

# Oberlin Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

## “Are We a Team?”



**Sunday, October 2**  
**Cal Frye, service leader**  
**Katie Cross, pianist**  
**Andy Frantz**  
**Chelsea Cross, violin**

## **Gathering Music**

*#188, Come, Come, Whoever You Are*

## **Welcome and Announcements**

**Lighting the Chalice**, #473, *Love is the Spirit of this Church*

**Opening Song**: #360, *Here We Have Gathered*

## **Story For All Ages,**

A story of teamwork and struggle.

Children Leave for Classes

*#413, Go, Now, in Peace*

**Reading**, #436, *We Come to This Time and This Place*

## **Joys and Concerns**

**Offertory**: The Santa Elena Project of Accompaniment

Music, Andy Frantz

**Homily**, Cal Frye, **"Are We a Team?"**

**Closing Song**: #145, *As Tranquil Streams*

**Closing Words**, (Erik Walker Wikstrom)

**Extinguishing the Chalice**, (Kenneth R. Warren)

**Postlude**, *Bouree in G Major* by J.S. Bach

Chelsea and Katie Cross

## Gathering Music

*#188, Come, Come, Whoever You Are*<sup>1</sup>

## Welcome and Announcements

Welcome, everyone, to the Oberlin Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. Whomever you are, where ever you have come from, whomever you love, we welcome you. I am Cal Frye, this morning's service leader, and I am a member of this Fellowship. We are glad to have you with us this morning.

I'd like to draw your attention to the announcements page, the pink sheet, for events of the week and the service next week. If you didn't pick up one with your program, you can find copies on the table behind you. Other announcements may be found on bulletin board in the lobby, and I encourage you to look these over following the service during our coffee hour.

In addition to the printed announcements and those listed here, I have the following special announcements:

I hope you will join us for next Sunday's service on Same Sex Marriage with Robert Taylor as our guest speaker.

Again, I bid you welcome. Let our service begin.

## Lighting the Chalice, #473, *Love is the Spirit of this Church*

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.

- James Vila Blake (UU)

## Opening Song: #360, *Here We Have Gathered*

1. Here we have gathered, gathered side by side.  
Circle of kinship, come and step inside!  
May all who seek here find a kindly word;  
May all who speak here feel they have been heard.  
Sing now together, this our hearts' own song.

2. Here we have gathered, called to celebrate  
Days of our lifetime, matters small and great;

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<sup>1</sup> Items referenced by a number are from the UU Hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition*, 1993, Beacon Press, Boston, and will not be otherwise noted further.

We of all ages, women, children, men,  
Infants and sages, sharing what we can.  
Sing now together this, our hearts' own song.

3. Life has its battles, sorrows and regret:  
But in the shadows, let us not forget:  
We who now gather know each other's pain;  
Kindness can heal us; as we give, we gain.  
Sing now in friendship, this our hearts' own song.

**Story For All Ages,**

Our story this morning is one of teamwork and struggle. I invite the children, or your inner children, to come up front as I share the story of Anansi, the Spider.<sup>2</sup>

Anansi is “spider” to the Ashanti people.  
In Ashanti land, people love this story of Kwaku Anansi.  
Time was, Anansi had six children...

The first was called See Trouble, and had the gift of seeing trouble a long way off.  
The second was Road Builder.  
Thirsty child was River Drinker.

Next was Game Skinner.  
Another child was Stone Thrower,  
and the last was Cushion, who was very soft.  
All were good children of Anansi.

One time Anansi went a long way from home.  
Far from home.

Anansi got lost, and fell into trouble.

Back home was See Trouble.  
“Anansi is in danger!”  
See Trouble knew it quickly, and told those other children.

Road Builder said, “follow me!”

Off Road Builder went, making a road.

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<sup>2</sup> *Anansi The Spider: A Tale From the Ashanti*, 1972, Gerald McDermott, Henry Holt & Co, New York.  
Words changed to be explicitly gender-neutral.

They went fast, those six children,  
gone to help Anansi.

Where is Anansi now?

“Fish has swallowed Anansi!”

“Anansi is inside Fish!”

River Drinker took a big drink.

No more river.

Then Game Skinner helped Anansi.

That one split open Fish.

More trouble came, right then.

It was Falcon took Anansi up in the Sky.

“Quick now, Stone Thrower!”

The stone hit Falcon.

Anansi fell through the sky.

Now Cushion ran to help Anansi.

Very soft, Anansi came down.

They were very happy, that spider family.

All home again that night, Kwaku Anansi found a thing in the forest.

“What is this? A great globe of light?”

