

Like-Minded, Like-Hearted, Like-Storied

March 2, 2014

Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

“I don’t think you can be empathetic and “know” you are right. If you already know you are right then just declare moral victory and be done with it. Instead engage with the other, feel their worries and pains.”

Doug Trombom 2014

“I would like to see us welcome newcomers so that they are being welcomed not into a clan that sets itself apart from the wider religious community, but into one that humbly and deeply knows its place in that community, is grateful for it, and seeks to help . . . individuals find their own ministry within it.”

Victoria Weinstein 2011

Gathering, Welcoming

Opening *please rise in body or spirit* Joe Pierce, Shane Roussi, Rev. Mark Belletini

We are here

on yet another snowy morn,

to worship, to weave a community that is deep,

to enter into relationship with both far stars

and near strangers, and to find ways to open our hearts,

and to claim our diversity as a source of our strength.

(all) And so, bearing witness both to our world as it is, and as Love can imagine it, we would claim that vision of a just world in our own lives. And because of a growing sense of kinship with all beings, inviting our compassion, we begin in this celebration to engage our mission with our whole lives: body, mind, and heart.

Praising #1023 Building Bridges

Ingathering On the Playground

(acted out by our coordinators, Joe Pierce and Shane Roussi)

There on the playground behind the old brick school on Springgarden, the children, younger and older in the neighborhood, played together each and every Saturday. Lamar liked to play baseball with some friends who always came from over on Maplegrove Street. The sound of the bat hitting the ball gave him a thrill almost nothing else did. But his best friend Doug never joined in. He didn't like baseball at all. He didn't like basketball or football either. He simply liked to sit in the shade under the oak tree in the corner of the play yard and read Green Lantern comic books. Sometimes he would bring a notebook, and try and draw the characters in Green Lantern. Parallax for example. Off the playground, Doug and Lamar were inseparable. Always together.

Jerica loves to play board games, and she and her friend Tabitha always tried to win as hard as they could. They would sit under the shade of the big pine trees in the corner and play both Scrabble and Boggle until they were exhausted. Off the playground, Jerica and Tabitha didn't see each other much. Jerica was always fascinated by math equations. Her mother taught her how much fun math could be. She was way ahead of her class in arithmetic and math.

Tabitha HATED math, and preferred to play video games and listen to music, but she preferred classical music, especially by a fellow named Bach, which many of her friends thought was weird.

"That's what grandpa listens to. Ewww."

"That's what I listen to, and I *like* it."

A girl named Darlene, when she heard Tabitha refuse to be teased by her friends about her taste in music, asked her if she could come over and listen to some of this "Bach"; and when she did, that Wednesday, Darlene realized that she really hadn't known what Bach meant, and that she kind of liked it.

Richard and Kim were friends, and they liked to kick a soccer ball around together on the playground. But only later in the day. Around sunset. Richard was Jewish, and didn't do anything on Saturday until after sunset, since Saturday was a holy day for him. They didn't have much time, but that time was precious to them. Kim was raised in a Buddhist family. She spent a lot of time trying to understand what Richard meant when he talked about G-d, and he, who had always attended a Methodist Church, tried to understand why G-d wasn't important in Kim's family, but that sitting in silence was.

Eventually, they visited each other's homes. Kim was invited to help light the candles on Friday night, and Richard was invited to sit on a small cushion and keep quiet as some Korean words were hummed. She liked the candles, especially as she watched the other women at the table bringing the light close to their hearts with their hands. Richard liked the bells and chanting Kim's family did. It reminded him of when his grandfather David would chant the *kaddish*.

Finally, everyone went home to their own apartments, or houses, or trailers or cottages. But they were never quite the same after a Saturday at the playground. *after which children and teachers leave for their activities, while our accompanist, Nathan Hamm, plays You've Got a Friend in Me by Randy Newman.*

Greeting news of the congregation

Affirming

I affirm that for every human being there is a diversity of existences. Single existence is itself an illusion in part. I affirm that these many existences signify something, tend to something, fulfill something; it promises us meaning, harmony, and even justice.

