

Y'all Come Back Now, Y'hear?
Rev. Greg Ward
Unitarian Universalist Church of Berkeley
September 23, 2015

Theme: Promise

Description:

This is a story about learning to love Religious Education when it is trying to teach us hard lessons. How do we bring our resolve and high ideals even in the midst of turmoil, challenge and conflict so, in the end, we wind up knowing the love we gave made a difference?

Slides: Stephanie Ann Blythe

Chaplain: Rev. Jane Ramsey

Board Welcome: Logan Stump-Vernon

Event: Family Ministry – Volunteers / Pot of Gold Promotion

PRELUDE –

“Praise” by Charles Callahan
Katya Kolesnikova, organ

SINGING TOGETHER

#368 Now Let Us Sing
#407 We're gonna sit at the welcome table

WELCOME

<<Logan Stump-Vernon - Board of Trustees>>

BEGINNING THE JOURNEY

<<Kathryn Jay>>

My kids Annie and Arlo start middle school in about a week. They have been attending RE at UUCB for all of their school-aged lives.

When asked to define themselves, their UU-ness is always part of their identities, right up there with their dog Jolene and rooting for the Oakland A's. At random moments, both have been known to bust out with a UU hymn. They once had a 10-minute argument over the precise wording of “Come Come, Whoever You Are.” At dinner the other night, they couldn't stop giggling over the joke: “Yo mama so Unitarian, she made you switch school 6 times so that you could have 7 principals.” I mean, they GOT that joke.

Singing in the choir, getting to know people in our community, but most especially RE classes have taught UU values to Arlo and Annie. And because my wife Elisabeth and I got involved as teachers, RE has transformed us too. The people you meet there--whether seven or seventy--are amazing.

Yet I sometimes feel like RE is marginalized from the life of the church.

Sunday school -- it's where you put your kids while *real* church is going on.

And that makes me sad.

RE is definitely messy, whether in its use of glue or in getting its message through. It is sometimes chaotic and it is often loud, but through it, my family has lived the interdependent web. RE is love in action.

My wish for the coming year--for the future--is that this church puts children and religious education at the center of its mission. I want us to be known across town as that church where children matter. Where kids teach adults how to play. Where imagination and joy and a certain messy loudness take us all a little closer to the light of truth and the energy of action.

It's a time of uncertainty for Unitarian Universalism -- and for us. I believe that what we choose -- right now -- will determine what happens to us as a congregation.

This church is already at the center of my kids. Now I want my kids to be at the center of this church. I want us all to be at the center.

Come, let us worship together.

MUSIC FOR GATHERING –

"One of Us" by Joan Osborne
soprano Marcelle Dronkers
accompanied by Katya Kolesnikova

CHALICE LIGHTING

We light this chalice, the symbol of Unitarian Universalism (UU with hands). May it remind us of the divine spark (slide/clap hands) in all of creation. The power of love (hands over chest) to heal what is broken (hands clasped). And to be grateful (open palms) for life's blessings each day.

DEDICATION OF OUR CHILDREN – A CEREMONY OF BELONGING

<<Rev. Greg and Merrin Clough>>

Greg: (holding a \$10 bill). I want to tell you a story that was told to me by my Sunday School teacher when I was your age. Who can see what I have here? Yes. \$10. When my Sunday School Teacher told the story, it was only \$1. But there's inflation.

Let me ask, does anyone want this? Yes? Well... this is a pretty popular \$10. Let me check something out (Rev. Greg holds the \$10 over his head and looks the other way). I'm going to ignore this \$10 and pretend it doesn't even exist. I could care less. Okay... now... who still wants this \$10? Really?

Okay... let me try this. (Rev. Greg yells at the \$10 bill – calls it 'stupid' and says 'I hate you!' several times). Okay... now... who still wants this \$10? Really?

Okay... let me try this (Rev. Greg crumples up the \$10). Okay... now... who still wants it? Really?

Okay... let me try this (Rev. Greg pounds on the \$10 over and over with his fist). Okay... now... who still wants it? Really? Wow.

