

“Love Calls Us On”

Rev. Shawn Newton
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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As you likely know, I have quite a thing for churches.

Truth be told, I'm fascinated by shrines and synagogues,
and mosques and mandirs and temples, too.

I'm captivated by the sight of faith translated into bricks and mortar—
by the sheer determination
it took to raise the classic temples of antiquity
and the vaulted cathedrals of the middle ages.

Places like Stonehenge, Angkor Wat, and Hagia Sophia
stand to this day as testaments to faith and the force of will,
symbols of devotion carved from stone
that were meant to endure.

But, these sites, of course, are more than buildings.
More than the pile of rocks from which they were built.

They stand as sacred sites,
hallowed through centuries of human longing for life's deepest meaning.

And, that's why, I think that I—and so many of us—
gravitate to such places, such patches of hallowed ground,
whether they be half a world away, or just around the corner.

A few years ago, I dragged Bob
through many of the major cathedrals of northern France.

To squeeze in a few stops later in the day,
we set out very early to arrive at the Cathedral of Amiens
as soon as the doors opened at dawn.

Though we've visited countless cathedrals,
we'd never had one completely to ourselves.

Somehow anything that's that big and almost a thousand years old
just seems like it should be shared.

But that morning, the caretaker departed after unlocking the doors,
and Bob and I were left with this cavernous space
to enjoy its vast silence
and the morning sun piercing its stained glass.

There in the middle of the nave lay Amien's famed labyrinth.

In the deep, still quiet of the moment,
I couldn't resist the rare opportunity to walk its angled rings,
without having to dodge unthinking tourists,
armed with cameras and selfie-sticks.

There, in the filtered morning light,
I walked my way into a time of meditation,
navigating the black and white marble that outlined my path.

I simply and slowly walked,
breathing in the air of the ages.

Reaching the centre, it pleased me, for a time, to stand there in silence.

Eventually, a handful of chatty worshippers began to arrive
for a morning mass in one of the small chapels beyond the altar.

The silence had been broken and, in some ways, the spell, too.

I was a little annoyed
until I asked myself what right I had to be so selfish—
to somehow think I deserved to make this place my own,
to forget the dedication of generations of people
that had built and rebuilt this magnificent sacred space.

In that moment of insight,
I remembered the story of a visitor in France,
who, some 800 years ago, entered the town of Chartres,
when the great cathedral there was under construction.

To his surprise, it seemed that nearly everyone in town
was engaged with an activity in some way related
to the building of this enormous church.

The visitor went up to a man who was busy with some large stones.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m cutting stones,” came the reply, “I’m a stonemason.”

Not far from the stonemason was a man carving some wood.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m carving wood, I’m a carpenter.”

Several more people from many different trades brought predictably similar answers: the glassblower was blowing glass, the solicitor soliciting donations, the architect planning pillars.

Off in the distance was a woman with a large broom, sweeping up sawdust and stone chips and shards of glass, tidying up after the workers who had finished their various tasks for the day.

To her, the question was the same: “What are you doing?”

But, this time, something was different.

The woman stopped sweeping, stood up straight and turned toward the visitor with a big, broad smile.

“Me?” she said,

“Why, I am building a cathedral to the glory of God!”¹

And so she was, because she understood the higher purpose of her work.

In my selfish desire to keep the cathedral to myself that morning, I had forgotten her and so many like her who have toiled from the beginning of time to build enduring monuments to their faith, places owned not by any one person, or even a single generation, but places that today belong to the ages.

What moved me most, though, in that moment of clarity— in thinking of that woman sweeping the corners of her cathedral— was realising that, across all those centuries, I know her!

¹ I’m not sure of the origin of this story. It’s been circulated widely for years, if not longer.

I easily recognise her in the people who have cared for this building over the years,
the people who have animated it with life,
through the work of their hands and hearts.

Now, I suspect many of these people
wouldn't say they did what they did for the glory of God,
at least not without an extended debate about the definition of God,
but I know for certain that they gave and give of themselves—
like so many of you give of yourselves—
to serve the greater good
and help build up a monument to the best of our humanity,
often right here within these walls.

There are, as it turns out, many ways to build a cathedral.

Today, we say our goodbyes
to this building we have called home for the past seventy years.

And in so doing, we acknowledge the debt of gratitude we owe
to those who founded this congregation in 1845
and to those who in every generation since have worked for its well-being,
cutting stones, blowing glass, and sweeping the floors.

These countless acts of love and devotion
have created this place and made it what it is today.

