

Text: Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Growing up Unitarian was a lot of fun, particularly because it is a religious movement that is not at all shy about poking fun at itself. One of the myriad jokes that is passed around is worth relating today. What do you get when you cross a Unitarian with a Jehovah's Witness? Someone who knocks on your door but doesn't know why.

Speaking of knocking on doors: During the presidential election of 2008 I actually went out into neighborhoods, knocking on doors, stumping for a candidate. I had never done that before. But I thought it was important enough that I was willing to put myself out front for what I believed.

"I was willing to put myself out front for what I believed." An odd comment, that. We do something we believe in. We follow a purpose we believe in. We believe in freedom of speech. We believe in life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We believe in the separation of church and state. I was willing to go door-to-door for something I believe in.

And of course my faith in the Way of Jesus is another form of belief, which leads me to ask an uncomfortable question, particularly in a progressive, liberal setting. "Would I go door-to-door to witness to what I believe in?" After all, I had just done that exact thing for politics because I believed in it, so why not for religion, for our church?

I hope you all are squirming now. I can just imagine many of you thinking, "Oh my God! He is going to ask us to go door to door and recruit people for First Plymouth! I wouldn't know what to say! Besides, we don't do that! That is not done in our tradition!" So let me say in words of one syllable: No, I am not suggesting we do that. Going door to door really is not something we do in our tradition and it is not part of who we are. That being said, I would however like to quote one of the leading lights in the world of the United Church of Christ—the most liberal of all Christian denominations—the Rev. Lillian Daniel. Recently she wrote,

It has long struck me as strange that the same mainline church members who pass resolutions on gay marriage and propose solutions to conflict in the Middle East and take on health care reform suddenly shrink in silence on the subject of sharing their faith—and here's the irony—lest they offend someone. . . .

For too long, the mainline's noble and honorable impulses toward tolerance and inclusivity have turned our church members into spiritual illiterates who, being out of practice, have forgotten how to speak the simple words of testimony.

We who love to talk—we who have found our feminist voices, our justice voices, our intellectual voices, our public voices for Christian traditions that value teaching, prophetic speech, and intellect—we have a fear of public speaking on the one topic we should be most excited about, which is our experience of the living God.¹

¹ Daniel, Lillian; *Finding Our Voices Again*; Reflections; Yale Divinity School; Fall 2009, page 12.

Interestingly, that is exactly what Pete Martinez did earlier in the service; and what Peg Thompson did in October; and what Jan Humphreys did in November; and what Steve Haskins will do in February: speaking of their experience of the living God, that very experience that allows them to live lives of courage and witness and grace despite the very real challenges they have faced. It is what other members shall be doing here in the future, at least once a month: giving testimony to the activity of God in their lives.

Speaking of Unitarian jokes, did you hear about the Unitarian minister who had identical twins? She baptized one and kept the other as a control. The Church has always taught that when we are baptized we become a member of the Church; this has meant that we die to our old selves and we become new creations in Christ, committed to the mission of the Church. And testimony—proclamation—is historically the FIRST mission of the gathered church. It is the first reason why Jesus called the Church, called us, into existence. We are to be bold in not only in proclaiming how faith ought to be lived, but also to be bold in proclaiming the faith itself: that faith that gives us the values, inspires the justice and nurtures our community. This is a tradition of our baptismal covenant that is worth reclaiming. Baptism is to commit to work in the Way of Jesus. And the primary work that he did above all else was proclamation. He proclaimed, witnessed, gave testimony—testimony to a way of living and loving that brings balm to wounded souls, peace to troubled hearts and meaning to searching lives.

Look around you and see how we do already that. Look at this profound community of faith that is First Plymouth. Look at the ministries of compassion and grace that are done here week after week, decade after decade. Look at the way so many in our midst care for and love our children, nurturing them in faith and weaving into their lives the disciplines of serving and sharing. Look at the way so many reach beyond our doors and share their abundance of time, talent and treasure, providing nourishment for body, mind and soul. Look at the numbers of you who sing in the choir, serve as liturgists and deepen our worship. Look at the graceful smiles that our greeters and ushers extend to all who enter through our doors. Look at the food provided every Sunday morning, both in Plymouth Hall and here in the sanctuary. Look. Look at who you are.

You have so much to share with people who have no idea this beloved, incarnate community even exists, and who need to know. You have a faith that opens both heart and mind, dissolving the certainty of dogma and nurturing a way of humble grace. You have a faith that sees abundance when the world sees scarcity, proclaims hope when the world speaks fear, knows good news amidst headlines glorifying devastation. You have so much to share, so much to proclaim, and people outside these doors will never know unless you tell them. You are God's beloved children, through whose baptisms heaven is opened, and the Holy Spirit descends and a voice comes from heaven, 'You are my daughters and sons, my Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'