

**First Unitarian Church of Baltimore**  
**Sermon: Counting Our Blessings**  
**February 8, 2009 Rev. Lyn Oglesby, Ph.D.**

Some people look at the glass and see it half full. Some people look at the glass and see it half empty. Sometimes I start out seeing it half empty and then realize, when I think about it, that the glass really is half full, and I just hadn't remembered all the good stuff in the glass.

Well, here at First Unitarian our glass is more than half full. Just think. Our founders and pioneers built and have left us this magnificent building, with its Tiffany windows, Niemann organ, a harpsichord, an organ in the parish hall, two grand pianos, a pizza oven that Dominoes would die for, a second building for our Religious Education classes, and a mosaic and beautiful window over the altar.

Those are just some of the things. They have blessed us with much more. This church is where it is because its role is to serve the city of Baltimore and those who live on the outskirts. We are a vital part of the community. Our leadership in religious liberalism and inclusiveness is right out there. Our banner that says, "Civil Marriage is a Civil Right" overlooks the Pope Paul garden, on the grounds of the first Roman Catholic cathedral built in the United States.

We are truly blessed. Look where we are, right downtown in one of the most interesting cities in the country. Baltimore is a delightful city of neighborhoods, with a vigorous port and vibrant, attractive waterfront. Our city relishes and cherishes neighborhood restaurants, ethnic grocery stores and delis, and an abundance of great choices in music.

From Eddie's to the Peabody, from Hon to the Walters, from the Enoch Pratt Free Library to Ms. Desserts, Baltimore offers exquisite and unique experiences. From the symphony to the Senator, Baltimore offers high quality arts and entertainment. In this city we have seven colleges and universities, superb medical schools and hospitals. There is a spirit in this city that is contagious, that brings out the desire to be in community, and to preserve and

improve our community. I see those same energetic qualities in our church.

We are blessed with a unique building in the midst of our city, with windows and organ and art work that other congregations envy. This magnificent, and very special church, was built by people who had vision, who were driven by a strong sense of purpose, who took their religion and their faith seriously, who wanted to ensure that future generations would have a beautiful and comfortable place to worship and sing and dance and pray. The religion our Baltimore forefathers practiced was not as liberal as ours today, but William Ellery Channing's sermon from this very pulpit pushed the envelope and set a new mark in development of Unitarian theology when he spoke here at the ordination of Rev. Jared Sparks. He redefined Unitarian Christianity. Channing's sermon is required reading for every Unitarian Universalist minister in training.

We are a faith, we are a denomination, we are a congregation of courageous explorers and builders. Because we question authority, because we question creeds, because we doubt dogma, Unitarian Universalists consistently harbor heretical thoughts, and many have paid the ultimate price for that.

One of the synopses of our church history tells us that, "The First Unitarian Church of Baltimore is the first church in the United States built for and by Unitarians that is still in use as a Unitarian church. In 1817 a group of leading citizens of Baltimore met in the home of Henry Payson to form a religious society and build a church for Christians who are Unitarian and cherish liberal sentiments on the subject of religion. The name selected for the church, the First Independent Church of Baltimore, was a precursor to the independence of thought and action that would become the hallmark of this group of free thinkers and those who succeeded them through subsequent generations. Almost from the outset, this bold independence was reflected in the acts of the founders. Maximilian Godefroy was chosen to build a church of an ultra-modern design reflecting the revolutionary notions of architecture emerging from the ideas generated the French Revolution. The building is considered the

finest American example of French Romantic Classicism. Jared Sparks, a young scholar who was later to be President of Harvard University, was hired as the first minister.”<sup>i</sup>

**Several important events in the congregation's history reveal the spirit and nature** of this church. □The landmark sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. William Ellery Channing on May 5, 1819 at the ordination of the first minister, Jared Sparks defined the essence of Unitarianism in the United States. That sermon led to the formation of the Unitarian denomination in 1824, has become known as the Baltimore Sermon. Channing gave that sermon from this very pulpit.

