

“What’s Happening At All Souls?”

(originally titled “Afraid to Ask”)

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday April 5, 2009

Jesse Jackson has identified the greatest cause of social decay in America today, and it is not racism, it is not poverty, it is not drugs, it is not war, nor is it violence. Those are all symptoms and consequences, but they are not the root cause of the greatest social decay in our America today. The cause is a lack of self-worth, a lack of an identity worth respecting, a lack of self-respect and self-dignity, and that comes from not knowing who we really are [and what our purpose is.]”

Many people today feel trapped and defined by the circumstances of their life. We can feel trapped by our lack of time, by our job, our debt, our family situation, the economy, or our health. Whether we are currently unemployed and barely scraping by or a successful executive with plenty of money in the bank life can appear to be living us, rather than us living the life we feel we are meant to live. Rev. Peter Gomes tells us, “That’s what hell is. Not fire and brimstone and eternal torment, but rather hell is being defined by your circumstances, and believing that definition.” Research shows that the number one fear in people is having lived a meaningless life.

With that in mind, I want to return to one of my favorite metaphors – animals called lemmings. They are furry little rodent-like animals that have a reputation that at some point in their lives they run en mass into the sea and die. I find myself returning periodically to a fictional story by David Hutchins and in his version the Lemmings run off the edge of a cliff. In this story there’s a Lemming named Emmy who one day decides to ask why Lemmings run off the edge of the cliff. Her question seems to startle, bewilder and annoy those she asks. All they can say is, “This is just what we do; we’re lemmings.” At one point Emmy asks, “How do we know running off the cliff is a good thing?” To which she is told, “Well, no one ever comes back, so it must be good.”

Not satisfied by this answer, Emmy keeps inquiring. Eventually she meets a group of lemmings who call themselves the NO LEAPS. They have formed in opposition to this culture of leaping off the cliff. They have organized around this cause and can even be seen picketing at the cliffs edge. When Emmy asks them why they are against leaping, they say it is because they don’t want to leap off the cliff. When she asks them what they want to create, they look confused and then say, “Um... well... we want to create a world in which no one leaps.”

“But why?” asks Emmy, who is quickly disillusioned because she realizes that the NO LEAPS know what they *don’t* want, but they don’t really know what they *do* want. Emmy begins to realize she can no longer look to others to tell her who she should be or what she should do with her life.

One day, while sitting at the edge of the cliff, crying with angst and confusion, Emmy takes to pondering what her purpose in life is and why she exists. She begins to realize that the reason she is always asking so many questions is because her purpose is to open people up to new worlds and ways of being. While perched there, staring at the ledge on the other side of the abyss, Emmy gets the idea that she wants to build something that will get her over to the other side. Eventually she creates a kind of slingshot that catapults her over the abyss. She continues asking questions and she opens up new worlds for all lemmings.

Nevertheless, there are certain lemmings who refuse to give up the big leap. They feel it is too important to their heritage and their identity as a group. However, more and more Lemmings begin to ask why, and consider other sources of meaning for their lives.

Now in our lives today, the rapid pace of change keeps many of us from taking the time to ask the most important questions. Questions like: What brings you the strongest sense of meaning and joy? Who are you and why do you exist? What is your purpose in this world? What is it you want to create with your life? These are not obscure esoteric questions; they are the basic building blocks of a meaningful and fulfilling life.

We have to be careful though, because our purpose can often become confused with our vision. While vision is something we want to create, our *purpose* is something that we discover from within ourselves. In another part of the lemmings' story I haven't told, there is a character named Lenny who thinks his purpose in life is to be a motivational speaker. When Emmy asks him why he wants to be a motivational speaker, he first answers because he is good at it. But eventually, with her prodding, he realizes why he wants to do it. In his case it is to motivate people to create more cooperation and community. Once he knows *why* he is doing it, he is able to live out his life's calling with conviction and enthusiasm.

