Looking in the Mirror
September 18, 2016

Reading: To A Louse (Robert Burns)

Our reading this morning is from the Gospel According to Robert Burns, the much loved 18th century Scottish poet.

In his poem, To A Louse, the narrator notices an upper class lady in church, with a louse that is roving, unnoticed by her, around in her bonnet. The poet chastises the louse for not realizing how important the lady is, and then reflects that, to a louse, we are all equal prey and that we would be disabused of our pretensions if we were to see ourselves through each other’s eyes.

[In Scottish dialect, if possible.]

“O wad some Pow’r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ither see us!
It wad frae mony a blunder free us ....”

“And would some Power give us the gift
To see ourselves as others see us!
It would from many a blunder free us ....”

Here ends the reading.

Homily (Part I): Looking in the Mirror

I

John: “Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who’s the fairest one of all?”
Chris: “I don’t know who, but it sure ain’t you!”
OK. OK. I know. You don’t have to rub it in.

When I look in the mirror, I can see with my own two eyes that I’m not the fairest one of all.

I see a face—my own face—looking back at me. A face that’s not the same one that looked back at me fifty or twenty or five years ago but, nonetheless, is still my face. A face that’s changed so gradually day to day and so much over the years.

Reflected in the mirror, I see a person who isn’t and yet, in some ways, still is the same person who looked at himself in the mirror yesterday and the day before, the year before, and so many decades before as a young man and child.

I see a face that was once young and no longer is.
I see hair that has turned from dark brown to gray.
I see a brow that is more and more furrowed.
I see tiny wrinkles around the corners of my eyes that I’m pretty sure weren’t always there.

When I look in the mirror, I longer see the pimples that were such an embarrassment when I was a teenager and an even worse embarrassment when I was a thirty- and forty-something year old.

When I look in the mirror, I still see the same two blue eyes that have looked back at me and looked out at the world for the past sixty-five years.
I see myself as I am now. I see myself as I was. And, every now and then, I see myself as I may be.

II
When I look in the mirror, I see myself—my face, my skin, my hair, my ears and nose, my mouth and tongue and teeth. But, some days, I also see something more, something deeper, something behind and beyond the face that’s looking back at me.
I see my self.
I see who I was and who I really am—deep down in my heart and bones. I see the real me that’s not just skin deep.
I see the kindness and love that I’ve shared and the kindness and love that I’ve withheld.
I see the courage and the fear within my heart.
I see scars that are invisible to the naked eye—scars that bear witness to deep wounds but also to healing.
I struggle to see my “inner beauty.”
It’s easier for me to see my “warts,” but I know I don’t see them all because although mirrors are reflections of ourselves we always see our reflection through the “mirror” of our own eyes and the “prism” of our “mind’s eye.”
I see myself as I long to be and I see myself as I actually am, which, even at my best, is always so far short of who I long to be.

III
What do you see when you look in the mirror?
What would we see if we looked in the mirror?
What would the “magic” mirror of discernment tell us about who and what we are as individuals, as members of this religious community, and as a religious community?
Let’s take a look. Let’s see what we can see. Let’s discover what we can discover about the “heart and soul” of this community and, in the process, about our own hearts and souls as well.

Homily (Part II): Who Are We

IV
Who are we? Who are we as members and friends of this religious community? Who and what are we together?
What do we see when we look in the mirror at ourselves and at this community? What can’t we see? What don’t we want to see?
There isn’t—and can’t—be one, single “right” or “wrong” answer to these questions because even when we’re all looking at the reflection of one object, one thing, one person, one group of people, one community in the mirror we see that object, that person, that community through different eyes—through the lens of our own values, our own experience, our own hopes and dreams.
And yet, there are some things that I think can be said about who and what we are—some things that are more or less objective “facts” and others that are subjective (and debatable) opinions that constitute one truth, but not the only or complete truth about who and what we are.

V
Let’s start with the simple “facts.”

We are Unitarian Universalists. And that means something, even though it’s often hard for us to say exactly what that means and it doesn’t mean the same thing for each and every person who identifies herself as a Unitarian Universalist.

We are the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Raleigh. And that means something, even though we’re not sure if we should call ourselves a church, a congregation, a fellowship, a liberal religious community, a spiritual community, a refuge from religion, a gathering of like-minded people, or a bunch of different kinds of birds that just happen to be flocking together in one tree.