“O mysterious and beautiful! I shall give this to my child,” said Anansi, “To the one who rescued me!”

“But which child of six... Which deserves the prize?”

“Nyame, can you help me? O Nyame!” called Anansi.

For Ashanti people, Nyame is The God of All Things.

Anansi asked this of Nyame:

“Please hold the beautiful globe of light until I know which child of mine should have it for their own.”

And so they tried to decide which among them deserved the prize. They tried, but they could not decide. They argued all night. Nyame saw this. The God of All Things took the beautiful white light up into the sky.

Nyame keeps it there for all to see. It is still there. It will always be there. It is there tonight. [end]

### Children Leave for Classes

*#413, Go, Now, in Peace*

### **Reading**, #436, *We Come to This Time and This Place*

*I invite you to read with me #436, We Come to This Time and This Place. I'll read the parts in blue, yours are those in white:*

*We come to this time and this place:*

*To rediscover the wondrous gift of free religious community*

*To renew our faith in the holiness, goodness,  
and beauty of life;*

*To reaffirm the way of the open mind and full heart;*

*To rekindle the flame of memory and hope; and*

*To reclaim the vision of an earth made fair,  
with all her people one.*

### **Joys and Concerns**

As part of our free religious community, we share both our joys and concerns each week. I invite you as you are moved to come forward and light a candle to mark that you would share with us this morning. Please remember to state your name as you do so.

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As is our custom, I light one further candle to honor those joys or sorrows held in the silence of our hearts.

### **Offertory:** The Santa Elena Project of Accompaniment

Music, Andy Frantz & Rob Branch

For the month of October, we are collecting your offering for the Santa Elena Project of Accompaniment, working for human rights in Guatemala. More details on their work will be presented as part of the service on Sunday, October 16. If you have a pledge check for the Fellowship this morning, please make sure it is clearly marked.

I've asked Andy and Rob to improvise something this morning, as a musical illustration of teamwork.

**Homily, Cal Frye, "Are We a Team?"**

"Come again, please, come again,  
Whoever you are.  
Religious, infidel, heretic or pagan.  
Even if you promised a hundred times  
And a hundred times you broke your promise,  
This door is not the door  
Of hopelessness and frustration.  
This door is open for everybody.  
Come, come as you are."

This poem was probably not written by the poet Rumi, but was found in the quatrains of his Persian contemporary Bâbâ Afdal al-Din Kashani, who died in 1274--a year after Rumi. Perhaps even this is merely a retelling of a poem dating centuries earlier. The translation in our hymnal may be more poetic, but it doesn't really matter who said these words, particularly as they continue to speak to us nearly a thousand years after they were written.<sup>3</sup>

"Come, yet again come, come as you are." Ours is certainly a funny church. About a year ago I gave a sermon from this pulpit asking the question, "How does an atheist go to church?" It is said against us that Unitarian Universalism is the church where you can "believe anything you like" and while that's not entirely true, we harbor Christians, Pagans, Buddhists, and even godless heathen atheists in our midst easily enough to make the average Baptist scoff at our theology.

We say ours is a church "of deeds, not creeds," and there are many deeds performed by members of this Fellowship and by UUs across the country that are praiseworthy and inspirational. But are good deeds enough to make us a church? What the Wizard of Oz called "good deed doers" can be found in many religious and civic organizations besides ours, whether they hold testimonials or no. Are there particular deeds that would identify Unitarian Universalists from among those of other, more traditional

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<sup>3</sup> Shaykh Faraz Rabbani, SunniPath, the online Islamic Academy, [http://qa.sunnipath.com/issue\\_view.asp?id=11915](http://qa.sunnipath.com/issue_view.asp?id=11915) accessed 10/02/11

beliefs? Besides forming and joining committees, that is? If not creeds nor deeds, just what is it that holds Unitarian Universalists together and brings us here Sunday mornings? What is it that takes us beyond a gathering of people interested in discussing public education, or immigration, or voter rights, or vegetarianism, or any other topic you could hear about on a given Tuesday evening here in Oberlin? What is it that takes us from all those people we welcome through our doors at the beginning of the service and makes us something more, a team, a community, a fellowship? When I run into a puzzle like that one, I start reading. After all, my office has been in one library or another for decades, now.