I would like you to consider the fact that everything exists to serve something else. A pen serves the purpose of writing. A chair serves the purpose of sitting. Everything that exists, exists to serve something beyond itself. A door, a window, a piece of paper, they all serve. That is why any one and any thing that does not serve something beyond itself is a form of cancer. That is why Jesus continually said things like, *the greatest among you must become like the younger and the leader like one who serves.* (Luke 22:26) That is why all the world's religions have serving others as a tenant. And that is why at All Souls we say, *Service is our law.*

Let's look at the purpose of this church for a moment. Turn your order of service to the back. Do you see the sentences printed in italics? This statement was written and adopted by this congregation in 1952. It has been printed on the order of service for over five decades. And it is this church's official statement of purpose in our by-laws. It says:

This church is dedicated to religion but not to creed. Neither upon itself nor upon its members does it impose a test of doctrinal formulas. It regards love of God and humankind and the perfecting of our spiritual nature as the unchanging substance of religion and the essential gospel of Jesus. Consecrating itself to these principles, it aims at cultivating reverence for truth, moral character and insight, helpfulness to humanity, and the spirit of communion with the infinite. It welcomes to its worship and fellowship all who are in sympathy with a religion thus simple and free.

When we say: *This church is dedicated to religion but not to creed. Neither upon itself nor upon its members does it impose a test of doctrinal formulas*, we mean that no one can be rejected from this place due to their beliefs. Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, atheists and others - everyone is welcome here, as long as they respect others who have different beliefs.

Our church welcomes to its worship and fellowship all who are in sympathy with a religion thus simple and free. Many people don't understand how a church can be united without a common creed. Most churches have a creed or statement of belief that everyone is supposed to recite and agree to. Here however, we are united instead by a covenant. Now flip back in your order of service to the middle section. There is our covenant, which we read every time we gather in worship. Will you say it with me?

*Love is the Spirit of this Church and service is its law.
This is our Great Covenant. To dwell together in peace.
To seek the truth in love. And to help one another.*

We are united not by a common belief, but by a sacred promise that we make each week to one another. That is how people of many and various beliefs can come together as one church family. And our covenant and our statement of purpose form the compass that points us in the direction we need to go. They show us true north and remind us what we stand for. From that, we develop a vision for our future. Yet, when we clarify our vision, and also are aware of our current reality, we create a gap – a space between where we are now and where we want to be. This gap creates tension.

So, we are living in the tension, and there is usually a degree of uncertainty and discomfort. We often try to move too quickly to resolve uncertainties and discomforts in our lives before they have a chance to move us toward our vision. Rushing through the uncertainty means that we may be too quick to latch onto something that feels certain or comfortable even if it is not what we really want. In our personal lives, it may be the wrong job, the wrong solution, the wrong lover, that we grasp onto in order to feel secure in a time of uncertainty and discomfort. In the life of our church, it can be a grasping on to the idea that “this is the way it's always been.” And that is why, at times of

transition, it is important to be very clear about what can never change about our church, and what in fact can.

In the story of the lemmings, remember the NO LEAPS? They are reactive. They know what they are rejecting, but they don't really know why they are rejecting it. They don't know what it is they want to create. If we are not careful, in a church like ours, there can be a tendency towards reaction, because most of us know what we don't want. We don't want doctrines and dogmas and literal interpretations of scripture. We don't want a religion based in fear, judgment, guilt, shame or superstition. We don't want anyone telling us what we *should* believe, or what we *must* believe. And knowing this helps us discover what we *do* want and what is non-negotiable for us.

We want a church that allows us to bring our doubts and questions as well as our faith. A church that allows us to explore truth, freely – with mind, body and spirit. We want a Sunday school for our children where they can learn not only about the Bible, but also from science and the world's great religions and philosophers and poets. These things will always be central to who we are, no matter where our vision may take us. So, being visionary requires asking the questions: What do I want to do with my life? What do *we*, in the case of our church, want to create? With this special but short life that we have? With this building and this history and all of our resources? This is a very exciting time in the life of our church.

