

The City In the City On a Hill

the Rev. Edmund Robinson

Unitarian Universalist Meeting House

October 23, 2011 – Association Sunday

Today we observe Association Sunday, and I'd like to reflect on what our denominational headquarters at 25 Beacon Street in Boston is for all of us. And that starts with what Boston meant to the Englishmen who founded her.

I and many of you have been reading the book *Mayflower*, by Nathaniel Philbrick, an account of the founding of the Plymouth Colony, and part of the pleasure of reading it is that some of the action takes place right here, and most of it takes place within 50 miles of here, and so it is satisfying to contemplate that the place we have come to live is so close to these founding events in our nation's history. There is a little voice in the back of our minds saying, yes, the Mayflower came to Chatham, and then 300 some-odd years later, I came here; how important I am!

The Plymouth colony started at least one of the features that developed into American democracy and Unitarianism two centuries later: the Mayflower compact showed that people could create a society by agreement. And since both the Pilgrims and the Puritans were seeking a place they could worship as they wanted, the political freedom claimed by the Mayflower Compact was a precondition to the establishment of the religious state they desired. The churches they founded were an integral part of the society, and they were founded on covenant, and that basis continues to undergird our UU churches today. We get our basic blueprint for religion from the Pilgrims and Puritans, though in many ways we are vastly different.

In 1630, ten years after the Pilgrims, a much larger company of Puritans set out for Massachusetts in several ships to establish a colony. Their leader was John Winthrop, a wealthy lawyer. He was aboard the lead ship, the *Arbella*, and during the passage, he wrote a sermon outlining his hopes for the colony, which is titled "A Model of Christian Charity." It is touching to read in its entirety, and it is clear that this Puritan believed they were recreating society as Jesus had preached, a society based not on military power, not on money, but on love, or what we today would call the Beloved Community.

Winthrop goes on at length about what this duty of love means in practical everyday life, and then summarizes his thoughts in these words:

"Thus stands the cause between God and us. We are entered into covenant with Him for this work. We have taken out a commission. The Lord hath given us leave to draw our own articles. We have professed to enterprise these and those

accounts, upon these and those ends. We have hereupon besought Him of favor and blessing.¹”

“The Lord hath given us leave to draw our own articles.” The states even more clearly than the Mayflower Compact that the right of self-government is, as Jefferson would say a century and a half later, inalienable.

Winthrop goes on to say that if they keep the covenant, God will favor them, but if they break the covenant, God will let them know the price of such breach. He then ends with words which have been widely quoted:

[Let us] follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together, in this work, as one man. We must entertain each other in brotherly affection. ... We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality. We must delight in each other; make others' conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, "may the Lord make it like that of New England." For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.”

Now Winthrop wrote these words about a City on Hill before he had even seen Boston. The language comes straight out of Jesus' sermon on the mount (Matthew 5),
14 "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. 15 No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

But life imitates art, and lo and behold, they found a hill on the Shawmut peninsula, and that is where they built the city. This is how Boston became the City on the Hill. This aspect of shining forth, of moral example, is reflected in the name of the principal hill in Boston and in the street that runs up it: Beacon. The new settlement was to be the moral example that Jesus

¹A Model of Christian Charity, John Winthrop at <http://religiousfreedom.lib.virginia.edu/sacred/charity.html>

talked about, and which we sing about today with a song like this little light of mine.

Politicians from John Kennedy to Ronald Reagan have cited Winthrop's "city on a hill" image to argue that America has a mission in the world, a mission of enlightenment, or human rights, or of political or economic freedom. It is an elastic concept, and can be used by the right as well as the left.

Now I see the downsides to the rhetoric. Our moral light doesn't always shine so brightly. The Puritans created a beautiful thing, but at the expense of Native Peoples who had been here before. The idea that our system should be a moral example to others easily gets perverted into the idea of American exceptionalism which then is used to justify militarism and imperialism in the four centuries of European occupation of this land area, and in the last century, American domination of the world. In fact, I think that to be true to Winthrop's original idea, America should strive to set a moral example precisely by renouncing military, economic and cultural domination of the rest of the world.

