

One and Universal

A sermon by Rev. Jackie Clement
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Faith of the free! By thee we live. Yes, indeed. We are the faith of the free. Not free, as some would say, to believe whatever you want, but free within the bounds what is life-affirming to follow the dictates of conscience, free to use the power of reason and the test of experience; free to govern as we see fit in our unique individuality.

But wait, what's that at the end of the line? By all thou givest and shalt give our loyalty commanding. Our loyalty commanding? That sounds suspiciously communal in the midst of all this glorious freedom of individuality. And that is because while we are a faith of the free we are still a faith, a denomination, an association of congregations, a church. As I am so fond of quoting from the Cambridge Platform that founded our New England churches "one person is incapable of being a church alone."

In more contemporary language the seven principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association can be seen as an affirmation beginning in the specific with the inherent worth and dignity of every individual and then coming to uphold the sacredness of the community, the interconnected web of all existence. From the individual to the communal. From "I" to "we." That is because our values and our faith call us to uphold the worth and sacredness of both, not either – both.

You may have noted a seeming inconsistency in the readings this morning. Coming from the same author, and indeed the same book, they seem to speak at cross purposes. The first one spoke about the dangers of individualism. It spoke of the dangers of a rampant self-absorption that disregards the good opinion of others. In other words, an individualism that ignores the bigger picture, the good of the whole. An individualism that forgets we are individuals *in community*.

And yet in the second reading the author complains about community that is too strong; a community that bonds so closely that it ignores the individuality of its members and thereby ends up locking them into a homogeneous mass while keeping others who are different in some way outside the circle, outside the gates of community.

But I don't really find them mutually exclusive because anything in the extreme tends to be unhealthy (even, sad to say, chocolate) and it is true that both individualism and communalism have their challenges and their dangers. Let me give you an example from our own denominational past. I live in the town of Harvard, site of the mid-19th century experiment in utopian living known as Fruitlands. The real name for the community was the Con-Sociate Family, but since they planned to live off the fruits of the land it came to be called Fruitlands. Fruitlands was founded in 1843 by a radical English educator named Charles Lane and Bronson Alcott of Concord. Alcott was a philosopher and educator of somewhat limited success in a New England atmosphere that required a bit more

orthodoxy in the education of its young than Alcott ascribed to. He was after all part of that wild and crazy Unitarian Transcendentalist group being neighbors with Ralph Waldo Emerson and friends with free thinkers like Henry David Thoreau, all of whom marched to their own drummers. Perhaps Bronson Alcott, in the final analysis, is best known to many as the character Mr. March in *Little Women*, being the real-life father of its author, Louisa May Alcott.

Lane and Alcott founded Fruitlands for two primary reasons. One was to withdraw from what they saw as a corrupt economic society where greed was the controlling factor in all things. An aim with which many of us can perhaps be in sympathy. They planned that Fruitlands should be as far as possible self-supporting, requiring no commerce with the outside world. The second reason for the founding of Fruitlands was to have a community where each person was free to live according to the dictates of the spirit. It was a community founded in principle, guided by principle and dedicated to principle. Problem was there were actual people living there. People who were heir to all the foibles and personality quirks we all are and who had, moreover, been set free to live by the spirit.

One member was Abram Wood who, in his unique form of self-identification, switched his name to Wood Abram. And then there was Joseph Palmer who sported a rather imposing beard in an era when beards were considered “not the thing.” The beard eventually landed Palmer in jail when he refused to pay a fine for disorderly conduct after being set upon by a gang determined to shave him. Samuel Bower “took it into his head that clothes were an impediment to spiritual growth,” and ate nothing but raw beans and raw grain. Samuel Larned lived for a year on nothing but crackers, and the next year ate nothing but apples. At Fruitlands the inherent worth of all was to be respected.

All the eccentricities, oddities and individualities that the Transcendentalists were charged with in mainstream society, followed the Con-Sociate Family to Fruitlands by the bushel. But yet the community was just that—a community rather than a loosely associated number of folks marching to different drummers in different directions. There were very strict rules of behavior and activities shaping the days in Harvard. Rules that not only reflected the founders’ values, but rules that were meant to shape a cohesiveness of membership. Early rising, cold baths and a spare diet of bread, fruit, vegetables, and pure water helped to build body and spirit. Linen would suffice for clothing until such time as cotton could be cultivated. In all things the members sought occupation as directed by the spirit. And in this way the union of spirit and flesh would be made manifest.