Today we have a group of over 50 ministers and lay leaders visiting All Souls from around the country. They have come to Tulsa for a conference on creating multicultural churches. For their benefit, as well as our own, I want to briefly review what has happened here over the past ten months. For those of you from former New D, I realize this is your story. I feel honored to share it, and also to realize that it is becoming our story.

Bishop Carlton Pearson was the founder of Higher Dimensions, what became a 6,000 member, multi-racial congregation in Tulsa for 25 years. It was rooted in an African-American Pentecostal church culture and theology. A few years ago, he discovered through prayer and extensive Bible scholarship that God does *not* damn Jews to hell after all. Or Muslims, Buddhists and other non-Christians. He went further and said, God does not condemn gay and lesbian and transgender people either. His new theology, which he outlines in his book The Gospel of Inclusion, describes what many of us know as a classical version of Universalism, which states that God's love extends to *all* people and denies the concept of a punishing, wrathful God.

Unfortunately, Bishop Pearson's televangelist colleagues on the Trinity Broadcast Network, at Oral Roberts University, and throughout the country deemed him a heretic and publicly denounced him and his message. (We call that giving him the left foot of fellowship.) The condemnation and bad publicity caused many longtime members to leave his church. United Church of Christ pastors

here in Oklahoma reached out to him, and to his associate Pastor Jesse Williams, and they were eventually ordained by the UCC. Trinity Episcopal Church in downtown Tulsa welcomed them to use their sanctuary at 1:00 on Sundays which they did for over a year after losing their building.

During this time, Bishop Pearson and I developed a close friendship, having regular lunches and occasional pulpit exchanges. As a matter of fact, when my wife and I lost our daughter a few years ago he was the first non-UU clergy to come to our house to be with us. Last May, he asked if his congregation could try worshipping at All Souls over the summer during our 11:30 service time, since we usually go to one service at 10:00 for the summer. With the approval of our board of trustees we welcomed New Dimensions church to begin worshipping here in June.

Bishop Pearson and Pastor Jesse were surprised to find that over the summer at least half of the attendants at their services were members of All Souls. New Dimensions members found that they were being invited to lunch by members of All Souls and were meeting each other in the mall and throughout the city. At the same time, Bishop Pearson was traveling and speaking around the country two or three weekends a month in order to support his family and the church. The final blow came at summer's end, when tragedy struck the New Dimensions community, and Bishop Pearson learned that his beloved associate minister Jesse Williams was dying of terminal cancer. He knew that there was no way he could sustain his church in Tulsa without Pastor Jesse, and in August he announced that he needed to discontinue his church ministry after more than 25 years.

The New Dimensions community went into mourning as they began to say goodbye to their church and the pastors they love. Bishop Pearson announced that he and his family were planning to become a part of All Souls and he suggested that the members of his congregation do the same. At the time, he made the statement that "All Souls was offering the freshest, most relevant and inclusive religious message in the city" (which I consider an enormous compliment.) A number of New Dimensions members joined All Souls and many more began to attend regularly. New Dimensions' renowned music director, Pastor David Smith came onto All Souls staff and he not only continues to direct the New Dimensions Chorale, he also directs our Children's and Youth Choirs, who are in Washington DC today. Eventually Nicole Ogundare came onto our staff as my Executive Administrative Assistant. As summer ended, the All Souls ministry team had to decide how best to minister to this group of faithful universalists, who we had come to love and care about, and who were now grieving the loss of so much, including their church, their minister of 25 years, and the tragic death of their beloved associate pastor at the age of 42.

Here were people, who like many All Souls members, had been scorned by family and friends for believing in universal salvation, and who were often told that they were heretics and going to hell. They and their children had lost so much, and there were almost no places to go to

church in Tulsa where they could bring their grief and their inclusive theology. Fortunately, many New Dimensions members felt at home here in this church and found here, in our people and principles, a companionship of the spirit.

