

Sunday, October 12, 2008

*Thought to ponder at the beginning:*

So many things are possible just as long as you don't know they're impossible.

- Norman Juster, *The Phantom Tollbooth*

**Sermon "Mission Impossible"**

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As most of you know, I began serving as Minister here on August 1, 2007 – a little over a year ago. And I love it here. I love this state and town. I especially love this church. I want to state that right up front so you won't take what I am about to say the wrong way.

In some ways, you can take the girl out of Massachusetts, but you can't take Massachusetts out of the girl.

Do you know, I had a favorite sentence I could say in Massachusetts? Do you want to hear it?

*And now, by the authority vested in me by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts,  
I pronounce you married!*

In Massachusetts I could say those words at the nuptials of any two consenting adults. *Any* two consenting adults. On November 18, 2003, the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts ruled that denying same-sex couples equal marriage rights was unconstitutional. The Supreme Judicial Court gave the Commonwealth 180 days to change the marriage laws. Thus, on May 17, 2004, same-sex couples married, legally, for the first time in the history of the Commonwealth... and in the history of the United States.

Those were exciting times to be a Unitarian Universalist minister. Couples who had been denied the right to marry turned to Unitarian Universalist clergy to solemnize their vows, because the Unitarian Universalist Association and many of its member churches had long been unequivocal about their support of gay rights. So we clergy were busy! And we were honored to participate in many of those first weddings.

I don't think I have adequate words to describe what it was like to witness the impossible suddenly become possible. Those weddings were electric with joy.

The day same-sex marriage became legal in Massachusetts, Arlington Street Church in Boston hosted wedding after wedding. A friend of mine greeted each couple as they stepped into the church vestibule. She recorded the number of years they had been together in committed partnerships. By the end of the day the number of years of union represented by those couples who could finally marry totaled something like 587. In just

on day. In just one church. Five hundred eighty-seven years of people waiting, hoping, working for the impossible to become possible.

The Supreme Judicial Court's ruling created historic change – change that would have been impossible in earlier times. As recently as ten years ago, such a ruling would probably have been impossible. Ten years ago today Matthew Shepard died. Matthew, you remember, was the 20-year-old gay college student who was tied to a lonely fence post in Laramie Wyoming, brutally beaten, and left in the freezing cold to die.

A hundred years ago, my great aunt Ruth lived in an age when no one spoke of such things as sexual orientation. When she met her lifetime partner Florence, no state would recognize their union. For over 50 years they lived in a committed relationship, carefully closeted to shield Ruth's job as a high school guidance counselor. If they were alive today, Ruth and Florence would now be able to marry in their native state of Connecticut, the latest state to change the marriage laws.

Now you and I know that supporting the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning community involves a lot more than providing equal marriage rights. Much work remains to afford safety, justice, and equal rights for all, regardless of gender or sexual orientation. But today, National Coming Out Day, I want to remember the successes. Remembering them can provide the sustenance to continue laboring until a vision of equality becomes reality.

When people share a dream and embrace a mission to make the dream come true, the impossible can happen. I know this because I have witnessed it. "We never dreamed it would be possible," I heard so many of those couples say in May of 2004, as tears streaked down their cheeks. Now it's possible, because people shared a vision and worked to make it reality.

Vision and mission can make the impossible happen. So let's talk about vision and mission and how they relate to our church community.

In case you haven't been reading the newsletter, email messages, or Order of Worship inserts, for these many weeks, and in case you haven't been listening to the announcements, let me repeat: This coming Saturday will be special and important. Our church will embark on a process whose aim is to articulate our dreams. We will examine our shared purpose, our sense of what we are doing together – our mission. We will ask where we are going – what dreams, even impossible ones, do we carry into the future? What change, what impact, do we want to make in our bruised and aching world? We will seek language that reflects the ember of our community, the coal that provides the steady heat for all we do and dream together.

From Saturday's work will emerge a Mission Statement to guide our community's future. Then on Sunday morning, at the end of what should be a lively, inspiring service, we will

vote on the Mission Statement that results from Saturday's work. It will be an up or down vote with no on-the-floor word-smithing.

Everyone is invited on Saturday. Many have signed up. There is a growing list of tempting dishes to share at the potluck lunch on Saturday.

If you haven't signed up, I hope you will. Come, even if you think you've been down this road before. What we do next week will be different from what this church has done before. It can't help but be. The people are different, the times are different, the issues are different, and the process will be different – and creative and fun, I might add. The facilitator is different. He is also amazing and inspiring. Your minister is different, and your Director of Religious Education is different. With all that is different, what we produce next week will be new.

*Any* church community benefits from periodically dreaming together. But I believe in *this* church. I believe this community has a glowing fire at the center that we can bring into our world in an intentional way. Finding the words to articulate that core will help us to thrive even more than now. What we do next week is important for setting our course.

So come if you can. We need your hurricane voices. We need your sacred hands.

