

"Festival Sunday"

a Homily Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, November 20, 2011

Back in 1998 I was a ministerial intern at the First Church in Boston. It was the thirtieth anniversary of a fire that burned down the entire church. They decided to rebuild the church after the fire, but people protested. It was the late '60s and there was a lot of protesting going on. The protesters felt that there were enough churches in Boston, and that to spend millions of dollars to build another church was immoral. They actually disrupted some Sunday services, and at least one had to be called off. The protesters wanted the church to take the insurance money and any other money they had raised to build affordable housing units. Boston needed affordable housing units much more than they needed one more church! It was a compelling argument. Was it not selfish for this church to spend so much money on themselves, the argument went, when there was so much that needed to be done for the poor?

Now, fast-forward thirty years and I'm delivering the sermon on the anniversary of the fire. Obviously, the congregation decided to invest the money into rebuilding their church instead of on affordable housing (it wasn't an easy decision, and it wasn't unanimous) and in my sermon I said, "Have you seen the affordable housing units they built in Boston in the '60s and '70s? They are mostly crumbling, condemned, or being torn down. Whereas this church is still going strong and appears as if it will continue into perpetuity."

Then I listed all of the things that the church had accomplished to help those in need over the last thirty years. I talked about the homes they created for the elderly; the homes to care for people with AIDS; the meals they'd served to the homeless; the events they'd sponsored; the people they'd brought into the community; the reforms they helped usher through in education, women's rights, LGBT rights, and so much more. But I also told them, when they add up all of the incredible organizations they founded and supported, and all of the direct service they offered, it is incredible. And there is one thing they'd done that made an exponentially greater impact for justice and

positive change in the world. Do you know what it is? It is the same thing that we do as a church that is greater than all other things that we do to change the world for the better combined: we educate our children to care about justice, and to live lives that make a difference. We teach them to care about the *common good*.

At my church in Boston I started listing the names of children who'd grown up in the church, and some of the jobs they were holding and accomplishments they had – in Washington DC, in the school systems in Boston and around the country, in academia, in the arts, as activists and lobbyists and lawyers, as creators and directors of social service agencies, the boards they served on, the newspapers they wrote for, the elective offices they held, and the list went on and on and on. The greatest impact that this church will ever have on the world for justice and change will be through our children!

My point this Thanksgiving is the point I've emphasized every Thanksgiving since coming to this church almost twelve years ago. The Mayflower Compact was a covenant that people entered into, in which they promised to put the common good over and above their own self-interests. It was an amazing step in human community that we continue today in this church. While the world outside often says compete, we say love. While it says get and take and then take some more, we say service and serve and serve some more, because Service is our Law. While the world is filled with wars and conflict, we say Dwell together in Peace. While religion is the source of so much strife, we say Seek the Truth in Love. While the world says help yourself, we say help one another.

We are people who choose to be bound together not by a creed or doctrine, but by a covenant. We are not a social service agency, we are a church. We do a lot of service in the community, but the biggest impact we will ever have is by raising our children to be as passionate about life and justice as we are.

Those protesters in 1968 argued that investing in a church is selfish, when in fact, investing in a church like this one is probably the single most effective way to create real, lasting, and sustainable change. We have so much to be thankful for this season:

our children, our church, our covenant, and equally important is the love that binds us together as one community. May our bond ever be strengthened, and may nothing ever pull us apart.

Happy Thanksgiving!