Saul Bellow 1976 Nobel Lecture (arranged)

Singing **1017 Building a New Way**

Communing

One last snowfall, I guess. One more blast of winter cold, channeled by the sweep of the jet stream, a flow of wind over which I have no power, nor does anyone for that matter. Some green shoots are up in the courtyard; at least maybe the snow will keep them warmer than the air itself. But I confess that weariness with rough winter is real in me now. Can't deny that. Can't deny that even if that old scolding voice inside my head, left over from my younger years, doesn't let up. "Oh, buck up, Belletini. I know you're weary but let's look at proportion here. At least you're alive. And you know something about central heat. At least you're not in Ukraine, bleeding on the street, watching everything fall apart. At least you understand that voting bigotry into law would be a moral injustice. And at least you're not in a sleeping bag in a doorway along the streets of Columbus. Snowflakes weigh little indeed compared to the weight of a bloody uprising, legislative chicanery, or crushing poverty. Let it go

man. It's been a tough winter yes. But it's not the end of the world." And so I find once again that many things can be true at the same time. My feelings *and* my grounding principles. Both true. My honesty with myself and my wrestling with what is beyond myself. Both true. The vision lifted up in word, and the solace found in a few minutes of silence. Both true. As I now make clear. (strike bell)

The Great Silence

One last snowfall day, but many days to come of love and loss and joy and sorrow, as there have been many such days in the past, our lives filled with experiences which we bring with us into this place. Setting aside time for finding the intersection between the communal and the personal, let us call to mind and name, silently or audibly, the folks who have loved us through to this day, the folks for whom we are always thankful, the folks we find disagreeable, the folks we miss because they are far away, the folks we mourn.

The Naming

One last snowfall day, but the power of music, like the realities of the world, balances our interior perspective, calls us to feelings greater than weariness, and forges ligaments of spirit that bind a community in gratitude.

Anthems

The First Reading comes from Ignazio Silone's 1938 novel, *Bread and Wine (Pane e Vino)*. Silone's novels were very important to me in the first part of my ministry.

"Well, Cardile, you and I know each other," said the doctor.

The carriage left the national road and entered a side road, full of puddles, running between fields of beans and peas.

"True," responded Cardile, "but nevertheless, people have many ways of knowing one another. We peasants know 'the better kind of people' through the land they own, and from their reputations. But is that a way of knowing anyone? You work, you buy, you sell, you rent, and you need papers and reputations. But is that a way of knowing anyone? Once when I was working at Estaque, near Marseilles, where a big tunnel was being built, someone said to me: "There's another guy from your neck of the woods, from the Marsica area, an educated man."

Oh, I said to myself, *it'll be someone wanting to get something out of me*. All of my papers and certificates were in order, I had paid all my dues, so what could he possibly want? So anyway, the man comes to me and tells me he had not been to the Marsica for several years, and he started asking me about the people there, and about their lives, and he spoke of his own village, Fucino. We went on seeing each other in the evenings after that. We used to go and sit on the dock, and we would talk till late at night.

After a few evenings, when we had told each other everything and knew each other well, we started talking about things that neither he nor I had ever thought about before, simple things, and we started thinking about them together. Sometimes I said the more interesting things, and sometimes he did. It would be impossible to repeat them aloud here now, because you would probably laugh at me, Doctor. Anyway, during the daytime I worked in the tunnel. It was an eight-hour day, but everybody worked two or three hours extra, to earn more. But after eight hours I used to stop, because I knew that the man I enjoyed talking to, was waiting for me. We talked about humanity, about the earth, and about life. *And then I thought to myself, here is a person from whom I get nothing whatever in a practical way, either for work, or for my testimonials, or for any of the other papers. Nor does he come to me as a priest or as a schoolmaster or as a propagandist. He is not one of those people who knows*

everything and are paid to convince others. Here is somebody who comes to me like a human being. One day he went away and I heard no more of him.

2. The Second Reading *comes from Anne W. Schaeff and Diane Fassel's The Addictive Organization, 1988. They are using the metaphors of addiction and recovery in talking mostly about companies, and even non-profit organizations, like congregations.*

We do not intend to give a blueprint for how organizations will look as they leave the addictive system; but there are several implications for organizations as they take our information seriously.

1. The mission of the organization would be supported by the structure, and there would be an awareness that the ways of organizing the work are integral to the mission.

2. The organization would be moral. The products and services would not be destructive to the universe, debilitating to the users, or exploitative. There would be no context for dishonesty at any level of operations.