But perhaps they went just a little too far in requiring conformity in some things, just as they went a little too far in encouraging individualism. Ann Page was either expelled or left the community for falling to the temptation of a forbidden piece of fish while visiting a neighbor. When Ann protested that it was only a small bit of the tail, she was informed that the whole fish suffered to yield that small bit and off she went from the Con-Sociate Family.

It's hard to believe that one example of living, let alone one that was specifically designed as a utopian community, could fail from both an excess of individualism and an excess of communalism, but there you have it. The experiment lasted only seven months, until the snows set in and the food ran out and personalities conflicted one with another in close confinement. There was more than one reason why Fruitlands didn't last, but it seems to me that not the least of these was its proclivity for extremes—extreme self-denial yet extreme self-centeredness, extreme freedom of belief yet extreme dictates of behavior, extreme individualism yet extreme communalism.

I think we have a lot to learn from Fruitlands even all these years later. We can learn from its failure to balance a respect for the singular while working for the collective. But, too, we can learn the benefit of living a life guided by principle. Although she was just 10 years old during the Fruitlands experiment Louisa May Alcott later wrote a story lampooning the comic antics of those months in Harvard. In it she proposed that rather than "Fruitlands" a more appropriate name might have been "Apple Slump." But she also wrote this:

"Transcendental wild oats were sown broadcast that year, and the fame thereof has not yet ceased in the land; for futile as this crop seemed to outsiders, it bore an invisible harvest, worth much to those who planted in earnest."

And it is this value of living by principle even when it doesn't always bear fruit that we can look back on and see the value of. Our church families today face the same question that confronted the Con-Sociate Family: how do we live in accordance with our values in a *society of individuals*?

Perhaps Fruitlands greatest accomplishment was the very fact of its existence. Of her father, Louisa wrote, "He has seen several of his ideals become facts and that is more than most of us ever do..." This is no small praise. Perhaps Fruitlands did not become the model for all society, but it became a reality for a time and that, in itself, is achievement. Further, it is a reality remembered and talked about and written about and studied today, not for its humorous misalignments, but for something more substantial – as an attempt at human living guided by principle.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in a letter to Alcott that "They speak to the conscience, and have that superiority over the crowd of their contemporaries, which belongs to men who entertain a good hope." Is this a notion so out of fashion today that we cannot conceive of entertaining a good hope? I think not. I think that in our very coming together, guided by, but not slave to, the seven Unitarian Universalist principles that we do strive to live a life of purpose and good hope. But here is the difference, I think – guided by but not slave to. In our societies of faith, our beliefs and activities are not dictated to us. We chose, by covenant, to come together into this cooperative society of seekers premised as much as anything on tolerance. Tolerance was not the hallmark of Fruitlands, and this, I think, was one of its shortcomings.

In our congregations today we are called to balance many things – from the individual, which calls us to respect of each person’s free and responsible search for truth to the communal: upholding the use of the democratic process, the rights of all and the indissoluble interconnectedness of all life.

The church is here to help each of us in our spiritual quest for meaning, but it is not here to meet the needs of any one person. Our programs are meant to serve our community and the wider community, but not to kowtow in service to the one. Like the three Musketeers, we are all for one and one for all.

We do the work of the community for the good of the community not for personal gain. Sure it doesn’t hurt that it all comes with personal growth and satisfaction, but that is not always why we do it. We volunteer to teach Religious Education even if we don’t have a child in the program. We take out the trash and wash the dirty cups even when it isn’t our trash or our dirty cup. We do it because, individuals that we are, we are also part of something beyond ourselves.

You are welcome here whoever you are and whatever your talents as long as you seek to live according to the covenant of community. You are welcome here whether yours is the biggest check in the collection plate or whether you place no check at all. You are welcome here whether you have the time to be on six committees or none at all. You are welcome here along with the rest of us who are trying to find that unique balance of self and community, welcoming inclusion and healthy exclusion, tolerance and subjugation, in short with all of us who try to live by principled covenant.

In our congregations we do not face the sorts of hardships for survival that faced the residents of Fruitlands. We do not depend on each other for food and shelter. But depend on each other we do indeed, and in Fruitlands we might perhaps see an idea of how to do that by looking for something greater than the individual, by putting community over self and ideal over desire. Clara Endicott Sears, the woman who turned Fruitlands into a museum, wrote that “Humanity must ever reach out towards a New Eden. Succeeding generations smile at the crude attempts, and forthwith make their own blunders, but each attempt, however seemingly unsuccessful, must of necessity contain a germ of spiritual beauty which will bear fruit.”

May our own experiment of living in community, of living as a church congregation, as two congregations sharing one church! May these bear spiritual fruit.

Por lo tanto, puede ser.

May it be so.

Namaste.