Making Your Mark

Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Roger D. Jones

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Congregational Meeting Sunday, October 21, 2018

Hymns: #1008, When Our Heart Is in a Holy Place; #86, Blessed Spirit of My Life; #1018, Come and Go with Me. Vocal music duet: The Gift of Love (by H. H. Hopson).

When you think of **legacy**, what comes to mind? For some of us, it might be what impact you leave behind after you have left a job or a career. We might think of our children and grandchildren as our legacy, or the people we have taught, mentored or supported. For others, concern over our legacy could be whether we lived life as best we could by the end of it. We might be reflecting on what we can accomplish with our gifts and in our time on earth. In one specific use, the term legacy relates to the money, property, and other assets we bequeath to people, causes and institutions when we die. This is a legacy of our values and commitments, backed up with resources.

All of these perspectives about legacy resonate with me. And I can think of examples of people in this congregation who embody these perspectives and motivations.

In our Sunday services this fall we are using a theme of *heritage and legacy*. We're looking at our congregation's history and its future, and at our lives and our own legacies.

When talking about legacy, of course, I should mention the high-achievers of the world. If you are a person who is high-achieving, ambitious, or influential, your sense of a legacy might mean the primary accomplishments for which you will be known—in other words, how you make your mark on the world. A famous Boston Unitarian of the nineteenth century said: "Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity." These are the words of an educator, politician and reformer by the name of Horace Mann. Among other endeavors, Mann founded the first public schools in the country. Education, he said, should be available to every child, and their teachers should be professionally trained. Free, non-sectarian education would be crucial for the future of the country. After all, a democracy depends on people who can read and write, learn and talk together, and this depends on education.

Horace Mann became a Member of Congress as well the first head of the first board of education of any state in the U.S. That was in 1837. There are statues of him in several cities around the country. However, as time passes, fewer people know about Horace Mann, except as the name tied to a cute graphic logo of an owl for the insurance company named after him. They may have seen the lighted Horace Mann sign on an office building, but not appreciate his legacy of public education, or his work for women's rights, the abolition of slavery, or compassionate mental health care. He made his mark, even though we may not all know it.

Perhaps what matters is not how we are memorialized for all time, but instead how we live now. Maybe what matters is how we respond to the times in which we live, and how we support the values, causes, people and institutions that matter to us.

"Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity," Mann said. Perhaps this motto was his guide for life, giving him the strength and faith to keep going through the struggles and controversies that arose in his chosen work. Maybe it kept him accountable to his principles and commitments. When Mann passed away in 1859, perhaps he felt *no* shame about the way he'd spent his time on earth. For me, however, his motto remains an intimidating standard. How big a victory does he want me to win? For *all* of humanity? That's a tall order, and it can get me down if I measure my one life by that standard.

This is the problem with looking at history as the work of heroic individuals, as the achievements of only famous people, rather than of ordinary people who were part of larger movements. When we think of our legacy, I believe we need to remember the web of connections in which we live. We need to affirm that we are mutually dependent and interconnected. We need to affirm that every day we can make an important difference on the lives of those around us, even if we are not feeling victorious for all of humanity.

Yet in the U.S. American culture of celebrity and success, it's so tempting to think about making your own mark. Our longing for significance in our lives is real, and it can be manipulated by those who want to sell us something, including their brand of theology. For example, Joel Osteen is a currently famous pastor of an evangelical megachurch in Texas. On television, he's seen by 20 million people every month around the world. In one of Osteen's several best-sellers, he's written this exhortation: "God didn't create you to be average…. You were made to excel. You were made to leave a mark on this generation…. Start [telling yourself] 'I've been chosen, set apart, destined to live in victory.'"

You know, there are academic terms that describe or capture that kind of theology, but I just call it crap. "You were made to set a mark on this generation!" I'm sorry, Joel Osteen, there is not enough real estate for every one of your readers and viewers to build their own mansion like the two that you have. There aren't enough heated garages for every person in the audience to own several expensive cars. Yet Osteen proclaims, "It's God's will for you to live in prosperity instead of poverty."

I can imagine that his advice may be helpful to some folks who need encouragement. Indeed, if there is a person whom his message helps in getting through life or getting through the week, that's good. If there are people that his message helps to *hang in there* when things are tough, then I would not want to begrudge them any of its inspiration.

But saying that "God didn't create you to be average" doesn't make sense. Average means in the middle! Most of us are average by definition. To dangle a *threat* of "being average" in front of us doesn't make sense, and it's not good theology.

Feeling that you are set apart is okay if it means that you have a sense of purpose and calling of your own, and you choose to live it out. But being set apart in the sense that *you* are specially chosen by God to be rich and others are *not*, that makes all of us not set apart, but separated. And we don't need anymore separation in this world or in this country. Osteen's goal of trying to "set your mark on this generation" promotes individualism and isolation rather than connection to the larger good and the larger community.

I wonder, does feeling chosen and special keep you from empathy for those migrants coming from the dangerous conditions in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala? Adults and children are making their way into and across Mexico, mostly on foot. The Mexican government shoots teargas canisters at them. The U.S. President threatens to use military weapons to keep them away, yet most of them are seeking only to make an appeal for asylum, to find a safe place. As migrant parents strive to protect their children from hunger and persecution, as they flee the violence of gangs or the violence of governments, I can't imagine the trauma they've been through. I don't think those people are motivated by a calling to "make their mark" or to excel and be above average. For now, they wish only to survive. They are driven by the courage that comes from desperation.