Okay... let me try this (Rev. Greg throws it on the ground and starts to stomp up and down on the \$10, over and over). Okay... now.... Who still wants it?

Really? You all still want it? So, tell me this. How come when we get ignored... when we get yelled at... we don't think anyone wants us?

How come when we get picked on or bullied, we don't think we're valuable anymore?

The truth is that there is no one up here who is worth less than a thousand of these silly bills. A million. And yet, we sometimes are allowed to believe we're worthless.

This morning we want to do the same ritual with you, that my Sunday School teacher once did with me. One by one, she asked us to come up front. She would say our name very proudly and then have us all respond with words that I have never forgotten.

Everyone said,

"You're good!"

"We love you!"

and "You belong here with us!"

Merrin: So, that's what we're going to do here this morning. If anyone wants to be dedicated into the abiding love of this congregation, we invite you to come forward.

(Merrin places her hand on the head of each child who comes up to be dedicated and says "I present to you _____[says their name out loud]. After all the children come up and are dedicated, she continues).

How many of you out there would love to be part of this ritual. To be reminded your loved and you belong here? It's pretty much what happens when you join the church.

But we want to do this with one more person. Will Zackrie Vinczen come up here please?

Greg: Zackrie, as our ministerial intern this year, you are like these children. You are in our care. We want you to know that we are here to teach you, help you grow, remind you of your value, love you and give you a place where you belong.

Merrin: Are you ready? (Puts her hand on his head...) "I present to you, Zackrie Vinczen"

"You're Good."

"We love you."

"You belong here with us."

CHILDREN AND YOUTH RE-CESSIONAL

<<Marcelle Dronkers>>

(to the tune of #390 "Gaudeamus")

Go in joy and peace and gladness, go in joy and peace today;
Go with love from all who guide you, on your way.

READING (From 'Travelling Mercies,' by Anne Lamott) <<Rev. Greg>>

Sam, my son, is the only kid he knows whose mother forces him to go to church. He rarely wants to go. Actually, the real truth is... he *never* wants to go. It doesn't matter that once he's there he enjoys himself: that he likes the people, the stories... It doesn't matter that I always pack some snacks, Legos, art supplies, and bring along any friend of his whom we can lure into our churchy web. All that matters to him is the extreme unfairness of it all.

You might wonder why I make this strapping exuberant boy come with me. I make him because I can. I outweigh him by nearly seventy five pounds.

But that's only part of it. The real reason I make Sam go to church is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want – which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy – are people who have found their way to the center community. And people for whom community is at their center. People who are generous with their time and love. People who have faith – in themselves, in others and in the world. I love the deep sense of spirituality you can get in a church. People banding together to work on themselves and justice. I love people who learn to become brighter than the glimmer of their own candle; who learn to become part of something larger and more beautiful.

My biological family are all as skittishly self-obsessed as I am, which I certainly mean in the nicest possible way. But I rarely leave my time with them feeling like I have just received some kind of spiritual chemotherapy. But I do when I leave my church.

But mostly, I take Sam to church because, once, when I was at the end of my rope, the people of my church tied a knot in it for me. They made for me a life line and helped me hold on. My church took me in when I felt out of my league. And every week, as we left, they would call out to Sam and me and say, "Y'all come back now, y'hear?"

MUSIC FOR CENTERING – In Thee Is Gladness, arranged by Diane Bish
Katya Kolesnikova, organ

MEDITATION AND PRAYER <<Zackrie Vinczen, Intern Minister>>

INVITATION TO THE OFFERING: <<Kathryn Jay>>

OFFERING MUSIC "The Clergy's Lamentation" Traditional Irish melody,
Arr. Susan T. Mashiyama
Susan T. Mashiyama, harp

DEDICATION OF THE OFFERING <<Kathryn Jay>>
"We dedicate our offerings and ourselves...to the mission of this congregation to create loving community, inspire spiritual growth and encourage lives of integrity, joy, and service"

OFFERTORY RESPONSE #1010 "We Give Thanks"

SERMON: <<Rev. Greg>> "Y'all Come Back Now, Y'hear?"
A little over twenty years ago, when I was deliberating about going to seminary, I decided to return to church. I wanted to find out if I could *depend* on church. I mean, I knew churches were imperfect. There was sometimes a difference between how they presented themselves

and what they actually did. Just like the difference I noticed in almost every person I ever met – and myself. Before I dedicated my life to one, I wanted to know if I could depend on a church.

