

# **“One Church, Many Perspectives”**

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

Sometimes my breath is taken away by this sanctuary. The way the light and sound fills the room, the warmth of those who gather here. This is the sanctuary where I was first called and installed. On this chancel I have witnessed with you the cycle of life, from child dedications, to weddings, to memorial service pronouncements. This sanctuary holds the choir loft where I have sung and cried with the adult choir, and it holds the pew where I felt our daughter, Beckett kick, for the first time.

Those windows look out onto the memorial garden where I have returned the ashes of many whom I love to the good earth. It is in the garden where you threw a wonderful celebration for Jill and me, welcoming the blessing of our new family. The garden is where I often pause during the day, take off my shoes, and pray to reconnect to my source [GOD], so that in the midst of meetings, and tasks, and agendas, and calendars, and conflict . . . I can remember that my ministry and my leadership should be grounded in my values, and in my intention to be a good steward of those whose hopes and dreams I carry with me.

When colleagues visit, I love to show them around this church. Our building, and what it demonstrates of our programming and outreach, is today so much more than what many Unitarian churches believe they are capable of. What we are now is what many of our churches dream to one day become. Once, a colleague, awed by the artists atelier, the majestic theatre, the Sponge Room and the Banks of the Nile, said, “Oh My God.. you work in UU Disneyland!” This *is* Unitarian Disneyland . . . if he meant the place where the dreams of our free faith come true, then maybe it is . . .

In our chapel I watch the seasons change through the window, and have seen Rick convince the autumn leaves to visually accompany him on piano. In that chapel, I have had the hands of the staff laid upon me as my family struggled with the news of Beckett's heart condition. Outside the door of our chapel hangs the ministerial robe of Jenkin Lloyd Jones. That encased robe reminds me that I am part of a legacy, of clergy

and lay alike, who built this church and expect me to help take care of it. In our pews today you will still find the Jones family, supporting the expanding ministry and the mission of this church beyond even what our forefathers and mothers dreamed.

The history of this church is palpable – it envelops you as you enter. I have heard so many try to describe it: they say it feels magical, poignant, significant...and calls us to rise to be our best – or at least our better – selves. Encouraging dreams of Justice and Compassion, Courage and Connection. Like me, you may not know many of the stories behind those who dreamed generations ago to make us who we are today. I have learned a few stories in my five years here that helped me better understand the context in which we find ourselves today. I would like to share one with you this morning that I hope will not only offer context but also touch your heart

During the 1920s, this church met in Tulsa's Majestic Theater, and the first paid staff person (other than the minister) was a soloist named Fred Welsh. Fred and his wife, Clara, were an integral part of the church. Clara organized and kept the church school running, served as the bookkeeper, the primary fundraiser, and successfully raised the money to buy the church school its first piano. When in the middle of building the church on Boulder, the money to complete the project ran out. Clara wrote an impassioned letter to the American Unitarian Association requesting funds. Eventually, that loan was paid off at \$75 per year – with funds raised by the Sunday School, and the check written by Clara.

The building on Boulder was being built during the Great Depression. Little work was to be found, and people were challenged to pay the expenses of their own families. Giving to the church was difficult, but the congregation pulled together. With the economy in such bad shape, the Welsh's were struggling and needed a place to live. The Jones family had just moved before the crisis hit, and had not yet been able to sell other home, so the Joneses offered the Welsh's a home to live in, in exchange for Fred Welsh singing for the church without pay. The Welsh's had a roof over their head and the church had music.

This church came through for the Welsh family when they had very little, and the Welsh family came through for the church. That formed a deep connection and a well of gratitude from which service and generosity to this church has flowed ever since. Panny

Welsh grew up attending the church on Boulder, and made the move to this building on Peoria. She witnessed the addition of the religious education wing, and later the addition of the choir loft. Panny married Art McElroy, and together they started a machine shop in their garage with their own two hands. It was in that garage that Art first invented a machine that eventually turned into McElroy Manufacturing, which today is the world leader in its field.

Good times or bad, the family never wavered in their support of this church. Art and Panny's children grew up attending in this church building, as do their children. It is they, the grandchildren of Fred and Clara Welsh, a family that has been an integral part of this community since the 1920s – who we know better as Donna Dutton, Chip McElroy, and Peggy Tanner – who have offered us the gift of two city blocks so that we can have the opportunity to dream bigger; so that we can build a church to serve their children's children yet to be born, and our community into its next century.