But we are here to talk about the UUA, and I only bring up the city on the hill to give some cultural context to the location of our headquarters – at the top of Beacon Hill, on Beacon Street, right next to the State House. UUA headquarters is a beehive of activity, a little city within that City on the Hill. When you go to the State House to have a chat with your senator, you can slip over next door and pick up some inspirational reading materials from the bookstore. If you need a place to stay in downtown Boston, you can do worse than to book a room at the Pickett and Eliot house, named for our own Gene Pickett, just behind headquarters. Just up the hill, you can visit the offices of Beacon Press and Skinner House.

As a seminarian in Boston and then a practicing minister, I have had many occasions to visit headquarters. I have attended meetings in the beautiful library overlooking the common, and I have conducted worship in the chapel overlooking the State House grounds. When I need to talk to someone about some policy question or a detail of my employment benefits, I find the right person somewhere in that warren of offices. For a time I worked in the Church of the Larger Fellowship offices in the basement of the Pickett & Elliot House. And I met the all-important Ministerial Fellowship Committee in that same building. More on that in a moment.

The Puritans set up a church system based on congregational polity, meaning that each congregation had the right to decide essential things for itself. When Unitarians organized a separate denomination in 1825, we continued this tradition of congregational polity, and today the congregation is the basic unit of our movement, with the denominational structure serving a subsidiary role. But even if you go back to the Cambridge Platform of 1648, the foundation of congregational polity, you find that congregations did not stand entirely on their own. When

there was a crisis within the congregation, they could call a meeting of neighboring churches. The ministers from the neighboring churches could examine a candidate for ordination. That system of consulting between congregations grew into the denominational structure we have today.

In our day to day work in the congregation, the denomination is largely invisible, so you may ask, what is it that Beacon Street does organizationally for a congregation like ours? The short answer is, that which the church can't do or doesn't do as easily as a national organization may do. 25 Beacon Street has a storehouse of resources for worship and religious education, for social outreach programs. It helps standardize staff finances and benefits. It is amazing how many questions which come up in the life of a particular congregation, have come up in the lives of other congregations, and it is amazing how many of them have an answer somewhere in the bowels of 25 Beacons Street. Nowadays, many of those answers can be found on UUA.org.

One of the most important things Beacon Street does is help with ministerial transitions. This congregation found this out five years ago when you went into search. Your search committee was guided by the Beacon Street settlement office as well as a settlement officer from this district. The search committee posted its profile on a special website and the ministers who were in search, such as myself, posted our ministerial profiles on another section of that same website, and eventually the website allowed the interested ministers and interested congregations to find one another. The fact that I'm speaking to you here this morning is a result of an Internet dating service run from 25 Beacon Street.

But before I got to the point of entering that website, I had to go through the fellowship process. The task of monitoring seminary students and setting standards for credentialing of ministers is entirely too big for any one congregation to undertake, so it is a function, a very vital function, played by Beacon Street.

During the fellowship process, many ministerial candidates develop a love/hate relationship with Beacon Street that follows them through their careers, and they often imbue their congregations with this ambiguity. I myself did not fare well with the fellowship committee the first time I appeared before it. The panel, ironically, was headed by Gene Pickett, and they told me that I needed to do some more discernment before I was ready for ministry. And while I didn't like hearing this, I have had to admit on reflection that they were right; I was just going through the last stages of my divorce and had a lot of issues I had to settle for myself before I was ready to take on those of a congregation. So I think in my case, the system worked, and I am a better minister for having been made to take time out and reflect. The fellowship process is one of the most important things the UUA does.

To put it succinctly, for the average congregation, the UUA's most vital role is as a fire

department; we pay to support our local fire department hoping we will never need the services they offer, but recognizing that it is in all our interests to have people trained to put out fires. The UUA, and its district staff, are there in times of crisis that a congregation can't handle on its own.

The UUA is not perfect by any means, and as a bureaucratic organization there are probably ways it could improve in providing its services to the congregations. But it is more than a service organization. And it is more than a fire department. It is also our movement's most visible voice on the national stage as witness for our values.

Peter Morales has been an excellent president for public witness. He went to Arizona in the summer of 2010 and got himself arrested protesting that state's immigration law. More recently, he went to the Occupy Boston site at Dewey Square, along with many Boston-area UU clergy, and he issued the statement I read earlier.