3. Organizations would develop permeable boundaries. This can happen only if the company can know who it is and still be responsive to information from the outside. Organizations with permeable boundaries do not pretend, or protect themselves from data that challenges their most fervently held beliefs. They are constantly in the learning posture. Their identity is firm enough not to be engulfed by new information.

4. Communication would be characterized as multidirectional. People would be, first of all, encouraged to communicate with themselves by listening carefully to their feelings and becoming clear about what they know. Out of this inner clarity, communication with others would flow.

5. Leadership would be diffused and more situational. Persons with executive and management responsibilities would model effective leadership by functioning as learners, by sharing their uncertainties and mistakes, by creating an environment in which it's safe for others to be themselves.

6. Organizations would alter their view of change. They would neither be resistant to change, nor try to elicit change for the sake of change. We know from experience that such organizations become more alive, and this aliveness would evolve as a source of change.

Preaching

When I was a child, I have to admit, I was certainly *not* the most popular kid on the block.

For one, I simply refused to roughhouse with the other boys on the street. I found it unnecessarily painful. And, I had been raised not to curse or swear for any reason, so I didn't. Not even in Italian, which has some of the world's best curses.

Two: For some reason, I just didn't like baseball at all, and in the 1950s in Detroit's East Side, to publicly say you did not want to play on a little league team was the *exact* equivalent of walking onto the field during an OSU rally, wearing a U of M pullover waving a U of M pennant of some sort. In November. It was like painting a bull's-eye target on your shirt.

Three: I was an altar boy, and got up at 5:30 to walk through the snowdrifts to get to the church for first service at 6:30 a.m. Everyone thought that made me *way* too devout. Or for spending months away from everyone learning the Latin responses: Ad Deum Qui Laetificat Iuventutem Meam.

I just didn't fit in. I was not “like-minded” with my peers. I was not like-hearted with them. And my story was just different.

When I grew older, living out on the edge of things with my particular uniqueness set me to feeling lonely. Oh, I made new friends when former friends and I parted because I didn't fit in, but there was loneliness even in that.

As time passed, I learned to accept myself, but it was hard. So many cheers, so much applause when I conformed to others' wishes, only frowns when I did what made sense to me.

I wondered what it would be like to be with people who were more like me, who felt out on the edge. I found friends eventually who didn't like baseball much, but who ALSO didn't like either the music I liked, or the religious sensibilities I had...even the new fresh progressive ones who bid me leave the embrace of the church of my youth. I learned to curse with the best of them...even in Italian...but I found folks who felt on the edge for entirely different reasons than I had for feeling out on the edge. One first-year-student at my university was convinced that she was too plain in the face, and actually asked her friends to contribute, as she put it, to her "plastic surgery fund." (Twenty years later, she did indeed have her nose bobbed.) Others felt on the edge because they were Jewish in a Gentile world, or hated going to movies which everyone else seemed to like, or hated the taste of beer in a beer-guzzling campus, or were pregnant out of wedlock which, once upon a time, I assure you, was a Big Deal.

So in the first two and a half decades of life, I discovered two realities which to me seem pretty hard edged.

1. Diversity is all there is.
2. And thus, there really is no such thing as like-minded, or like-hearted, or like-storied whenever there is more than one person in a room.

Diversity these days is often a code-word that only gives attention to the externals: skin color, hair color, eye color, height, weight, build, IQ indicators (as creepily culture bound as they are) and cultural aspects of ethnicity. But externals are but one part of the great word “diversity,” our theme for the month.

And externals conceal a lot of inner diversity from person to person in every community, even the ones that appear on the surface to be the more culturally conformist. A group of Greek Orthodox Catholics, for example, may share a lot of cultural norms because of their Greek rootedness. You don't expect to see many people named Chang or Lopez standing under the dome of the sanctuary of a Greek Orthodox church. Yet diversity, as I learned, is all there is...some Greek Orthodox men I know have little theological interest at all, and are hardly concerned about either God or creed, while others are deeply emotional during the chanting. (Is it the music, or the doctrine?) Some are Republicans politically, many are Democrats and, still more, Socialists, and some don't even vote.

Different educational matrixes exist within a Greek Orthodox church, artist and engineer, poet and grocer and physicist and teacher and cement truck driver...all dissolved into the common and glittering Orthodox liturgy under the golden dome. Different economic realities, too. Different tastes, skills, health, emotional approaches.

