

Online Worship during the Covid-19 Pandemic
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Founders' Day, Sunday, March 29, 2020

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones

Hymns

Hymn #21 "For the Beauty of the Earth"

Hymn #108 "My Life Flows On (How Can I Keep from Singing?)"

Responsive Reading: #468 "We Need One Another," by George E. Odell (revised)

Homily

On March 29 of 1868, seventeen families came together to start a church in Sacramento. They signed Articles of Agreement. They said: "We, the undersigned, do hereby associate ourselves in a body corporate, to be known as the First Unitarian Church of Sacramento." They celebrated the founding with a worship service at the District Courtroom at the corner of 6th and I Streets (one in the morning and one at night). That was exactly 152 years ago, today. So I'd like to wish you a Happy Founders' Day.

It was so long ago when this church began.

In 1868, Queen Victoria was ruling over the British Empire. The United States was recovering from a devastating Civil War. In the Sacramento area, the population was rising as a result of the Gold Rush, which had begun in 1849. There was growth in the banking and railroad industries, among other industries. Many families moved here from the East, especially New Englanders, including religious liberals. Our original Unitarian ancestors included lawyers, teachers, skilled laborers, engineers, homemakers, doctors and merchants.

I wonder. I wonder what it would be like if you were able to travel back in time and speak to those Unitarian ancestors in 1868. What if you could tell them how much change would be taking place in the next 152 years! If you could predict for them that right now, on this day, nearly 300 people---adults, youth and children--would be gathering for a Sunday morning service but from widely distant and separate locations. Tell them that we would be holding a service through an electronic device with sound and with live-action pictures, in color! Perhaps they wouldn't believe you, and they'd send you back to 2020 with your hat in your hand.

Actually, if you had gone back only to 1920 and made that same prediction, not many folks would have believed you. However, if you had told those ancestors that our congregation would be confronting a disaster, a public health crisis, they might have been able to relate. Such ordeals would be fresh in the memories of many of the previous generations.

The founders of this church would have known that in 1850 a cholera outbreak had hit Sacramento, taking several hundred lives, including those of 17 medical providers. Then came the great fire of 1852, destroying six million to ten million dollars' worth of property. Ten years later was the Great Flood of 1862. *Ten feet of rain* fell over three months in California, Oregon,

and Nevada. Sacramento streets were inundated, to say the least, and some western towns were totally wiped out in the disaster.

Thus it was with a deep awareness of the precarious existence of life that this church was formed. Just five years after our founding, in the financial panic of 1873, major banks across the country failed. In the four-year economic depression which followed the panic, wealth declined, and jobs were lost. As a matter of fact, there would be a series of such panics in this country until the Great Depression Era of the 1930s, when federal New Deal legislation provided for federal deposit insurance, for government regulation of banks, railroads, and the stock market, and for Social Security Insurance. In addition to enduring dramatic upheavals of the national economy, our church ancestors lived through global military conflicts.

From its founding years, this congregation rented space for meetings and worship services until 1915, when we constructed and owned our own building in the Midtown neighborhood. Two years later the United States entered the First World War, a pointless and ruinous global conflict. The war ended in November of 1918, having decimated a generation of young men around the world.

Less than two decades later came another world war, the Second World War. In 2007, Ken Burns and Lynn Novick produced “The War,” a 15-hour documentary about it. To show the impact of the war on ordinary lives, they focused on the stories of people and families in four American cities or towns. Sacramento was one of them.

One impact of the war was the unjust internment of Japanese American families. In Sacramento and other cities, Americans of Japanese descent lost their homes, businesses and personal freedoms. I have not read how this congregation regarded that national injustice—whether we opposed it, went along with it, or actively supported it. But I did learn that in 1944, our minister Arthur Foote preached four sermons in a series about “race in the modern world.” Reverend Foote “discussed racist epidemics [his term], not only in Nazi Germany but in America against Jews, African Americans, and Japanese Americans.”

Our printed congregational history book says: “The war years would disturb the personal lives of church members so [much] that four years would pass before anything resembling normality would come.” Of course, as we face the pandemic of Covid-19, as we stay home or keep our social distance outside, we long for something resembling normality to come back. Oh, when can we worship, have a meeting, celebrate? When can we hug? In the past few weeks, I’ve been thinking back on people alive during that war. In so many cities of so many nations, those were years of danger and uncertainty. It was an ordeal of anxiety.

If they were not away in the military, however, the Sacramento Unitarians of the 1940s could gather for services and Sunday School, for dinners, meetings and fundraisers, for dances and concerts. During their time of crisis, unlike ours today, they could embrace one another. They could hug. And surely, they needed to. As news came in about the shifting fortunes of the war, they would have lived with uncertainty about an Allied victory. As reports came in of local men lost in battle, hearts broke repeatedly—the hearts of parents, classmates, children and spouses. People needed to embrace one another.

California’s Governor, Gavin Newsom, has provided press conferences nearly every day of the week in the last several weeks, announcing limitations and closures and other public health measures in this epidemic. He talks about what we need to do “to meet this moment.” That’s his

refrain—how all of us, as individuals, communities, and congregations can find the courage and wisdom to meet this moment. This is why we are here. That is why we exist as a congregation. The purpose of our existence as a congregation is to embody our values in rough times as well as easier times. We are here to meet this moment, in all the ways we are able to do so. *We come together to deepen our lives and to be a force for healing in the world.* That is our mission.

Since March of 1868, generations of Unitarians came together in this region, for worship, compassion and service. They sometimes made mistakes; our ancestors were not perfect at all. However, they experienced social disasters and natural ones, and they tried to respond to them. They lived with uncertainty and anxiety, yet they tried to stay true to their values. I am sure that, in every generation, new people joined this congregation to deepen their lives, nourish their spirits, and enjoy fellowship. Yet what drew them to do that here, in this congregation, was a sense of shared values. This is why we are here.

This is why we have always been here—to meet our challenges with shared values of compassion and mutual support, shared actions of generosity and service, and a shared spirit of connection and love.

Today let us remember our Sacramento Unitarian ancestors. Today let us also remember that how we respond in these times will shape the ways that we will become the ancestors of later generations of Unitarian Universalists. They will look back on this pandemic, and look back on us, as their ancestors.

In these trying times of ours, let us continue to come together to deepen our lives and be a force for healing in the world. In these times, let us be grateful that we are here together. For this gift and for every good gift, let us give thanks. Amen.