And they are in no small part what will sustain us
as we leave this building behind and move into the future.

A move that will teach us again
the lesson we've learned repeatedly through this pandemic:
that we are so much more than the brick and mortar
of whatever place we may call home.

David Anderson, in his story "Love on the Rocks,"
tells of the time when someone struck a match and destroyed his church.²

He says that by the time he got there,
the whole sky was lit up orange.

Flames had shot through the arched roof of the parish hall like a pyre.

² David Anderson, "Love on the Rocks" from *Breakfast Epiphanies*, 130-33.

He stumbled around the building,
finding a clutch of his parishioners huddled out front,
where they watched the horrific scene until the fire chief
moved them off the property because it was no longer safe.

When the roof of the sanctuary collapsed,
he stopped comforting his congregants and began to wail himself.
When he could cry no more,
someone got a chair for him and sat him down.

After the fire, everything was different.

The staff worked out of the old rectory,
and the congregation worshipped across the street in a school gymnasium.

Eventually bulldozers crawled off flatbed trucks and made quick work
of everything but the heavy stone walls of the old church.

When the demolition crew began piling up little hills of face stone,
a friend of the minister, who knew he had been forever planning
to build a deck off his home,
suggested he take a load of the salvage stone
and create a terrace instead.

The minister knew in an instant that it would be a fitting memorial.

A week later, six tonnes of precious stones
slid off a truck and into a pile in his backyard.

That evening, after dinner, he went out to look at his new rock pile.

The stones looked pinkish in the setting sunlight.
They were scraped and scarred,
and some were [covered with soot] on one side.

But he loved those stones, for he knew that there,
in a microcosmic heap lay his church.

But, truth be told, he got much more than he bargained for.

It turns out that six tonnes of battered and burnt stones
require a lot of labour to be transformed into a terrace,
requiring of him every bit of sheer doggedness he could muster.

He knew that if he didn't love this rubble so much he would be free of it.
"But, I do, he said, "and so I am not."

That is the love that we can have for a place such as this.

It may look like just bricks and mortar and a fading coat of paint,
but this building is much more than its elements
because of those of us who have called it home.

Love is the only reason that explains why we have given to it
a measure of our devotion, our resources, and our lives.

It—and the community it holds—has been a cradle for our common dreams.

But, again, as we move from this place
we will be reminded that what we know as First Unitarian,
this community of communities, this web of relationships,
is and always has been about so much more than our building.

In some religious traditions,
there is a practice of deconsecrating a house of worship
when the building has outlived its useful life
or when the congregation is moving on, for whatever reason.

It's said that these buildings, these sacred places,
are returned to "profane" use.

As I have thought about this moment—
and, I will say, with our planning for this long-awaited day
having taken some fifteen years,
I've had plenty of time to think about it—
I reject the notion that this ground, this place,
this home that has been hallowed by our presence across so many years
somehow needs to be rendered no longer sacred.

If anything, with our commitment to the interconnected web of being,
our faith reminds us that everywhere is sacred.

Or, in the words of Wendell Berry,
that "there are only sacred places and desecrated places."

Our work is to see the sacred in all things.
To uncover it and uphold it.

To savour and to celebrate it.

To render something sacred is merely to recognise
what's already true, what's already there.

Friends, there are indeed many ways to build a cathedral or temple
and we in this time and place are given the awesome privilege
of taking up our trades and honing our skills
to fashion from wood and stone, from dream and sacrifice,
a new and enduring monument to our faith
and a testament to the life that ever-stirs within us and among us.

While we are, indeed, about the work
of literally building a new house of worship,
even more, we are called in this moment
to move forward in faith to build up the beloved community,
within and beyond whatever walls we will come to call home.

May that, more than anything, be what endures from our efforts.

May the call of love and of life
ever lead us to build up a better world.

Let us join now in a time of meditation and prayer:

Spirit of Life,

On this day and every day
when we commit ourselves anew
to the future of this congregation,
let us recall, with gratitude, those who,
by the labour of their hands and their hearts,
worked to make this a house of peace for all people.

For it is to this sacred place, this community of memory and hope,
that we have brought the joys and the sorrows of our lives,
knowing that here we would find compassion, courage, and conviction.

For it is to this place we have come to renew our faith in the world,
in one another and even ourselves,
in the knowledge that we will be sent from here
to take up the work of love and justice that is ours to do.

As we move into our future as a congregation,
may we remain ever true in our care for one another:
for our temple to the Spirit of Life is only as strong
as the foundations of our love and commitment for each other.

Amen.