

“Tending Our Souls”

Rev. Mary Gear

Delivered Sunday, October 3, 2021

Reading: “Acquitted of Universalism” by Robert R Walsh.

In the newspaper there was a story about a seminary professor in Kansas City who was put on trial by the Southern Baptists, accused of being a Universalist.

It's no wonder they were suspicious. He had stated publicly his belief that all people born into the world are children of God.

And as if that were not enough, he also supported the ordination of women. Case closed?

The professor denied the charges. "I'm not a Universalist," he said, and he convinced them. After four hours of deliberation they voted 21 to 11 to let him keep his job.

Now, I confess to being a Universalist. In fact, I am a Unitarian Universalist. But I wonder. If I were arrested and charged with being one, would there be enough evidence to convict me?

The Kansas City story proves that having the right beliefs is not enough. The professor believed that we are all siblings, that every person has a piece of the divine spark, that women are the equals of men in the sight of God. That was not enough to bring in a guilty verdict.

No, if they are going to pin Unitarian Universalism on me they will have to be able to show that I participated in and supported a Unitarian Universalist church. That is the only way to be sure. Beliefs, no matter how noble, must be embodied in a living institution or they will have no convicting power.

Sermon/Homily: “Tending Our Souls”

In June of 1958, Mildred Jeter and Richard Loving traveled from their home state of Virginia to Washington DC to be married. This may not have been of note except that Richard was white, Mildred was African American and Native, and interracial marriage

was illegal in Virginia. As newlyweds, Richard and Mildred returned to their home in Central Point, Virginia and, a few weeks later, police stormed their home at 2 am and arrested them both. They were charged with miscegenation, (mi·suh·juh·**nay**·shn) a word meaning any marriage or interbreeding among people of different races, which the state of Virginia deemed a felony. A year later, Mildred and Richard pled guilty to the charge and the county judge sentenced them each to one year in prison but suspended the sentence on the condition that they leave Virginia and not return together for a period of 25 years. The couple moved to DC where they raised their family.

In 1963, weary of their exile, Mildred wrote to US Attorney General Robert Kennedy asking for his help. Kennedy referred them to the American Civil Liberties Union, and two young lawyers took their case through the appeal process and finally, before the US Supreme Court. Arguing the Loving's case before the High Court, Phillip Hirschkop said that Virginia's interracial marriage law and others like it were rooted in racism and white supremacy. He claimed, "These are not health and welfare laws. These are slavery laws, pure and simple."

On June 12, 1967, the Supreme Court issued a unanimous decision that Virginia's ban on interracial marriage violated the 14th amendment to the US Constitution. Nine years after Richard and Mildred were married, the Court's final ruling in *Loving v. Virginia* struck down interracial marriage bans that existed in 16 states, including Virginia.

Although Washington state repealed its ban on interracial marriage shortly after the Civil War, historians agree that it was done based on the belief that these laws would not hold up in court. Instead, interracial marriage in Washington was restricted by rules and procedures on how marriage licenses were issued and who could own property. Newspaper editorials over the years lamented the existence of interracial marriage and legislative bans were regularly introduced, although not ever passed. More than 50 years after the Supreme Court's "Loving" decision, we know that changes to laws are important and, as hard as they are, may be easier than changing hearts, minds and culture.

I have always enjoyed that this landmark civil rights case is named Loving after a couple who only wanted to love who they loved. The case came to mind for me as I reflected on our spiritual theme for this month, which is "loving." This word is part of OUUC's new vision for a world that is loving, just and healthy. I've suggested that we use these words as our spiritual themes for the next few months so that we can deepen our understanding of why we selected them for our vision.

This case reminds us that "loving" sometimes means challenging what is, especially when it is harmful or unjust. Richard & Mildred knew that their love was not illegal and that the law needed to be changed.

In our time, many of our institutions are being challenged for a variety of reasons. The legal and judicial systems are being named as biased and unjust as black, indigenous and people of color are arrested, tried, and convicted more than whites, and serve longer sentences. Our public health and health care systems are challenged as black, indigenous and people of color are more likely to suffer from preventable health conditions and lack access to health care. Our education system is criticized for not recognizing differences and how that can affect learning. It is easy to be anti-institution these days. There are plenty of reasons for mistrust.