So, I joined one. And I began to observe the people who had something to teach me. Yes, I observed the ministers. And the church leaders. And that helped. But there was one person who really taught me what churches – at least good churches – were really all about. And his name was Christopher Berry.

Christopher Berry was famous. Beyond famous, actually. Legendary. During coffee hour, the mere mention of his name brought whispered conversation among the people. Hushed tones among staff. No less than the very walls of the building stiffened in response to his presence. There weren't many who attended that church more than a couple weeks who didn't know his name at least as well as the minister's. Indeed, his fame had spread to several of the neighboring UU churches in the area. Pretty good, considering he was only six years old.

The rest of the church would have probably preferred that Christopher's notoriety subsided a bit. That his reputation not overshadow the things the church wanted to be known for: which is to say, a place of peace and purpose and hope. Where people go to find true community. They didn't have in mind that they would become 'Christopher Berry's church.'

And yet, that's what this church had become in many people's minds. Certainly in mine. I was there at a pivotal point. While Christopher's – and the church's - reputations were developing. And I know that it was this particular church, at this particular time, deciding how it was going to be known, which would show me whether or not I could depend on a church.

Christopher Berry was a special boy. With his energy and exuberance, he had single-handedly brought a strong religious education program to its knees.

When Christopher came towards them, other children, other adults – even the ministers – would flatten themselves against the walls to get out of the way. He was a whirlwind, often prompting teachers and children to request a change in classrooms... Parents resigning from the RE program... and families changing churches.

I came wanting to see what churches really were. But more than that. I came because I was hoping they could be what I really needed them to be: which is to say a little spiritual chemotherapy. A path. And a little light to see by.

When I was young, the church been that for me. It had saved my life. I don't mean 'saved' in they way I hear most people talk about church and religion. I was saved by the people. In particular, the teachers. The ones who, week after week, took me in, hugged me, remembered my name, told me they loved me and that I belonged there.

That's what I was coming back for.

I also realized that besides love, I inherited something else from my time at church: a debt. An obligation to give to others what others had given to me. So, when I went back to church I did so with the idea I could be an RE teacher. Conveniently, I discovered there was an immediate opening for a teacher in Christopher Berry's class.

And so I took it. And from the very first interactions it was clear that he was a 'special' child.

Christopher Berry was an uncontained nuclear reaction in a dirty t-shirt. After one week I developed the theory that every church in existence that has any spirit whatsoever has at least one child like Christopher. And I came to that theory, in part, after realizing that I was the one my church had when I was six.

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"It serves you right," my friend, Dana, said to me. Dana was a friend I'd met at church who knew about my early childhood and how I credited my early church with saving my life. She also listened to me describe what a terror I was to my early teachers. So when we'd have lunch after church and I'd recount the weekly rant on what was going on with Christopher, she'd just smile and say, "It serves you right."

Dana had recently returned to church to re-think the idea of God. She had spent twenty years as a teacher in public schools. She said that just knowing that I was getting my comeuppance for having once tortured my teachers helped her to believe that there was, indeed, a just God at work in the heavens. Or, at the very least, that some great law of karma was securely in place. And that karma was being administered like spiritual chemotherapy by Christopher and his mom, Jackie.

Jackie Berry was in her mid forties. But she looked much older. She appeared as though she had once had a very kind face – with a sparkle in her eye that might, in a different life, led to a soft, rosy glow with laugh-lines as she aged. But this life had given her a very different face instead. One where kindness hid behind a mask of fatigue. One with more hardened determination than soft composure. Where joy once resided, worry now seemed to have taken root.