In 1859 a group seceded and formed the Second Unitarian Church of our Savior. Church records do not show what led to the division, but it is quite certain that those who remained were predominantly Southern sympathizers, with the exception of such church leaders as Enoch Pratt. However, in 1864 the First Independent Church called Rev. John F. W. Ware who was a strong advocate of the Union cause. In 1867 Mr. Ware resigned from the First Independent Church and assumed the pastorate of the Second Unitarian Church of our Savior until 1872 when he left due to ill health. Rev. Ware left his mark on Baltimore where among many other accomplishments he organized and directed The Baltimore Association for the Moral and Intellectual Improvement of Colored People, which established over 200 schools for freed slaves. Upon Ware’s departure, the Second Church decided to dissolve and their members were then invited by First Church to re-unite with it. □□In 1935 Second Universalist Society of Baltimore merged with First Unitarian, becoming the First Unitarian Church of Baltimore (Universalist and Unitarian).” This was 26 “years before the two denominations merged nationally.”<sup>ii</sup>

“In 1954 at the time of general exodus from the central city, at least partially due to “white flight”, the First Unitarian Congregation decided to remain in its historic location in order to preserve its physical heritage and testify to its faith in the future of the inner city. Again in 1972, the question of remaining in the city was raised when the First Unitarian

Church of Baltimore was designated a National Historic Landmark. The congregation met to discuss the possibility of relocating outside the City and agreed that the ministry of the church belonged in center city Baltimore.”<sup>iii</sup>

We are blessed by the commitment of past congregations to this location. We are blessed by the generosity of all those who constructed and paid for the building, the organ and other musical instruments, our religious education wing. The pizza oven. This church was begun, this church was built and this church has been sustained by people who cared. People who cared about the beacon of hope and that we symbolize liberal religion, right across the street from the nation’s first cathedral – also a beacon of hope, but hardly a symbol of liberal religion. This church was begun, built and has been sustained by the generosity of its members, its welcoming philosophy, and its compassion within the church and in the larger community. We have inherited a sterling legacy, and that is a blessing.

Such a legacy also carries responsibilities, and in the past we have fallen into an unhealthy habit of leaving a large part of the financial responsibilities to others. That is, we are a friendly, welcoming, caring congregation. We are generous to one another, yet less generous in our financial commitments and pledges to the church for its operations. As you will read in my March Beacon piece, the church cannot run on ether. Many of you are very generous. Some of you may not be aware how much it costs to operate our building and our programs. Whatever the case, the costs remain the same or they increase, and the responsibility remains the same.

We are preparing for a new minister. We are blessed with a conscientious search committee that has sifted through countless records and is working hard to call a minister who will best meet the needs of the congregation. In anticipation of the arrival of a new minister, the redecoration of the parish hall is nearly complete, thanks to the dedication and determined leadership of the Building and Grounds Committee.

To prepare for the new minister, we are developing a Safety and Security policy to ensure the safety and protection of our children, youth and adults, as well as our building. We are developing a Pastoral Care Team. We are developing a group of trained Worship Associates. We are working hard to make sure that our computer systems and software are adequate to support our needs. We are involving children and youth in our services. Isn't it a joy to be greeted by an adolescent usher? I love it. And I love it when our children light the chalice. We have a magnificent music program and choir. We are truly blessed. Our Religious Education program continues to attract more and more children and youth, and provide historical, moral and ethical frameworks for our young people. Parents need all the help they can get, and our Religious Education program is a true blessing. We are slowly but steadily enriching our Adult Religious Education programs, and have begun Wednesday Brown Bag discussion groups. We are truly blessed.

As we build on our magnificent history, celebrate Founders Day, and launch our Stewardship drive for the coming year, I do not want to nag. I hate nagging. At the same time, we are all grown-ups, responsible citizens, and are accustomed to straight talk and dealing with issues matter-of-factly. And, as a matter of fact, it is going to be much more difficult to secure the services of an excellent minister if our finances are not in order, and our giving levels don't adequately support church operations. Stewardship and financial commitment materials went into the mail on Friday. Let me urge you, rather than nag you, to consider them carefully, and to remember what a difference this church makes, Let me urge you to consider how generously you can support your church. Imagine what life would be like without this church...without the music, without the RE program, without the banner outside stating that Civil Marriage is a Civil Right, stating to the world that we are genuinely inclusive. Brave and courageous people risked ostracism to create this faith, and this church.

We are here for a reason. We are here to transform the world. This is a great moment in the history of our country and in the history of this church. Please do as much as you can to

show you care. Please give as much as you can to show you love this church. Please give as much as you can, so that you can attract a first-class minister who will begin his or her ministry with you on a firm financial foundation. Please give as much as you can. You can make a difference, you can make a difference. Yes, you can make a difference.

I ask this in the name of all that is holy and sacred, and in the name of all those who have made this church the symbol it is of religious freedom and inclusiveness.

Amen

I ask this in the name of all that is holy and sacred, and in the name of all those who have made this church the symbol it is of religious freedom and inclusiveness.

Amen

---

i  
ii  
iii