Yet, I admit to being an institutionalist. I believe that there are some things that it takes institutions to do, like education and health care, and that our institutions are worthy of our attention and care. And I confess to being an idealist who believes that institutions can be used for good. Our institutions reflect larger societal values: they can be loving, just and healthy, or not. How they function is up to us. Loving and tending our institutions means supporting them in all the ways we can and challenging them to be better. I believe that it is possible to love something or someone just as they are, including ourselves, and know that there is room for improvement, both at the same time.

A faith community is a place where we tend our souls, and by “soul” I mean that spark of life, the spark of divinity. In people, it’s the spark that leaves our bodies when we die (where it goes, if anywhere, is a topic for another time!) A community can also have a soul. It’s the spirit of the gathering, the sense that coming together is larger than the individuals who gather. And an institution can have a soul. Congregational consultant, Susan Beaumont, says that the soul of a faith institution is “the authentic and truest self of the institution; the source of its divine calling, and character; the protector of institutional integrity.” The institution of our faith community has a soul, and it is our vision and mission, worthy of our stewardship.

At its best, a faith community supports us as individuals as we tend our own souls with faith formation or religious education, naming and claiming our dearest values, and asking big questions. Together we tend the soul of our community by being together in covenant. But as our reading today reminded us, “beliefs, no matter how noble, must be embodied in a living institution or they will have no convicting power.” So, we tend the soul of our institution by acting to support our vision and mission. Beaumont goes on to say that, “tending institutional soul requires nurturing organizational effectiveness and spiritual wholeness as one.” Both organizational and spiritual leadership.

Two and a half years ago when this congregation was in search of your next minister, you were clear that you wanted a spiritual leader and a skilled administrator. You were seeking a minister who would tend the soul of this institution, OUUC. Every parish

minister is an institutionalist in some way because we serve a congregation, which is an institution, and serve the larger community, which is full of institutions of all kinds. Every Unitarian Universalist minister is expected to be a competent spiritual leader and a competent administrator. And no minister does these things alone. Tending to the soul of our institutions, including OUUC, is part of our shared ministry. It's the practice of tending to our spiritual lives and tending to our governance-how we share power and make decisions. It's how we embody our values, bringing love, justice and health into each of these.

This month is the OUUC's stewardship drive, the time when we are asked to draw on our abundance and give generously to support this institution. This year you will be asked to share your gifts with the OUUC community in support of our new vision and mission. You can share your financial gifts through a pledge. You can share your time and your talents by completing the Skills and Interests survey that you'll hear about and by volunteering in ways that tend your soul as well as the soul of the institution. Your gifts are welcome and appreciated.

Stewardship means tending to something of value; taking care of something; careful and responsible management of something we love. Stewarding this institution is part of tending its soul. And, in the process of noticing what we care for and love, we tend our souls, nurturing gratitude and calling for justice. How we tend to our institutions reflects how we tend to ourselves and each other. We tend to the institution so we can be transformed and transform the world.

This year, as we have for the past two years, my husband, John, and I made a financial commitment to OUUC. We have been a part of Unitarian Universalist congregations for over 30 years, and we believe that part of belonging is stewardship of the institution.

I am committed to our faith tradition because I believe Unitarian Universalism has something important and lifesaving to offer this hurting world. It is a faith grounded in love, a love that can be life giving and life sustaining, a love that everyone is worthy of.

I support Unitarian Universalism and OUUC not because we are perfect, but because we are courageous and vulnerable enough to admit that we are imperfect, and we begin again in love.

I support Unitarian Universalism and OUUC, not because we have it all figured out and wrapped up neatly in a bundle, but because we are in the messy, magnificent work of creating community.

Won't you join in making a commitment to OUUC?

Richard and Mildred Loving simply wanted to live as a married couple near family in a place where their families had been for generations, and in the home that Richard built for them. They wanted to enjoy their love for each other and have it recognized by their community. They challenged institutions as they were known then, and their actions transformed the law and the world, leaving a legacy of love.

We can take a lesson from the actions of the Lovings. May we love and tend the institutions that we have, calling them to be even better, leaving a legacy of generosity and love. May we remain open to the possibility of transformation in ourselves and our institutions. May we remain grounded in the love that never lets us go as we work for a world that is loving, just and healthy. By our actions, we make it so.

Let's bring that vision into a moment of silence as we breathe together.