

Moving Yet Again©
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet
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The origination of this Fellowship can be traced back to the late 1950's. In the very beginning, a small group of people would gather together in one another's homes. The idea, the dream, of someday owning land and having a building arose just a few years after the group began meeting. In the mid-60's land was purchased on Sourdough Ridge but no building was ever constructed. Meetings of the Fellowship were held in people's homes until 1977. In that year a room in the Montana Power Company building became the new Sunday gathering space. But the Montana Power Company building didn't feel like a home. And there were concerns about meeting in the building of a company that seemed to hold values that were incongruent with the values held by many in the Fellowship. After a short time Sunday gatherings were moved back into people's homes. In total, Sunday gatherings were held in people's homes for more than twenty years. Eventually another congregation agreed to share its building with the Fellowship. In 1982 UUFB began holding Sunday services at Pilgrim Congregational United Church of Christ. Services were held at Pilgrim twice a month for the next ten years—twice a month except during the summer. In 1992 a third monthly service was added, this one at Beall Park. The following year weekly services began, still not year-round however. Pilgrim Congregational remained this Fellowship's consistent meeting place for about seventeen years. As the twentieth century was drawing to a close the Fellowship began a period of wandering. From 1999 to 2003 the Fellowship met in four different locations, the Emerson Cultural Center, St. James Episcopal Church, the Senior Center and Temple Beth Shalom. In 2003 the Fellowship settled into yet another shared, temporary space—the Senior Center. That arrangement lasted until just last year when the dream of owning a building became a reality. The search for our own home has come to an end.

In our Story for All Ages this morning, Bunny went looking for a home and found one in a very short period of time. In our reading this morning we heard another accounting of a people looking for a homeland. The reading from the book of Numbers is a description of one short period when the Israelites were moving from place to place in their search for the promised land. In another book in the Hebrew Bible, namely the book of Joshua, it is written that their time of wandering in the wilderness extended for a period of forty years. UUFB hasn't been wandering in the wilderness as the Israelites did. But UUFB has been dreaming of and looking for a home for decades. From what I have been told, this Fellowship has been seeking a home for 50 years or more. That is a long time. The good news is we now have a home. The not so good news is that we aren't able to be in it. Since last summer our new home has been in one phase or another of renovation. I'm told there is a possibility we could be in our newly expanded building in May. Whether we get there in May or not, at this point we know we will get there. That can't be said for many of those who kept this Fellowship going over the years. Many of those who held and nurtured the dream that will soon become reality will not be present to witness its fulfillment. I have a great deal of appreciation for all those who have made it possible for us to have a home of our own.

Before we are able to get into our new building though, we will be moving yet again. As you heard during the announcements, next week we will begin holding our Sunday services at Christus Collegium. In my exploration of UUFB's history I was told that the Fellowship has previously met at Christus Collegium for some special services. Next week we can add it to our list of temporary homes.

I, like you, am looking forward to moving into our own building. But today I would like us to look back at our time of not having a place of our own. And as we look back we might want to give thanks that we weren't given what the Israelites were, stone tablets containing laws we were to obey. I'm told we had plenty of other stuff to lug from place to place as it was. While we didn't have laws carved into stone tablets, there were lessons and practices that allowed this Fellowship to get to where we are today. Here are some of the lessons and practices I think were present and important over the years.

The first thing that comes to my mind is the practice of perseverance. From what I have learned, there were times when the continued existence of this Fellowship was very tenuous. For example, when the land on Sourdough Ridge was purchased almost half of the Fellowship fell away. Those who stayed continued to meet every other week, except during the summer of course, even when only a very small number of people would attend.

The second thing that I think of goes right along with perseverance. That is the lesson of how to cope with doubt and uncertainty. It definitely helps to have perseverance when dealing with doubt and uncertainty, but perseverance, by itself, is often not enough. When things get tough, really tough, something more is required. That something more is a sense of purpose along with a healthy dose of hope. Those who made it possible to get to where we are as a Fellowship clearly had a sense of purpose and they had an ample amount of hope as well. When I consider the current state of affairs in our country, I am certain that a clear sense of purpose and plenty of hope will be needed to make it through the tough times that lie ahead.

And then there is the practice of sharing space. Since the Fellowship's inception members and friends have needed to hone the attitudes and skills that sharing space requires. I have learned over the course of my life that sharing space isn't always easy or even possible. Sometimes, sharing space can be quite challenging or even impossible. Any number of things can be problematic when it comes to sharing space. As we heard in our Story for All Ages, Bunny quickly realized that sharing a home in a bog with a frog was not an option. "Not for me," said the bunny. "Under the water, I would drown in a bog." Shared space needs to fit the needs and feel safe for all involved. But it isn't just the threat of physical harm that can cause problems with sharing space. Sometimes a conflict in values can be an important issue. As I mentioned earlier, forty years ago this Fellowship realized that there were value conflicts involved with meeting in the Montana Power Company building. Significant value conflicts can make a space feel like it isn't an appropriate place to be.

Another factor that may affect sharing space is the issue of territoriality. Like many other creatures, we human beings want to have a space or a territory to claim as ours. Our territorial tendency has both a positive and a not so positive aspect to it. On the positive side the desire to claim territory provided the motivation that led to this Fellowship's acquisition of its own land and building.

But territoriality can have a downside as well. It seems that once we claim space we may want to keep it just for ourselves. Recall Bunny's encounter with the groundhog. When Bunny asked "Can I come in?" groundhog's response was "No, you can't come in my log." Even though we are a Welcoming Congregation, it is almost certain that at some point we will need to say no to a request from some group or organization to share our space. When we say no, hopefully it will be in a kind way and for well thought-out reasons.

Territoriality may show up between and among us as well. In other congregations I have observed what can occur when someone inadvertently and unknowingly sits where another person had, over time, laid claim. If any of you have ever sat in such an unmarked reserved seat, you know how uncomfortable that can be. I have also witnessed in other congregations what happens when people come to assume that any or all of the space is available to them whenever they want or need it. Such assumptions can sometimes cause hurt feelings or strains in relationships. When we get into our new building it would be to our benefit to remember the lessons related to sharing space which have been learned and practiced over the long course of sharing others' space.

And there is yet another very important practice from our past that I believe would be beneficial for us to remember in the days to come. We need to remember to have and to hold a vision and a dream for the future. Those early Fellowship members and friends had a vision and a dream of having land and a building of our own. Their vision, their dream has been a guiding beacon throughout the journey this Fellowship has been on, a journey of more than five decades. Their vision, their dream will soon be a reality, a reality that in just a few months we will be moving into. I believe we owe those visionaries, those dreamers our gratitude.

When we move into our newly renovated building though, their vision, their dream will cease to be the significant motivator it has been for so many years. The newly renovated building will be our home. But it will not be, or at the least should not be, our primary focus or motivation in the decades to come. Once we move into our new building we will need a new vision, a new dream to guide us into the future. And it will be up to us to discern what that new vision, that new dream will be. We must not rush the process of discernment. We will need to take our time while reminding ourselves again and again that we have a task before us, a task that will have a significant influence on those who will come after us. As we undertake the task of discerning a new vision, a new dream I encourage us to recall the foresight and wisdom of those who came before. May we take the lessons and the practices they have given us and move, yet again, into a future full of challenges and possibilities.

May it be so.