I talked with Jackie each week after class when she came to pick up Christopher. She was always the last parent in and we usually spoke briefly - mostly pleasantries. Conversations about the best way to get splattered grape juice off walls or the hamsters back in their cage. So when I talked to her after the fourth week I was there, it started out pleasant enough. Until I mentioned some of the concerns that the other teachers and parents had raised about Christopher.

'I'm tired of hearing that it's all his fault!' She started out (I got the impression that I wasn't the first teacher to bring this up). 'Christopher's a boy with a lot of energy,' she continued. 'But that's not his fault. Lot's of boys have that kind of energy!'

"No one wants to blame Christopher," I tried to reassure her. In fact, I let her know easy it was to love him. The problem was that, with so many children in the class, we couldn't always give all of our attention to one boy. And I explained that I was hoping we could, together, come up with a plan that might work better.

The explanation, unfortunately, went poorly. Jackie seemed only to hear that I was calling her son a 'problem child.' And she responded like a protective mother lion defending her cub. And herself. I listened as she offered a sketch of her life behind clenched teeth. I learned Christopher's father wasn't around and never had been. She was all that Christopher had and it

took every ounce of energy and every minute of her day to meet his needs and she certainly didn't have time to help out in the class. She mentioned that he was doing just fine at home and at his school – THANK YOU VERY MUCH – and she couldn't understand why he wouldn't be doing well at church unless it was the other students, or the lesson plans or the teachers.

The infusion of spiritual chemotherapy I came for was feeling more and more like a spiritual root canal.

“Everybody who goes to church, goes for a reason,” I thought to myself. In Jackie's case it was the chance to sift through the overflow of feelings. The exhaustion. The feeling of how much her son needed. How much she loved him. Worrying if she could do it all. Or, what would happen if she couldn't.

I reflected back and realized those were probably the same things that prompted MY mom to bring ME to church. I imagined the conversations my own mother probably had with all my teachers. Feeling overwhelmed. Hoping that, somewhere, there might be a place – and people – who would care as much as she did. Who might tie a knot in her life line and help her hang on. And ask her to come back.

When people are at the end of their rope, they don't need criticism or guilt or people asking them to do more. They need love. At the end of his rope, Christopher needed affection and understanding – just like me, once. Jackie needed acceptance and support – just like my mom, once. And I thought I knew what I needed too.

I explained it after church one afternoon as I sat down to lunch with Dana. “I think I need to write a policy,” I said. Dana just rolled her eyes.

I was young. And naïve. I hadn't yet realized that the great archetypal enemy of all Unitarian Universalists is ‘the policy.’ And yet, determined to seal my fate as a leper in the community, I wrote and distributed my policy. Now – let me say – I am actually a big supporter of good policies – and churches without them are churches that struggle. HOWEVER – there is a difference between a church policy trying to promote love and safety and a church policy trying to promote compliance. And mine, being my first attempt, fell into the latter category and thus carried all the inspirational lift of a lead balloon. But it did manage to accomplish two important things: It raised the level of conflict between me and Jackie to something akin to the Civil War. And it got the church talking.

People were suddenly much more aware, not only of the conflict between Jackie and I, but the problem underneath it. Many teachers began to see how they really wanted to feel not only appreciated and supported, but effective. Many parents wanted to feel okay about letting go and feel like they were working as a team with their children and their teachers. Everyone wanted to feel like we, as a community, had something important to pass on to the children.

But the fall rolled along without anything much being resolved. When Christmas came, I realized I'd been back to church – and back in the classroom – for over four months. The tension between Jackie and I grew fierce and sometimes tender. But we both continued to show up. And I discovered a great respect for her commitment. And a little more empathy for her situation. I still felt awkward whenever I saw her, and uncertain whether all this effort would ever have the effect either of us hoped it would.

