

“One Church, Many Perspectives”

A Homily delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar
At All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, OK, Sunday, November 13, 2011

When the idea to possibly move the church downtown was first presented to me, I was quite shocked and very skeptical. I did not think this congregation would do it . . . not in a million years! Plus, I have deep ties to this place. My three babies were all dedicated here on this chancel, and my oldest little girl was memorialized here on one of the most meaningful and heartbreaking days of my life. Her ashes have become part of the soil that nourishes those trees outside the window. So, *if* we vote to move, it will certainly take us five to ten years before we leave this place. And in that time, there will be moments when you will need to carry me through my grief of saying goodbye, and I promise you that I will do the same for you.

Despite all this, before long, I started to become intrigued by the possibility of moving. And when a potential location was discovered, I found myself becoming excited. And if you know me, you know that when I get excited about something, I want everyone else to be excited about it too! This process created an uncomfortable tension in me – that I’ve been living with. I do not want anyone to decide to go downtown if that is not what they feel is right. The last thing I want is to be downtown with a congregation full of resentful, unhappy people. And . . . the tension is . . . I absolutely think it’s the right things for us to do. Can you see the dilemma? At times, the way I’ve tried to resolve this split is by trying to get others excited. At times, this may have caused confusion for some people, and if you’ve felt that, I want you to know what I’ve been going through, to help explain where it was coming from.

By the time it was appropriate to bring this possibility to the congregation, I’d been thinking about it for a few months, and by then I’d overcome my initial feelings shock and skepticism, and was very enthusiastic. Many in the leadership of the church counseled me to remain neutral through this process.

They know me, as well as you know me, and know that I sometimes like to try to sell my ideas. As you can imagine, the idea of being neutral was hard for me, but I realized they were right. I knew that each member of the congregation had to go through his and her own process, from the initial shock and disbelief . . . to eventually

coming to their own conclusions, and if I met their (your) shock and disbelief with my enthusiasm, it was not going to be good for anyone.

Like all of us, I come to this with my own opinions, my own emotions, and my own shortcomings. I've tried hard to allow the congregation time to learn, cry, ask questions, and get excited – and I've listened – and I've discovered what this church and what this building mean to people. One thing I learned from listening was that it's important for me to be honest about where I stand before we vote. One question I've been asked is, "Are you going to leave if the congregation votes not to move?" The answer to that question is simple: Absolutely not!

The hardest result of all this for me would be that we would not be together. We are a community; those of us who love this church need to stand united regardless of where we locate. This project and process does *not* in any way trump my passion for this community. I hope it doesn't trump yours. I'm in it ...and have faith that we will pursue our 2021 Vision either way.

But here's something else: if we decide to move, it could easily be a five to ten year process. And something could happen to any of us in that time, including me . . . a diagnosis . . . a car accident . . . who knows? This decision cannot be for *me*. You have to believe it is the right thing for the congregation. If this move is not going to go forward without me, then it's not the right decision to begin with. Let me be clear: barring unforeseen circumstances, I will be here, either way . . . but this decision cannot be about me . . . and if I'm honest, it should not be about you either.

In making this choice we need to be faithful to the people who came before us. They sacrificed and risked scorn and ridicule because they felt Tulsa needed a liberal church in order to become a healthy city. And boy were they right! I can't even imagine this town without All Souls. In the early years they moved from place to place; they met for a while in Old City Hall, at the YWCA, at the old Temple Israel, at the Majestic Movie Theater. And for a long time, the minister from Oklahoma City traveled to be with them every week on Sunday evening, on old roads with old fashioned vehicles, because he believed it too.

Finally they built a church in a prime place in the city (14th & Boulder) and it was – and still is – beautiful. They did it in the midst of the depression, despite the worst

economy the country had ever known, and amidst insecurity about the future. They did it because it was that important. But years later, when they realized it was too small, especially for the children (and what's the point of a church if it is not able to reach the children?) they left that prime location and beautiful church to come to this much less attractive and undeveloped piece of land – at the time. And they each scraped to come up with the money to do it, but that's because they had a mission and they knew it! And so do we. And if *anyone* does not understand the depth and importance of that mission, then I have failed. This church is not about our comfort and pleasure . . . it never was. It is not even about us; it is about a light that we tend and we are called to pass on to the next generation.

It's about freedom. It's about freeing the oppressed. Not just the politically oppressed like we've done in the civil rights movement, the women's rights movement, and more recently on gay rights and immigration issues. And of course in our work in the public schools, as we strive to give every child the freedom to learn and excel. And in starting banks in Central America that are helping the poorest on earth to become free of the debilitating cycle of hunger, poverty and prostitution. And in supporting our co-religionists in Uganda.

It is also about spiritual and religious freedom. Freeing people from the dominant notion that they are depraved and sinful to their core. Freeing people from doctrines that teach children a worldview that not only shames them about their own eternal nature, but also denies scientific truth and breeds spiritual arrogance that their religion is superior and right, and all others are perversions of God's truth. Freeing people from religious ideologies that say that women are less than men, that Jews and Hindus and Muslims and Buddhists are misguided, that being gay is an abomination.

We tend a *light* in this world. With our lives we breathe a warmth into this cold earth, and we do it because we love beyond belief. Some people think we need to do this for parking, and others for more classrooms for the children, or for our choirs, or environmentalism, and many other very good reasons. I'm excited because I'm convinced that this is what we need to do, in our time, to tend the light of religious freedom that has been given to us.

Our John B. Wolf Scholar & Unitarian Universalist historian Rev. Mark Morrisson-Reed explained to us last week that in the 1950's Unitarian Universalist churches all over this country abandoned the cities and moved out into the suburbs. It was part of the white flight that decimated the urban school systems in America and that served to segregate our cities along racial lines that could no longer be drawn legally. In leaving the city centers and retreating into the suburbs, Unitarian Universalists across America gave ourselves the option to engage urban issues (or not) depending on our interest or inclination at the time. So that we did not have to weigh-in on issues of hunger, or homelessness, or police brutality, or inadequate resources for education... because we could remain in our ivory towers, surrounded by huge lawns and old trees, and we could rush in and help when it was convenient or expedient. Even while saying every Sunday that "Service is our Law."

I have a fire in my belly for this opportunity because I am convinced that it will help us bring together our words and our actions in a profoundly meaningful way. And we will be changed by it, and we will create change in this city by doing it. There's a consumerist ethos that pervades and degrades our culture. It teaches us to make decisions based on personal preference, and comfort, and personal wants and desires. It's so insidious that it even creeps into our conversations about the church. I fear for a congregation of people who would make decisions about their church with a consumer mentality. When the question before us is *not* about *us*... it's about being *faithful* to those who gave us this place. Those who sacrificed much so that Tulsa would have this place. And faithful to the future generations who will not fully understand what we've done, but who will forever thank us for it. I believe our mission calls us to take this step.

And I know there are others who also believe in our mission with equal passion. Who may see turning down this opportunity as the way to be faithful to our mission. And even though we disagree, as long as everyone casts his or her vote based on their assessment of our mission and the heritage we represent, then I do not mind which way they vote. It is only those who vote as a consumer... for what they want themselves... who fall short of the sacred task that is before us next week.

I'll be here to minister to you and cry with you whichever way it goes, because those of us who love this church must stay united no matter what. I'll be here because I

love you. And because we have a job to make sure that light, which we tend but did not kindle, will not and shall never be put out!

Amen.