One of the Welsh's and one of the Jones' also played an integral part in bringing me to All Souls: Donna Dutton and Georgia Snoke. In May 2008, I was called by this church, by your vote, to serve and to lead alongside Marlin. That Fall was an amazing time in the life of this church as we welcomed the former members of Higher Dimensions. My installation, which included the New Dimensions Chorale and the entire Adult Music Program, was nothing less than magical. I had never seen a multiracial multicultural Unitarian Universalist installation. It was more than I dreamed possible... for my ministry, for this church, for our faith, for Tulsa, and for this world who desperately needs our saving message of love beyond belief.

The day of my installation, a call was placed on my life for my ministry, and I cannot go back. I saw a glimpse of our church as I believe it could be. As it I believe it *should* be. Not just as a theory, but as a real possibility. And you, this church, you saw it too . . . I know you did, because when you tackled the work of articulating a vision for who you want us to become in 2021, it reflected exactly what I saw and felt that day and what I know is possible: a church that is an embodiment and celebration of the world as we hope it will one day become. A church 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.

No matter what happens on November 20<sup>th</sup>, no matter how you vote, there is one important point of which I would like to remind you. We are on the same team. We are united in our diversity by a common value we all want: A healthy and thriving ALL SOULS in Tulsa. The question is not whether, but how. How do we get there? Which choice is the best one to further our vision? No matter whether you vote to accept this gift and begin the steps that would move this congregation downtown or not, I am called to be with you. And I will be.

I love this church, the grounds, the building, and I love you. This church *is* my home. But it is not simply this building. You have taught me to dream bigger than I ever thought possible, for myself and for this church, and I will not allow my own grief of losing my home to limit that dream. I will not allow my fear of the work that is ahead of us – and there will be work, no matter what you decide – to stand in the way of realizing that goal. You have taught me to be courageous, and so I will feel the fear and do it anyway. Neither my fear nor my grief will keep me from continuing to dream of the church that cries out to be built for Beckett's children's children: a dream that is grounded in my call to serve you, a dream that contains echoes of the voices of those whose legacy we have inherited. That dream, for me, is of a downtown church.

Dream with me a moment: I can see it if I close my eyes, I can feel what it will feel like to be in it. It is a thriving Community Church, a **significant presence** in downtown Tulsa:

**A significant physical presence** on culturally neutral ground, with incredible visibility as everyone who comes into downtown off the highway will pass our church, and our sign, and in plain view of City Hall. So many people upon finding All Souls tell me, "I wish I had known this church existed years ago." People will know we are here and how to find us!

**A significant theological Presence...** a religious alternative to the exclusiveness that plagues our city.

**And a significant presence of our outreach:** our membership and leadership would be more visible in their work to build the kingdom of heaven on earth, or the beloved community, if you prefer that language.

I see us becoming an anchor to a bustling downtown Tulsa. We would be facing Greenwood Avenue (Historical Black Wall Street), the site of the worst race massacre in US history, as we strive to build a community that brings the races together. That celebrates diversity in a city that has been divided by that event. It is redemptive. I see plenty of parking for volunteer and worshipper: visitor and member alike. The parking we are being offered is the block that originally contained a famous building that was used during the riot to inter African Americans as their homes were looted and burned to the ground. We would be using that land to help bring the races together. By the 100th anniversary of the riot and our church in 2021, we might have helped move Tulsa (and All Souls) toward a very different story about what is possible.

I imagine the iconic view of downtown Tulsa skyline shifting to include our church in the foreground of that perspective (I'm ready to buy the t-shirt.) I can hear a lunchtime bell calling residents and workers of all faiths to an inclusive chapel, or to our contemplative interfaith meditation space. I can see a clear and welcoming point of entry, and hospitable ease of flow leads to a naturally lit sanctuary with enough room for all who choose to come. A dedicated space for alternative worship like High Def Praise and Soulful Sundown, with dedicated lighting and screens and sound equipment

Outside, I imagine sidewalk tables in front of the building where anyone can gather for conversation, or chess, or to take in the surroundings. If the Park goes in, we would be across the street from the largest green space in the entire city. I can already imagine this park filled with people of all ages, and there are picnickers, an impromptu drum circle, dogs, and kites, and bicycles... All Souls becomes a place where Tulsans want to check out while they are nearby, because something interesting is always going on there: a weekly movie that discusses the theme in our theater room, an outdoor art display luring people into our dedicated art gallery featuring local artists or the art of our Children's Religious Education Program.

I have a vision of All Souls expanding beyond the neighborhood church, and becoming a facet of downtown, a point of interest. I see us becoming the anchor of a

public space. I could go on and on, but my hope is that you can imagine at least some of it . . . enough to see the possibility.

But the fact is, this is not **my** dream to dream alone. This is **our** dream to dream together. And it is **yours** to decide. The magic of this community is that you have already made so many dreams come true, but you have also inspired me to continue to dream bigger and bigger. I thank God every day that I am part of the Magic of All Souls. Thank you for inviting me to come along on the journey.