

**Reading:** These are words of Dr. Bernie Loomer who was a much admired professor of theology at Union Seminary in Chicago. When Dr. Loomer retired in the 1980's, he moved to Berkeley. After being a Baptist all his life, he joined the Berkeley Unitarian Universalist Church. As a scholar Bernie Loomer had devoted his life to the development of a theology based on the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. He was considered one of the leading thinkers in that field. He addressed the congregation with these words the day he joined the Berkeley Church.

Church is for enabling us to seek and find some ultimate source of value and meaning. Our trust in this source outruns our knowledge. This reality is to be worshipped for its own sake, because it is worthy of our trust.

In this relationship of trust and worship, the church is a reminder that we live in terms of a covenant and not in terms of a contract.

Church is a living testimony that we live in the context of a mystery that far transcends our reason. We are born in mystery, and die in mystery. A sense of value without sensitivity to mystery is one way of reducing the meaning of life for us.

Church is for seeking as well as speaking the truth in love.

Church is for the increase of stature, the enlargement of spirit, and the greater freedom of the self. Freedom is not an end in itself; it exists in order to enrich our communal life.

Church is for encouraging us to actualize our most creative possibilities. It is also the critic of our limitations and our pretensions.

Church is for understanding and for being understood. Church is for confession, for repentance, and for the compassion of forgiveness.

Church is for reminding us that we are all members of the web of life, that no one is an island, and that no person is an individual outside the context of the web.

The web includes more than the present; it includes the past. Church is an important agency by which great traditions become living presences within the community.

Church is the communal celebration of our elemental joys and sorrows, of our gains and losses, of great meanings. The church is for taking these elemental qualities and values of everyday life and of weaving them into the very litany of the community. I am grateful for this kind of church. I am proud to be included in its membership.

This Living Community  
Rev. Kathleen Owens  
Oct. 18 & 19<sup>th</sup>, 2008

For the folks seeing this DVD on Sunday morning, I want to say Good Morning to you at our Hillcrest campus while I'm live at our South Bay campus.

Long ago there lived a man named Nehemiah. His land had been taken over by the Persian Empire and because he was a learned man, he was taken to the court to serve the king. And all the while he served the king, he was in mourning for his homeland. His relationship with the King was good and one day the king asked what Nehemiah needed. Nehemiah needed to go home again and see his beloved land and city. The king sent him back because Nehemiah's homeland was part of the King's empire and the King agreed the land needed to be tended. So Nehemiah went home to Jerusalem and found the security wall surrounding the city was in disrepair. This made the city vulnerable – and the people were as well. So with the king's permission, Nehemiah was named governor and he began the process of rebuilding the wall. Now moral among the people was low, they had been defeated and felt helpless to change their situation. To rebuild the wall was a huge job – no one was up for it and all thought it couldn't be done. Yet Nehemiah knew it was possible. So he went to each household and asked them not to help rebuild the wall around the city – but to rebuild the portion of the wall that was against their backyard. That little bit they could do. So they gathered the little materials they could find and each household built their part of the wall. It wasn't perfect, sometimes the materials didn't match up well – but the wall was rebuilt and as it went up, so did the people's moral and pride; for not only was a wall rebuilt, but their sense of identity and a community as well.

Now there is enough historical accuracy to this story and for me, the more important aspect of the story is the metaphorical components...but how does it fit with us today? This month's transformational worship theme is faith. And sermons and readings will explore this and other concepts from various points of views. Today I'm talking about faith as our living community. What does it mean that we are a people of faith – of a faith tradition when we are pluralistic in our beliefs? We are Unitarian Universalists who are also Jewish, Buddhist, Christian, Pagan, Agnostic, atheist and more. We are a pluralistic faith tradition with a foundation made up by our Principles. We have a Unitarian Universalism that affirms and celebrates who we are and makes room for others – others who are grounded in our principles.

We have a story of dissent. Our religious ancestors were those who asked questions, found truth in their own experiences, promoted the use of reason when reading sacred texts and believed that the deeds, the actions people did were maybe more important than what beliefs they held. Our ancestors like Michael Servetus, Francis David and others questioned and dissented from the majority belief system of their day. And for a long time, we Unitarian Universalists tended to define ourselves as what we are not; what we don't believe. However, we are more than our history of dissent; we are a future-thinking, future-moving faith tradition that is energizing, that creates community, that is willing to do the hard work of community building so that we can be about our mission – in a short summary, that is: healing lives that transform the world.