We are a not-for-profit corporation organized under the laws of North Carolina and a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) entity organized for religious (yes, I said “religious”) purposes. But we’re more than a corporation and bylaws.

We are a member of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. And that means something. It means that we’re not alone, that we’re part of something that is much larger than just ourselves, that we are bound, in covenant, with more than a thousand Unitarian Universalist congregations and hundreds of thousands of Unitarian Universalists across the United States.

We are, by Unitarian Universalist standards, a large congregation. And that means something even though some of us wish we weren’t or deny that we are a large congregation—even though we sometimes think and act as if we were a small, lay-led fellowship and struggle to do the things that we need to do to make our structure, programs, staffing, and budget better “fit” our size.

Although we can quibble—and we do like to quibble—about the “official” or “real” size of our membership, the truth is that there are at least 500 to 600 adults who participate to a greater or lesser extent in the life of this congregation, 500 newcomers that walk through our doors each year, and more than 200 children and youth who are also a part of this community. And that makes us the 42nd largest UU congregation in the United States.

VI

What else to we know (or at least think we know) about ourselves?

We know that 9 out of 10 of us have a bachelors, masters, professional, or doctoral degree—which, even if we don’t intend it, can make it hard for those who have less formal education to feel at home here.

We know that although the complexion of the congregation has changed so much within the past two or three years including more and more people of color and we want to be more racially and ethnically diverse, we’re still about 90% white.

We know that although we explicitly welcome persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or gender queer, about 90% of us are straight.

We know that although we’re seeing more and more college students, young adults, and families with young children or teens, about a third of us are age 65 or older and four-fifths of us are at least 35 years old.

We know that although scores of newcomers join the Fellowship every year, almost half of us have been members of UUFR for at least 10 years.

We know that the median household income of members and friends is at least $75,000 per year—well above the median income for people living in Wake County—and that one in
every eight of us have incomes of more than $125,000 per year but that the annual income of one-tenth of our members and friends is less than $25,000.

We know that we depend on the generosity of a relatively small percentage of our membership and that there are more than 100 member and friend households who do not provide any financial support for the Fellowship.

We know that between a third and half of Fellowship members and friends participate in Fellowship programs and activities less than once a month.

We know that at as many as two-thirds of our members and friends have felt, and may still feel, that we lack a sense of shared mission or purpose.

We know that we have been and continue to be a visible presence, voice, and force for social justice in Raleigh and North Carolina.

We know that although we are theologically diverse, we’re not always as accepting of theological diversity as we should be.

We know that although we can be distrustful of authority, overly-critical, opinionated, and sometimes downright cantankerous, there’s also a deep, deep well of kindness, compassion, and love within our hearts.

Who are we?

We are all of these things and so, so much more.

Homily (Part III): We Is More Than Us

VII

Who are we?

Well, to paraphrase former President Bill Clinton, it depends on your definition of “we.”

As my sixth-grade teacher, Mrs. Billingslea, taught us: “We” is the first person, plural pronoun that two or more persons use to refer to themselves as a subject rather than an object: as in “We are going to the park” or “We are Americans” or “We are happy or sad or angry or scared.”

When we say “we,” what we say about us will almost never be true for all of us or be true in exactly the same way for all of us. And yet, it’s important for us to understand and say who and what “we” are—not simply who I am and who you are, but who we are together—the ways we’re alike and the ways we’re different.

It’s important for us to understand what it is that makes us “us,” what distinguishes or separates us from them but also how “we” and “they” are alike.

Sometimes I’m afraid that Unitarian Universalists place so much emphasis on individuality and individual freedom and autonomy that we think and act as if there is only “I” and forget that there is also “we.”

True community, though, is always about “we,” not just “me.” It’s about an “us” that is greater than the sum of all of its individual parts. It’s about an “us” that is more than just the lowest common denominator of what unites individuals as a community. It’s about an “us” that includes not only those who are here now, but those who aren’t here, those have gone before, and those who will come.

Who are we?

“We are mothers of courage and fathers of time, we are daughters of dust and the sons of great visions. We’re sisters of mercy and brothers of love, lovers of life and seekers of truth.
We’re keepers of faith and makers of peace. We’re our grandmothers’ prayers and our grandfathers’ dreamings. We’re the wisdom of ages and the spirit of God.”

_Amen._