Besides reading dead trees, there are online resources. While digging through the UUA web site one day, I happened to stumble upon a set of lectures given back in 2000 by Rev. Alice Blair Wesley in UU churches outside of Boston.<sup>4</sup> Rev. Wesley chose to speak on “The Spirit and the Promise of Our Covenant.” I had by then encountered several statements that UU theology, to the extent that we can say there is such a thing, is not creedal, but “covenantal,” so this topic caught my eye and I began to read. To bring the search full circle, these lectures have also been reprinted in a book by the Meadville-Lombard Theological School. I’m not going to give you all six lectures this morning, but I found one story she related to me very illuminating.

Interesting word, “covenant.” In its religious sense, it means “a solemn agreement between the members of a church to act together in harmony...<sup>5</sup>” but there are other instances where you’ll find this word. The Bible not only mentions the covenant God made with Noah, for example, regarding floods, but of course the whole work is about the relationship between humans and the divine and the promises each made to the other. Indeed, we could read the word “Testament” as being synonymous with “Covenant” in this meaning.

As Unitarian Universalists, we’re not too sure how we want to stand with that covenant of the Old and New Testaments; we listened too well to Emerson when he said, “Make your own Bible.” The word has an old-fashioned flavor, and many of us find its very religiosity a foreign and unpleasant spice. But today’s story begins long before Emerson...

Rev. Wesley chose to give her first lecture in the church in Dedham, Massachusetts, now a suburb southwest of Boston. When the town was incorporated in 1636, the residents wanted to name it Contentment, but they were overruled by the Massachusetts General

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<sup>4</sup> Rev Alice Blair Wesley, The Minns Lectures, 2000 series. Available online at <http://minnslectures.org/archive/wesley/wesley.htm>, accessed 10/02/11. I paraphrase much from the first lecture, with references from later ones.

Also available as a book, *Our Covenant*, 2000, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago.

<sup>5</sup> Dictionary.com online definition

Court. At the first public meeting on August 15, 1636, eighteen men signed the town covenant. There's that word yet again! They swore that they would "in the fear and reverence of our Almighty God, mutually and severally promise amongst ourselves and each to profess and practice one truth according to that most perfect rule, the foundation whereof is ever lasting love."<sup>6</sup>

They also agreed that "we shall by all means labor to keep off from us all such as are contrary minded, and receive only such unto us as may be probably of one heart with us, [and such] as that we either know or may well and truly be informed to walk in a peaceable conversation with all meekness of spirit, [this] for the edification of each other in the knowledge and faith of the Lord Jesus..." The covenant also stipulated that if differences were to arise between townsmen, they would seek arbitration for resolution and each would pay his fair share for the common good. That's not their *church* covenant, mind you, just that of the town, in those days before we recognized the value of the separation of church and state.

By 1637, there were about 30 families in Dedham, all recently settled there. They had come from all over England, and some had lived elsewhere in New England before they were given the grant of the township. With this grant, this motley collection of brave families had to design a government, divide up land for crops, for grazing, and for homes and gardens. Once the buildings were up, their furnishings unpacked, and they began to settle in, they began to think of founding a church. But they were still pretty much strangers to each other at this time. Unlike Ananzi's children, these townspeople did not grow up together, nor did they have neatly assigned roles to play in their story. Those they had to discover and invent as they went along.

Yet their relative isolation and the rigors of life on the frontier meant that they were immediately far more reliant on each other than we have any good understanding. As our song said, "Here we have gathered, gathered side by side. Circle of kinship, come and step inside!" But no, these folks didn't rush in to build a church together. They were a free-thinking cantankerous lot, refugees of the oppressions of the established Church of England back home, and they didn't really know each other on that deeper level at all. Yet they came, though they may have broken their vows a thousand times, again they came.

And they began a series of weekly neighborhood meetings, as their church records relate, "lovingly to discourse and consult together. . . and prepare for spiritual communion in a church society, \* \* \* that we might be further acquainted with the (spiritual) tempers and guifts of one an other." Meetings were held every Thursday "at

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<sup>6</sup> Wikipedia, "Dedham, Massachusetts," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dedham,\\_Massachusetts](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dedham,_Massachusetts) as accessed 10/02/11

several houses in order," in rotation. Anybody in town who wanted was welcome to attend. "May all who speak here feel they have been heard."

John Allin wrote "a breife history" of the founding into the first 24 pages of the Dedham First Church Records, Book I<sup>7</sup>. In his first paragraph he says he wrote this history for us. He wrote "for future ages to make use of in any case that may occur wherein light may be fetched from any examples of things past, no way intending hereby to bind the co'science of any to walke by this patterne or to approve of the practise of the Church further than it may appear to be according to the rule of the gospell."