To whet your appetite, here are some thoughts about Mission Statements.

I find the most moving Mission Statements direct my gaze in three complementary directions. The first direction is outward – out there, out into the world, with all its sorrow and pain. For me, a good Mission Statement focuses me beyond these walls. As my colleague John Gibbons puts it, “If we are not making an impact beyond our four walls, then we are not making an impact at all.”

In significant ways, the work of the church is not about us, but about the world we occupy. A good Mission Statement reminds me to build bridges between this community and the wider one. I have a responsibility to make the world spiritually, physically, and emotionally safer, more ethical, more just, more peaceful, for those who follow me. I have a sacred connection to the planet and all life. I have a responsibility to honor that connection. A good Mission Statement reflects that connection and inspires me to make the impossible happen. To make peace and justice happen. To learn, teach, and promote new ways of honoring our planet, Earth.

The second direction is inward – in here, this sanctuary, these two buildings with all their people, this church community. A good Mission Statement reminds me to seize the opportunity my church gives me to help create a beloved community, right here, across all the generations, across all the ways we express humanity together. For me, that’s a critical part of church life. If we cannot create a safe, healthy beloved community here in this relatively small group of people, we severely limit our chances of “making an impact outside our four walls.”

Or, put another way, when building bridges between our community and the wider world, it’s important to carry loving and healing spirit across those bridges. That means creating a loving and caring community here, a community of give and take, forbearance and forgiveness, understanding and acceptance. It means listening well to one another and holding ourselves accountable for our words and deeds. What we do well here, we export out there.

And, finally, for me, a good Mission Statement needs a vertical component, one that reaches both down into the deepest recesses of my heart and up to whatever I hold most high. This is the spiritual dimension of the Mission Statement, and for me it is critical.

It doesn’t matter how one defines the most high – with theists, atheists, and agnostics of various stripes here, the definitions will vary. But a good Mission Statement reminds me to answer such questions as: What gives me inner strength? What feeds my soul? What fills me up again, when my spirit feels depleted? Is it a belief in Goddess or God? A sense of awe at the power and wonder of nature? Inspiration drawn from the best works and highest potential of humanity? The love that can pass among us?

For me, a good Mission Statement uses broad language to encourage me to find my own individual path to nurturing and growing my spirit. I need that encouragement to reach down into my heart and up to what gives me spiritual sustenance so that I won’t burn out when the work seems hard or relationships feel fraught.

I often say the work of the church is to help people to grow into their best selves. For me, a Mission Statement addressing the three foci – out there, in here, and between my heart and whatever I feel is most high – will provide a grounding to help me grow into my best self, to help all of us grow into our best selves.

One more thing is important to ensuring a Mission Statement will be adopted and used successfully.

Brevity.

Brief enough to remember.

Brief enough to communicate to newcomers.

Brief enough to state without digging through pages of notes.

Brief.

With those things in mind, I invite you to listen to these Mission Statements, and ask yourselves how you might like to craft ours.

***The Mission Statement of the Matthew Shepard Foundation:***

*Replace Hate with Compassion, Understanding, and Acceptance.*

Or on one website, I discovered the shortened version of that already brief Mission Statement: *Erase Hate.*

What will our statement say?

***The Mission Statement of the Prince of Peace Church of Burnsville, Minnesota:***

*You will be cared for and called upon to care for others.*

What will our statement say?

***The Mission Statement of the Media Pennsylvania UU church:***

*As members of a religiously liberal community, we care deeply about each other, our children, our neighbors and our Earth. Together, we provide a haven for nourishing the spirit and mind, while we strive to build a just and sustainable world. We covenant to respect our differences, and to commit our time, our treasures and ourselves to this mission.*

What will our Mission Statement say?

***The Mission Statement of the UU Church of Stow and Acton, Massachusetts:***

*We welcome all who seek a vibrant spiritual home, where together we lovingly challenge and transform ourselves. Empowered by our congregation's rich history and our Unitarian Universalist traditions, we commit to courageously build a caring and just world.*

What will our Mission Statement say?

***The Mission Statement for the Arlington Street Church:***

*Gathered in love and service for justice and peace.*

What will our Mission Statement say?

What we will create together, I can only imagine today – and I can only imagine my part of it. I hope you will think about it during the week and bring your ideas on Saturday.

The statement that emerges from our weekend will guide our walking together and our working together. The work our statement will inspire lies on the path ahead. I look forward to sharing that journey with you. I have hitched my wagon to your star, and I am eager to dream with you and move into the future with you.

We may be one small band, but when we touch the ember at our center, the star at our core, who knows what amazing things may result? Who knows what we might make possible just by dreaming it and then walking toward it? The impossible can happen, you know. Ask those gay and lesbian couples who married in Massachusetts 4-1/2 years ago, who marry there still, today. Ask me. I have seen the impossible happen. I have seen it with my own eyes.