that you and this church would be here to help us to raise her well; and that, no matter who she becomes or what she believes or who she decides to marry, she belongs. This church will honor her, and love her, and help her through this life. And will help us be her parents, come what may. When I signed those adoption papers, it was one of the most joyous and meaningful days of my life. I realize that some families we are born into, and others we choose. When I signed my marriage license, I was choosing Anita to be family. When I signed the adoption papers, I was choosing Lyla; and when I signed the membership book of this church, I was choosing this church family; and I trusted that this church family would push me to be better and that you would hold me, if the floor ever fell out from beneath my life. And you did.

*Some draw a circle that shuts me out--  
Heretic, rebel, thing to flout.  
But you and I have the wit to win,  
We'll draw a circle that takes them in.*

Come help us expand the circle of love and family. Let us discover and create the kingdom of heaven right here on earth.

Amen.