There is nothing **but** diversity. Uniformity, in almost every community I can think of, is ritual fiction.

And this is true of every other community I can think of: secular, religious, political, educational, legislative. Look, just because we as a congregation claim in our mission statement "diversity as our strength" doesn't mean we have the corner on diversity. Our distinction as a spiritual body is that we name it and welcome it openly.

Or do we?

Over the years, it's a phrase I hear often. I've said. I heard it said around here, at General Assembly, and at District meetings. "I come to this church because I want to be around like-minded people."

"I've been an outsider all my life, lived on the edge, and now I want to be with like-minded people, people who think like I do, so I don't have to explain myself all the time. I want to be at home, comfortable, not always having to painfully explain myself." I understand. Remember, I felt like an outsider all of my life.

Yet as I understand it, the phrase "like-minded people" seems to chafe against the whole idea of diversity. And even though it's not a phrase I've heard anyone use, the phrase "like-hearted," which I invented for this sermon, would equally tug away at the dignity of diversity.

All of our stories are different. Unique. Diversity is all there is. And it's a strength, we say. But what does that mean?

Take the story from Silone's great novel, *Bread and Wine (Pane e Vino)*. The man Cardile tells his doctor friend about meeting a person from the same part of Italy that he was from. This was up in Marseille, while he was working on a big tunnel project. He is suspicious at first: "Italian." Then, most dialects were mutually unintelligible *"We peasants know the better kind of people through the land they own, and from their reputations. But is that a way of knowing anyone? You work, you buy, you sell, you rent, and you need papers and a good recommendation. But is that a way of knowing anyone?"* They did speak the same dialect, which made communication easier, certainly. Especially in 1938, which was before Italians were all forced to speak Florentine, which we now call simply "Italian." Before then, almost all dialects on the Italian peninsula were mutually unintelligible. It was really comforting to find someone, especially if you were out of the country, who could actually understand you.

And they really talked. *"After a few evenings, when we had told each other everything and knew each other well, we started talking about things that neither he nor I had ever thought about before, simple things, and we started thinking about them together."*

They talked about *"humanity, about the earth, and about life."* Cardile then reports: *"And then I thought to myself, here is a person from whom I get nothing whatever in a practical way, either for work, or for my testimonials, or for any of the other papers. Nor does he come to me as a priest or as a schoolmaster or as a propagandist. He is not one of those people who knows everything and are paid to convince others. Here is somebody who comes to me like a human being."*

Wow.

All the ways people know each other... by their handles, their labels, their papers, their diverse titles, their reputations...mean nothing at all. Everything is diversity, yes, but real diversity doesn't consist of people saying "I am an agnostic, I am a Buddhist Unitarian, I am a Jewnitarian, I am a Christian Universalist, I am an atheist, I am an Italian American, I am Chinese, I am half African American and half Korean, I am a Republican, I am a Socialist, I am Cherokee, I am a lesbian, I am deaf, I am arthritic." Those are just stopping points. They invite, God help us, *assumptions*, if folks don't go further. What does it mean to be both a Unitarian and a Buddhist? How does atheism guide your ethical decisions? How does deaf culture differ from hearing culture? (It does, you know.) Does the Cherokee spiritual language of your grandmother still speak to you? What does it tell you?

Tell me your story. Tell me your story. Tell me your story. I want to listen, engage, go deeper, not stop at the labels, identities. Tell me about your other identities too...for not one of us is totally singular.

Maybe you are not always agnostic, but sometimes say, "God, what a sunset!" and you don't rush to take it back. Maybe you change your mind several times each day, saying with pride, and quoting Emerson, "A foolish

consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." Maybe your ten years of marriage to an alcoholic husband changed you in ways that still affect you. Maybe you are drawn to Buddhist meditation, sure, but you find that reading the Gospel of Luke seems to lead you deeper than the silence. Maybe you wanted to be an artist but your stepfather scared you away from that decision, and you've been at odds with yourself ever since. Maybe you both love and hate your mother at the same time.

You are not crazy. You are complex, like every other human being living on earth right now. There is nothing but diversity, inside and outside, just like Saul Bellow said in his Nobel speech. It's ok. It's a source of our strength. You are safe here. Safe to be who you are...unless, of course, you threaten the safety of others. We are not fools, I hope. We can draw necessary lines. But we will always try to make this a safe and open place.