They adopted a few simple rules for their meetings. Rule 1: They would decide before leaving each meeting what question to discuss next week. That way people were more apt to share considered thoughts. Rule 2: Each week the host of the house would begin, speaking to the agreed upon question. Then everyone else could speak by turns. All individuals could, as they chose, speak to the question, or raise a closely related question and speak to that, or state any objections or doubts concerning what any others had said, "so it were humbly & with a teachable hart not with any mind of cavilling or contradicting." In other words, Rule 3 was: Here we speak our own understandings or doubts. No arguing all night over who among them deserved the prize of being right. The record reports that all their "reasonings" were "very peaceable, loving, & tender, much to edification."

The account in the Dedham Church record lists the questions the people in 1637 - not yet a church - discussed at their weekly meetings, which continued a whole year, one event really, week following week from the winter season of 1637 until some time after the church was founded in November of 1638. Several features of this event are just intriguing. For instance, we all know the New England colonists were a "people of the Book," the Bible. But they did not begin to talk about a church by talking about the Bible. By way of laying a basis for discussion of the church, they began by addressing a question of common sense or natural law. I quote, "For the subject of theses disputes or conferences divers meetings att first were spent about questions as pertayned to the just, peaceable & comfortable proceeding in the civill society \*\*."

In a word, a fundamental concern of a free church is for the justice, the peace, the laws and regulations -the conditions of any healthy free society. There in the wilderness these people, having just come from the anguish of European society in the 1600s, knew there can be no peaceably functioning free church - in the long term - if it is not set within a larger society where concerns for justice, peace and reasonable laws can be freely and

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<sup>7</sup> as quoted by Rev. Wesley in her lectures. All quotes from the Dedham First Church records are from Rev. Wesley. Indeed, several paragraphs in this section are paraphrased (or plagiarized) directly from Rev. Wesley's lectures here.

effectively voiced, without suppression. And that beginning concern for the conditions of the larger society always remained in the background of the New England free church, and could very readily, at any time, spring to the foreground if occasion warranted.

In England, in the decades before the 1630s, there had been no strong, clear, authentic voices for justice, peace and reasonable laws coming from the established State church, as these New Englanders understood things. Furthermore, every effort of lay people like themselves to get going even quasi-church meetings to discuss such matters - in their homes or in lawyers' professional organizations or in the marketplace - had been systematically thwarted and suppressed. For just such meetings as they were now having in Dedham, people had been fined, jailed, exiled, whipped and even hanged. So, they talked first about the conditions of a good society in general. But the author of the record, John Allin, wrote down no details of their "divers meetings" on this broad subject, perhaps because of the danger that, even out here in the wilderness, 3000 nautical miles from England, a written record could fall into the hands of an unfriendly agent of the king.

Anyhow, after much general talk about "civill society," they began to edge toward talk about a church. Their first question on this subject was: Here we are, not presently members of any church. We don't know each other well, religiously. Are we qualified to "assemble together. . . [and] confer" like this? Their answer: We are if, "in the judgement of charity," we seem to be and think we are acting out of [in our terms] genuinely deep, religious love.

Next question: Well, if we can meet like this, just as neighbors, isn't this enough? Maybe we don't need a church. Their answer: No, this is too casual. We are more than neighbors together. If we really want to live in the ways of our deepest love, then we must intentionally form a much deeper community of love. "The spiritual condition of [even deeply loving people] is such as stand in need of all instituted [aids] for the repaire of the [spirit] and edification of the [whole] body of [the church.]" And besides, others in the larger society need the example of love which a free church will publicly show forth. Otherwise, others might not be drawn to the life of effective love, or enjoy the benefits of justice, peace and so on - in "civill society" which the free church will care about and speak out for. My point is they understood the role of the church as filling needs of both the members and the larger community.

Quite a few references to the Bible came into their later discussions, precisely when they got into issues of authority inside the church. For they read the Bible with sociological and political eyes. But what they were doing with reference to Bible stories, is just what I am doing right now. They were looking back in time to earlier eras of reform in the

records of great free church tradition, to see how things were done back then, and whether those ways made sense to them in their own times.

These folks' central conclusion, from all these weeks of discussion, was this: Members of their new free church should be joined in a covenant of religious loyalty to the spirit of love. And once the members were joined in a covenant, of their own writing and signing, the member's loyalty in the church should be only to the spirit of love, working in their own hearts and minds. No one - not the Governor, not the General Court, not even members of other similarly covenanted churches, would have any authority in the local free church. This is the essence of teamwork, of people drawn together by a common bond, not merely assembled by convenience. They were improvising together, making it up as they went along, honoring tradition while refusing to be bound by it.