At the same time, many long time All Souls members had fallen in love with the New Dimensions' members, music and the mixture of people in their church. So, in September, our ministry team, in consultation with the board of trustees, decided to incorporate New Dimensions' music into our 11:30 service as a way to both minister to former New Dimensions members, and also to many of our own members, who I see out in the pews right now. And now, eight months later, we are truly becoming one family.

The whole undertaking has not been without its challenges and controversies. I read several books on the subject and one statistic I read said that when churches make a change in music style it is typical for 16% of congregants to leave. We're not doing anywhere near that bad. Probably the most substantial change that we are working through is that this church has long prided itself on being a place where a person could come with doubts and skepticism about God and religion and be able to freely work through those questions in our worship services. The inclusion of praise music in our second service appears to make certain claims about God and the human relationship with God, and that leaves less room for a person who is a skeptic or agnostic to feel at home in that service. So, we could not have done this if we did not already have a 10:00 service that continues in All Souls traditional style.

The flip-side is that the new style at 11:30 is making room for people, who *do* have a strong belief and relationship with God, to encounter our messages that by design open the door for questions, and make room for an expanded and complex faith. Having the best of both worlds requires "both-and" thinking, and a "win-win" mindset, and a spirit of abundance and generosity that says "at All Souls, there is room enough for all." And deep down, there is a strong sense that we are better together, and even somewhat incomplete without each other.

On Youth Sunday one of our youth told us that she was shocked to hear that anyone would be unsupportive of this, because she said it is completely consistent with everything we have taught her in Sunday school about what this church stands for. On Heritage Sunday one of our most beloved elders, Doe Lockwood, gave a sermon describing the inclusion of New Dimensions members and music as a gift of God's divine grace that has descended onto our church.

I am convinced that all of us, young and old, who stay engaged with the principles and purpose of this church, will continue to find our lives transformed in powerful and important ways. Because our own spiritual and personal growth is inextricably tied to the work we are doing as a

congregation. It is the work of creating community with people of different colors, cultures, classes and creeds. And, in the end, it is a journey that each person has to choose for him or her self.

I have been enjoying getting to know our new members, some of whom have a very different experience of God and Jesus than I have had. Some of these perspectives of the divine have been forged through an American experience shaped over generations amidst the trail of tears, lynching, race riots, Jim Crow and persistent racism. Our church's dialogue has been greatly enriched by the inclusion of such powerful experiences of God and life. And I have also been enjoying the curiosity I have found in people who want to know about what I learned in my four years studying Buddhism in Asia and studying Hinduism in the Ashrams of India.

The next few months and years have the potential to be an incredible period of personal and spiritual growth as we take this inclusive journey together. Do you realize that almost nobody in the world has this opportunity that we have been given? For me it's like Emmy the lemming's slingshot catapulting us over a chasm into potential new worlds of thinking and being. We have an opportunity to grow in ways that people rarely have a chance to do, because nothing quite like what we are creating exists anywhere else.

And Tulsa is a city that has been molded, for better and worse, by its encounter with race and religion. And we are right in the middle of it. But, it's important for us to remember that while we are busy building this catapult of the human spirit we are living on the edge. Living on the edge of our understanding, the edge of possibility, the edge of our culture. It can feel quite tenuous living on this edge. And that is why we need to be able to trust and respect each other. It is why we need a vibrant and varied worship culture. I'll be the first to admit that I am working from a place that is testing the limits of my skill set. And I need all the help and support I can get. The questions we must not be afraid to ask include: What is it that makes you unique? What is it that makes our church unique?

Let us be clear who we really want to serve, to inspire, to learn from and impact in a positive way. We are building out of the lumber of our lives, and out of the power of our principles, an amazing testament to God and the human spirit. Living the purpose and principles of this church is not easy; it never has been. But it is the right and courageous way to live.

These are the days we have been given. May they be many. But more so, may they be meaningful. I love you. Amen.