Peter didn't wait for a vote of the UUA Board or from the congregations before issuing a statement in support of Occupy Boston. The city on the hill doesn't work that way. The state House may pass legislation and work out detailed policy proposals; the UUA headquarters next door is not charged with governing, it is charged with witnessing. And it does witness. Having our President visit Occupy Boston is a powerful act of witness.

The UUA witnessed in the 1970s, when Beacon Press published the Pentagon Papers. It will be witnessing in 2012 when the entire GA in Phoenix will be a protest of the state immigration law.

Our values get legs and walk as we witness for them. Jesus admonished us to let our light so shine before others that they might see our good works and glorify the holy source of those works. As the great Universalist preacher Quillen Shinn said,

“Every exertion you put forth to make this world better is so much done to make our doctrine true. God works through instrumentalities. We are all to be agents. A Universalist who is idle, doing nothing to make his doctrine true, is a counterfeit.”²

The City on the Hill leads by example.

The UUA is funded from three sources: the Annual Program Fund, which are the dues paid by each congregation, the Friends of the UUA, which is a network of individual donors originally set up by Gene Pickett when he was president, and special appeals such as Association

² Shinn, Quillen Hamilton, “Affirmations of Universalism” sermon about 1900
<http://tgulcm.tripod.com/cu/afmuniv.html>

Sunday. This congregation pays something on its dues to the UUA and to the District, but not at the level sufficient to amount to a Fair Share. As one whose own compensation looms large in the budget of this church, I understand that the expenses of the congregation must be met before we pay our dues, and yet I would like to see us be a Fair Share congregation. When you are a Fair Share congregation they give you all sorts of beads and ribbons to wear at GA.

But that is another matter. We are here today on Association Sunday, in the 50th year of the Unitarian Universalist Association. I am pleased to say that this year's Association Sunday contribution will go to the professional associations – the UU Minister's Association, the Liberal Religious Educator's Association and the UU Musician's network, to support programs and scholarships. So money you contribute here may eventually make it possible for me or Frank or someone like us from a small church to attend a conference that would promote excellence in our ministry or music. A special collection will be made after the usual offering, and you can make checks out to the Meeting House but put Association Sunday in the reference line. I am making my check out in the amount of \$100, which is more than I can afford, and I challenge each of you to give an amount which is similarly uncomfortable.

I leave you with the words of Jesus as I have adapted them: A city on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to the source of life.
Amen.

Reading: Statement of Rev. Peter Morales on the Occupy movements

"The Occupy Wall Street movement that has now spread to other cities across the country is a public outcry of frustration and anger. The protestors have taken to the streets to draw attention to the fact that our economic system has not only failed to protect the most vulnerable among us, it has preyed on the majority for the benefit of very few. The Occupy protests are a wake-up call that the American people are in great peril, and we have been for some time.

"It is not surprising that Americans have had to take to the streets to get the attention of our leaders. For too long, we have seen attention paid to banks that are 'too big too fail' while the plight of the poor and the working class goes unaddressed. For too long, we have been pitted against each other by those in power, by a corrupt economic system that pushed us to consume more and to 'get ours' at any cost. Now we know: The cost is too great, and is ultimately without

satisfaction.

"Last Sunday, I had the opportunity to join the Occupy Boston protesters in this city's financial district. Unitarian Universalist ministers from several of our Massachusetts congregations came together to organize an evening vespers service at the Occupy Boston encampment, offering spiritual support and encouragement to the hundreds of souls gathered there.

"I was honored to bear witness to this historic event, and grateful for the chance stand side by side with Unitarian Universalist ministers showing such passionate devotion to our Fourth Principle: The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large. And I know that our ministers and congregants have played similar roles at the other Occupy events across the country.

...

"I reach out to Unitarian Universalists everywhere to consider how you might be of service to any among us who are struggling to provide for their families, those who have been cheated and abused by financial institutions, and all those whose backs ache under a burden of debt, unemployment, and fading hope. Let the world see the power of our faith in action.

"And if these protests are truly planting the seeds of a reformation – even a revolution – may those seeds be nurtured by love. May the change come from a place of compassion and good will. And may all those involved know this: We are with you."