For any who might suppose our 17th century free church ancestors talked mostly about original sin, predestination and hellfire, Rev. Wesley reports not one of those topics is even once mentioned in the record of the founding of the Dedham Church. The document describes these discussions of 1637-38 and the talk, talk, talk they engaged in, at each step of the way to the founding, and on to their first reception of new members after the founding, and on to their first election of Officers, after which they ordained two of their own members as Pastor and Elder.

In the years since that time, Dedham, Massachusetts bucked the state-church authority of Massachusetts and helped establish the Congregational Churches as independent bodies; helped lead the transformation of those Congregationalists into Unitarians, and by unanimous vote, authorized the first taxpayer-funded public school in America<sup>8</sup>. The tradition of liberal religion goes far back, and remains founded on this notion of independent congregations, members joined together willingly and in love to sort out as best they can the problems of their age. As strangers they came together, forgave each other those broken vows, and in a caravan of hope set out to build a community.

In the records of the founding of the Dedham Church, there is much use of the words: reason, reasons, reasoned, reasoning, deliberation, make trial of, clearing, cleared up, encouragement, advice, advise, counsel, agree, agreed, agreement, approbation, liberty, liberties and promising. There is also repeated use of the words: sweet, comfort, help and brotherly. But by far the most commonly used words in this written history are: affection, affections, affectionately, embrace and love, loving, lovingly. Why? Because then and now and for as long as human history lasts - when all is said and done, done and said some more - the integrity of the free church comes down to our loyalty to the spirit of love at work in the hearts and minds of the local

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<sup>8</sup> Wikipedia, "Dedham, Massachusetts," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dedham,\\_Massachusetts](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dedham,_Massachusetts) as accessed 10/02/11

members. The people who founded First Church, Dedham knew so and clearly said so, and that is why we still say together, so often in UU churches now, their covenant:

Love is the doctrine of this church,  
 The quest of truth is its sacrament,  
 And service is its prayer.  
 To dwell together in peace,  
 To seek knowledge in freedom,  
 To serve human need,  
 To the end that all souls shall grow into harmony with the Divine -  
 Thus do we covenant with each other and with God.

May we long continue to say so, and understand deeply what we are saying in the liberal free churches these people founded.

**Closing Song:** #145, *As Tranquil Streams*

As tranquil streams that meet and merge  
 and flow as one to seek the sea,  
 Our kindred hearts and minds unite  
 to build a church that shall be free.

Free from the bonds that bind the mind  
 to narrow thought and lifeless creed,  
 Free from a social code that fails  
 to meet the cause of human need.

A freedom that reveres the past but trusts  
 the dawning future more,  
 And bids the soul, in search of truth,  
 adventure boldly and explore.

Prophetic church the future waits  
 your liberating ministry,  
 Go forward in the power of love, proclaim  
 the truth that makes us free.

**Closing Words,** (Erik Walker Wikstrom<sup>9</sup>)

If you are who you were, we have failed

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<sup>9</sup> Erik Walker Wikstrom, *Closing Words*, <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/closings/submissions/142730.shtml> as accessed 10/02/11

If you are who you were, and if the person next to you is who he or she was, if none of us has changed since the day we came in here—we have failed.

The purpose of this community—of any church, temple, zendo, mosque—is to help its people grow.

We do this through encounters with the unknown—in ourselves, in one another, in “The Other”—whoever that might be for us, however hard that might be—because these encounters have many gifts to offer, and we have much to learn from working together.

So may you go forth from here this morning not who you were, but who you could be.

So may we all.

**Extinguishing the Chalice**, (Kenneth R. Warren<sup>10</sup>)

May the love that is the doctrine of this church  
be also the strength and the spirit of this congregation  
and of our individual lives.

**Postlude**, *Bouree in G Major* by J.S. Bach  
Chelsea and Katie Cross

*Notes following the service:*

*I'm not sure how we ran through the opening material quite so fast. This was a 40, maybe 45 minute service, with the homily starting about 20 after. Perhaps we started the gathering music a bit too early, but certainly the reading could have been a bit longer, and/or an additional reading or hymn, perhaps both, could have been added here.*

*Also, I noted partway through the service I had inadvertently placed Joys and Concerns after the Story for All Ages, and so the children were not present for J&C. Some appreciate this, others feel they should be invited to share their thoughts as well. It was not my intent this time to exclude them.*

*Otherwise, it seems to have been received well. I invite additional feedback.*

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<sup>10</sup> Kenneth R. Warren, *Closing Words*, <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/closings/submissions/6022.shtml> as accessed 10/02/11