At least, this is the kind of organization we've been working on creating and deepening for years. Anne Wilson Schaef and her friend talk about healthy and unhealthy organizations. Schaef has been writing books using the reality and the metaphor of addiction for years, and her co-written book, *The Addictive Organization*, has helped me understand, better than anything else, the wisdom of our covenantal form of organization. What does that mean? It means simply, *we agree to be together, not believe together*. We don't pretend conformity of identity, and say so openly.

The addictive organization *does* pretend that, however, asserts Schaef. She describes organizations, for example, where the expression of feelings is seen as inappropriate. She sees this as a sign of an addictive or unhealthy organization. "Get control of yourself."

There is a loss of corporate memory, a culture of forgetfulness. Dualism rules...it's a culture where there are enemies, and either/or constructs throughout the system. Dishonesty and denial are encouraged: "This product won't hurt the environment. My boss says so." Judgmentalism comes to the fore. As Schaef puts it, "There is a great deal of difference between saying 'I don't like that' and 'That is bad.' Perfectionism rules at the unhealthy organization, as does seduction, as Schaef defines it, "luring people away from their own perceptions." "You don't see what you see. You don't hear what you hear."

But then Schaef describes a healthy, or in her metaphor, *recovering* organization. I was heartened when I read it, because I recognized aspects of our own congregation in the beautiful outline she offered us in the reading.

Sometimes people tell me they come to services, not because of what I say in the sermons, but because they feel it's safe to cry here. No one is telling them to "get control of yourself." Some people never cry...sure, it's not how they express their emotions. But both participate here.

The Archives group systematically help us remember things. Forgetfulness is beginning to fade (although it was stronger here once, I admit). Our progress is forward. Proposals for streamlining our governance structures, so that our mission is served, are being studied and are moving forward, and it's clear to me that we are organized more and more around our mission.

The whole Capital Campaign is our attempt to create a more moral organization, which Schaef asserts is a sign of health. The LED lighting, the insulation, the new windows are all making us less destructive of our common environment and universe, and our commitment to that vision has inspired me.

More and more, we are developing what Schaef calls "permeable boundaries." We have initiated many changes which were inspired by other UU congregations, which have taught us things and which we have learned. We also lend our ideas outside these walls. (Example...when Jolinda helped create little green stoles for our children to wear when they light the chalice, that was a unique feature of this congregation. Now, others are using this delightful symbol.) Again, a sign of health. We are not self-sufficient, but grateful for what we learn from other congregations. We are constantly in "the learning posture," to quote Schaef.

Over the years we have developed many ways for people to listen to themselves first, so they can then listen to others. Various groups, where themes and readings and stories help us unpack our own journeys, have been enlarging our sense of community and making our communications more “multidirectional.”

I have heard many of us share our uncertainties and not feel embarrassed by doing so. Very healthy.

Lastly, Schaef says healthy "Organizations would alter their view of change. They would neither be resistant to change, nor try to elicit change for the sake of change. We know from experience that such organizations become more alive, and this aliveness would evolve as a source of change.”

And indeed, you will hear me say this all the time: this is one alive place! More things are going on here than I have a clue about. It’s electric and vital. This a playground where diversity is our strength, and like the children on the playground in the story this morning, we’re never quite the same at the end of the day because of all the strength in our diversity.

I was lonely when I was a kid, but now I have joined my self to a congregation of folks who “speak my dialect” about many things, but who are not so much "like-minded" as "diversely-minded,” not so much "like-hearted, as “diversely-hearted,” each with a different, totally unique story, deeper and more wonderful than any label, title, claim, paper, identity, reputation or name.

Tell the stories, in all their distinct beauty.

Diversity, after all, is all there is.

Offering

How wonderful is the privilege we claim, to support a congregation where there can be no fencing of thoughts and no denial of dignity to any human being. Such a congregation has an important role to play in a world that grows stingier every day in love and peace. May we always offer support for this community that supports us...by electronic means if you like, or in this ancient way of sharing common responsibility.

Returning New Member Ceremony: The Cardamom Seed
(see insert in order of service)

Singing **#1018 Come and Go with Me**

Blessing