The risk of thinking you are *chosen*, then, can lead to arrogance and pride, and it crowds out a sense of common humanity. Our Unitarian Universalist heritage provides a different standard, a different way to think of our legacy.

The first UU Principle, the first statement of our association of congregations, says that all human beings are created with equal dignity and worth. Inherent worth—not average worth but full, rich, un-movable worth for everybody.

Each of us might seek a different purpose, hear a different calling, and leave our own legacy. We might end up with different levels of wealth or privilege or good luck, but we start with a basic level of dignity. In our faith tradition, we are destined to remember our dignity. We are called to proclaim it, and to remind others to recognize their dignity and worth—and to extend that recognition to everyone.

Whether or not you leave a mark in history books that will never fade away, you can trust that your presence *can* make a difference--your compassion, kindness and courage will make a difference.

Your generous intentions, words, deeds and gifts can generate ripples of influence far beyond you, far beyond your time and place in history. It can be easy to forget this. It's easy to fall into a longing for a sense of purpose or significance. Yet our first principle says you have *inherent* significance. We all do.

The Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury in the 1960s and 70s was Michael Ramsey. He is remembered as a bold and brave activist, supporting gay rights in the U.K. and opposing racist rule in Rhodesia and South Africa. History proved him right. Even though he was the head of the worldwide Anglican Church, he tried to stay humble, to stay grounded in spiritual practice. One of his means was the practice of gratitude. Ramsey said:

Thankfulness

is a soil in which pride

does not easily grow.[i]

Rather than getting lost while seeking for a special destiny or an above-average legacy to leave, I have a different standard to suggest. How about this: Every day, let's be thankful that we are able to *participate in the progress of love in this world.* We benefit from the ways that others participate in the progress of love, and we can share in that calling. Many of those who have gone before us bequeathed to us their contributions to the progress of love—imagine how much harder human life would be if they hadn't.

In most cases, it's not possible to trace all of the blessings and beauty of the life of a community to any particular individual. Each one of us stands on the shoulders of not *one* other person, but on the shoulders of communities of people. We share a common inheritance from the sacrifice, work, and generous creativity of people we will never be able to name.

Consider *music*, which we often think as the work of a famous individual, a known person. Some composers made their mark while they were alive, and the work of other ones enriched the world well after they were gone. In today's service, both of the solo piano pieces that Ina is playing for us are anonymous works. Who knows who wrote them, who gave them to the world? The prelude was a waltz—anonymous! The piece we will hear later as the offertory comes from the Irish folk tradition. The tune was used about 100 years ago for the song lyrics of "Danny Boy," but the tune is four centuries old. It is the gift of a community and its tradition—a shared legacy.

Later in the service, our closing hymn will be an African American song, "Come and Go with Me (to that Land)." Coming from slavery times, it's likely *not* the work of one writer and singer. It is the shared survival tactic of a whole community. A shared legacy, a poignant example of a legacy that participates in the progress of love in human history.

These community legacies, this inheritance of human inter-connection, suggest for us a spiritual practice. Here is how it might look if you'd like to try it out. It's got a couple of parts. Part one is to take time every day to identify one activity of yours which you can appreciate. Name one way in which you have spoken, given, acted or been present for the progress of love. Then give thanks. Don't worry about a major legacy or a victory for humanity for which we'd make a statue of you, as nice as that might look out on the lawn. Just consider one choice you made, just one more way that you participated in the progress of love in the world.

It could be that moment when you caught yourself being kinder or more generous than you might have wanted to be. It could be the completion of a task or a project, the creation of something new, or stretching yourself in service to something larger than your wishes. It could be the way you affirm human dignity and recognize the worth of every person, or of particular persons who are vulnerable, at risk, or suffering.

It could be the giving of a gift, or the demonstration of patience, which itself is a gift. You may not get a bronze plaque for the efforts and care you put into being a good citizen, friend, or parent—especially no bronze plaque for parenting, so you probably shouldn't hold your breath waiting for one.

So, you are invited—alone or with others in your life—to take some time every day to notice one aspect of your day or of the week in which you hope you have aided the progress of love in the world.

Notice this gift and give thanks. Now the second part. In that same spiritual space, notice one aspect of the day or of the week in which *others* have added to the progress of love in the world, which is the world we all share. Notice this and give thanks for those who add love to the world—individuals and communities, people you know and enjoy and people you don't know, those living now in this world and those who have gone before us.

What we have received from others can remind us of this: what we offer to the progress of love in the world is not lost after we leave the scene. The shared legacies that we leave will become the inheritance of so many people we don't know.

Let us remember that our works of justice and beauty, our deeds of courage and compassion, and our acts of love and generosity remain in the web of life. Our gifts remain held in the web of life that holds us all. Let us be mindful of this, and let us be thankful. Let us respond to the shared call to participate in the progress of love in the world. Amen.

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[i] Quoted in David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (New York, 2015: Random House), 8.