This living community is found right here – in this church/congregation. There is a hymn titled Where Is Our Holy Church? Written by the rev. Edwin Hennery Wilson and

it holds some of the answer. This is a key questions to a forward thinking, forward moving faith tradition – where is our holy church?

Within our tradition there is a group of people that make up the Commission on Appraisal and this committee studies a big question for many years and then writes a book that attempts to answer the question. We've studied what is Unitarian Universalism? What does membership mean? What is our polity – way of governance? All important questions and how we are in community is at the heart of our faith tradition; this communal relationship we are in is crucial for fulfilling our mission and our reason for being. I think our holy church resides in us, right here, right now. Our church and its future are in the hearts and minds, hands and feet of every person who claims to be a Unitarian Universalist. Our church, our living community is in our actions, in our words and in our very attitudes.

This fact is wonderful, frightening and exciting to me all at the same time. It is wonderful because we celebrate the worth and dignity of every person. We celebrate a polity that claims no hierarchy – no pope nor bishop ruling over us. It is wonderful in that we honor and celebrate diversity in all the ways it can be expressed.

And the fact that our holy church, our living community is right here is frightening to me. It's frightening because we are it ; and how shall we carry the liberating message that Unitarian Universalism promotes into the future? This is also exciting because we are it; we can be who and what is needed to transform and help heal the world; that which we create is enough to make a difference.

If we are to not only go into the future but lead the way, perhaps we can deepen our understanding of what it means that our church is inside us and what membership in

this living community means. We need to take our saving message more seriously – to live out everyday, in every breath those foundational principles we ground our diversity on. It can be difficult for they challenge us to be our best selves and that challenge brings enthusiasm to one's life. Some ways to take our faith more seriously include regular faithful attendance and participation in church community. We need to show up and participate with an open heart and willing spirit. It means taking seriously the covenant of good relations we have here at First church; of practicing those important behaviors of speaking directly, of assuming good intention; of expressing gratitude and appreciating our limitations; of educating ourselves about how we are in this community with respect to governance and ministry team involvement.

Another way is to maintain a daily spiritual practice – an individual practice that connects us to that which is within and beyond us. The communal worship is enhanced when we have an individual practice. A spiritual practice may be a time of quiet breathing, of praying or meditation; yoga or a walk – some thing, some behavior that will still you enough to hear and/or feel the quiet spirit within.

The spiritual discipline of giving – giving of yourself is an important way to keep this community vital and living. The discipline of giving your time, talent and treasure benefits you as much or more than the community. Time and again I've heard stories of folks hesitant to help others or participate and yet when they do – feel they gained far more than they gave. It's a spiritual principle. There are those who are afraid to say yes to a request for help for they fear they will have to serve on a committee for life; but one woman shared her story with me – she was hesitant to say yes; finally she said yes to staffing the welcome table and it changed her experience of church, it deepened her

experience. I think this is one of the wonders of Nehemiah's story; each household gave of themselves, the materials they had and their labor to rebuild their part of the wall; doing so connected them with others that created something that offered safety to the larger group and built a stronger sense of community.

I believe people are longing for a place where they can be accepted for who they are and encouraged to grow beyond themselves. They long for a place where they can practice being their better selves. People long for a community that will gently hold them accountable to those higher ideals they seek to live. They want meaningful connection and deep community. I believe this only comes from working together for a cause larger than ourselves. I believe people want a church, a community that will transform their lives and then support them in transforming the world. Again, this is our reason for being in this community.

Unitarian Universalist churches can be such places...and First UU Church is this kind of place. We are creating the longed-for community. And we're doing it because we allow this faith of ours to change our lives, our outlook, our behavior. In June 1985 Bernie Loomer wrote, "Church is for the increase of stature, the enlargement of spirit, and the greater freedom of the self. Freedom is not an end in itself; it exists in order to enrich our communal life." We are about the business of creating, maintaining and growing this kind of deep community.

To truly live out our principles, to articulate what we are for and find common ground with others; to learn what living in a pluralistic community means and how to do that, how to practice that – to find meaningful spiritual practices that deepen our

understanding and experience of Love in this world – it takes work. It can be tiresome,  
exciting and inspiring – and it is our work. Blessed and Amen.