And then came the New Year's Eve party where, in a crowded room Jackie and I suddenly found ourselves standing next to one another at the champagne table. We both picked up glasses, turned and were suddenly, awkwardly facing one another in a moment of uncomfortable silence. Neither of us knew what to say. But in an amazing display of grace, she lifted her glass and smiled – a genuine smile – and said, “Happy New Year.” We toasted. Then she told me that she'd heard Christopher say that he really likes me as his teacher... and that's why she had continued to come. And I felt a huge weight slide off my heart. It made a world of difference to hear that I was having any of the impact I had hoped to have. I told her so. And thanked her. And we parted ways.

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The next morning, early, the phone began to ring. I turned it down to sleep more. But when one call after another seemed to be coming in I finally answered. It was Dana. “Have you heard?” she asked. “There are at least ten people here at the church. I thought you should know what was happening.”

That night, after she had gone home and gone to bed, Jackie Berry died in her sleep. Christopher went to wake her in the morning and couldn't. It was no surprise to me that he felt panic. It was no surprise that he was terrified... or felt lost. It was a surprise, however, to find out that the first place he knew to call, the only place he knew to call, was the church.

Within minutes, the ministers were there. People were called and came and brought food. Ten people came to offer comfort. Another ten called to offer places where Christopher could stay until it was determined what would happen.

He ended up staying with the ministers. But he might as well have been staying in the church itself because just about every member took the time to make their love and concern noticeable. People who had, only months before jumped out of the way when they saw him coming, were now stepping in to make sure they got to see him.

Over the next couple weeks, support was offered, services provided, and arrangements made. After only a few days, it was discovered that Christopher's biological father lived only 80 miles away. He had been paying child support regularly, every month. Social services reported that he had requested visitation in the past but that it had been contended by Jackie. Christopher's father had married and had two other children. He agreed, and was delighted, to take Christopher in the interim and possibly indefinitely. It was the church that insisted, coming from almost every voice, that he bring Christopher those 80 miles to church every Sunday – or that someone go get him – for at least a little while. Which we did.

Christopher Berry was famous. And that little church I belonged to had become famous for being his church. And for a great span of time they were incredibly proud to be so. For he held up a truth, greater than any minister or church leader. He taught us that the real reason why we bring our children to church is NOT because we outweigh them. But because they help show us the way to be the people we want to be - which is to say, people with purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy – is to be people in community.

If you are here, and you came looking for some spiritual chemotherapy, and you want the satisfaction of knowing you make a difference, know that there is still room in our kindergarten and first grade classrooms. We can't promise you Christopher Berry. But we can promise you the same kind of love that saved him – and that saved me. That is to say, a path. And a little light to see by.

Love – and Community – what almost every one of us is yearning for in our lives – is never put in place by a policy. It is put in place by people. By people who are willing to organize kindness beyond a level of skittish self-obsession. Community is built by people who realize that wisdom and love don't flow in only one direction. It's built by people who know there are places where they can let go and places where, when they are at the end of their rope, will tie a knot in their life-line and help them to hold on. People who know, when all seems lost, there will always be someone to take them in. And when, someday, they set out on their own, there will be people to send them off with some reason to be grateful. And as they go, they may even hear someone shout after them, "Y'all come back now, y'hear?"

To the Glory of Life.

SINGING TOGETHER

#131 "Love Will Guide Us"

BENEDICTION

<<Rev. Greg>>

Reach out and join hands. Open your hearts to the Love that rests at the center of this community. Know that no matter what age, no matter what burdens you may carry, if you find yourself at the end of your rope, the people of this community will tie a knot in it and help you hang on. And if you listen as you turn to re-enter your life, you may even hear them call after you: "Y'all come back now, y'hear?"

Amen.

MUSICAL BENEDICTION

<<Katya and Marcelle>>

EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE

<<Rev. Greg>>

We extinguish our chalice and our Service is ended. Our service in the world begins.

POSTLUDE

"A Mighty Fortress"
(Ein' Feste Burg) by Gordon Young
Katya Kolesnikova, organ