

“Cultivating Relationships Between Religious Communities”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on October 17, 2021

Alice Blair Wesley was clearly talking about churches of long ago in the reading Amanda shared with us. In the very first sentence, Wesley refers to the “Cooperation among churches” and then uses the phrase “Standing Order.” She proceeds to describe ways that churches cooperated. What she doesn’t do in this reading is provide information about what the phrase “Standing Order” means. Earlier in the same lecture our reading was taken from, she provides a clear explanation of the “Standing Order.” This term refers to the churches founded on this continent in the decade of the 1630’s. She writes, “these churches were identified, not by any ‘denominational’ name, but simply as churches of the Standing Order. She goes on to say; “The oldest churches of our UU Association were churches of the Standing Order.”

As part of my ministerial training, I had the privilege of serving as a ministerial intern for one of these Standing Order churches, the First Parish of Watertown, Massachusetts, which was founded in 1630. The Rev. Mark Harris was the minister, and my supervisor, during that internship. Rev. Harris is a UU historian who wrote the *Historical Dictionary of Unitarian Universalism* and was a co-author with his wife, Rev. Andrea Greenwood, of *An Introduction to the Unitarian and Universalist Traditions*. I learned a great deal about the Standing Order, and the history of the early churches in this nation, both from my theological school coursework as well as Reverends Harris and Greenwood.

As Wesley makes clear, the churches of the Standing Order were not identified by any denominational name. All of the Standing Order churches identified as Christian, and yet they didn’t necessarily share the same Christian beliefs. In spite of this, many of these early churches worked to cultivate relationships with one another. These relationships made the kind of consultation Wesley refers to both possible, and beneficial, as churches sought to address the issues and problems they were dealing with.

Today a considerable number of churches identify with one of the many denominations that exist. This Fellowship, as our name indicates, identifies us as a member of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Other prominent Christian denominations in the Gallatin Valley include, in alphabetical order, Baptists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, United Church of Christ, United Methodists, as well as others. This shift to denominational affiliation has supported a movement where churches tend to focus attention and energy on cultivating relationships with other churches within their denomination.

Over the years, UUFB has engaged with other UU Fellowships in Montana, as well as neighboring states, in a number of ways. Prior to my ministry with you, the Montana UU Fellowships had an annual retreat. Since my arrival, one such Montana UU retreat was held at the Rockhaven Camp and Retreat Center. In April of 2018 UUFB hosted a Board Leadership training put on by staff members of the Pacific Western Region. Most of the Montana Fellowships sent representatives to that training as did the Fellowship in Sheridan, Wyoming. The training offered us the opportunity to learn together about what is needed for a Board to serve its congregation well. It also gave us the chance to share our struggles and successes. More recently, the Board Presidents of the Montana Fellowships have been meeting regularly with our Pacific Western Region contact person to share information, get support, and learn about resources that are available.

We heard in the reading that “ministers often preached in other pulpits than their own.” In my time as your minister, I have sought to cultivate relationships with the other Fellowships in Montana by being a guest minister on a Sunday morning. I have visited and shared a sermon at least once with each of the other four Montana Fellowships. Along with being a guest minister, I have arranged a few pulpit exchanges, as our reading mentioned. On October 6, 2019, the minister of the UU Church of Idaho Falls was delivering the sermon from where I stand this morning while I was in the pulpit at the Idaho Falls congregation. And on two occasions since we made the shift from in-person to online Sunday services, we have shared a service with the Billings UU Fellowship.

Each of the situations I have mentioned are ways that we have sought to cultivate relationships with and between religious communities who are part of the UUA. We have not, however, limited our efforts just to religious communities within our faith tradition. Our Fellowship has sought to find common ground, and cultivate relationships, with a wide array of religious communities. We have been a member of the Gallatin Valley Interfaith Association, often referred to as GVIA, for quite a few years. The membership of GVIA includes many of the Christian denominations I mentioned previously, as well as other, non-Christian religious communities. A few examples are Congregation Beth Shalom, which is Jewish, the Bozeman Dharma Center, which is Buddhist, and the Islamic Center of Bozeman, which is Muslim. And in the past three years, this Fellowship has been a key player in the establishment of Montana Interfaith Power and Light, which is a state chapter of the national organization, Interfaith Power and Light.

It would be reasonable and appropriate to ask why cultivating relationships between religious communities is important. What difference does it make? Before I speak to those questions, I want to focus on a portion of our Story for All Ages. As you heard in the story, an old woman had a vision of what heaven and hell were like. The basic elements of each place were the same—people sitting around a table with ample food with each person holding a very long spoon. In hell, the people were “emaciated and sickly, moaning with hunger.” They were that way because they were all trying to feed themselves and couldn’t accomplish this alone. Yet in heaven, everyone was feeding each other. As you heard in the introduction to the story, we UU’s don’t focus our attention on the afterlife. Instead, our attention is on this life, and how we can make life better here on earth. Any of you who heard my September 26th sermon, “Universalism Comes to America,” know that we stopped worrying about heaven and hell when our Universalist forebears determined that all humans were loved by God and all would eventually be reconciled with their maker. Some of our Universalist forebears believed that if hell exists at all, it exists during a person’s lifetime here on earth. Many of the other religious traditions believe in an afterlife, and heaven and hell. Most of the major religious traditions believe that how we live and act during this lifetime will affect what happens after we die. In other words, what we do here on earth will determine what the afterlife is like.

I return now to the questions of why it is important to cultivate relationships between religious communities and what difference doing so makes. I want you to remember here what I mentioned a few moments ago about where we focus our attention. Our attention is on this place and on this life. But our attention, our focus, isn’t just on ourselves as individuals. It isn’t on the few people we know and associate with. And it isn’t just on the people who belong to the same faith tradition as we do. Where we place our attention can be seen by looking to our Principles. Our First Principle refers to “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” And our Sixth Principle is “the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.” The probability of the very small number of Unitarian Universalists in the world being able to actualize these principles is tiny at best. But by working with people of religious communities from other faith traditions, we significantly increase the possibility of making our Principles a reality. So now let’s consider how cultivating relationships between religious communities is important.

I will start with our recent involvement with Montana Interfaith Power and Light. Here is what the Mission Statement of the national association states, “Interfaith Power and Light inspires and mobilizes people of faith and conscience to take bold and just action on climate change.” If you look at our UUFB Mission Statement, which is printed on the front of our Order of Service every Sunday, you will see that we seek to “sustain our living planet.” Our involvement with Montana Interfaith Power and Light is one way we partner with other religious communities to embody this aspect of our mission.

And as I mentioned in my sermon two weeks ago, we recently worked with other religious communities in the Gallatin Valley to raise over \$139,000 to cover the cost of building tiny homes for homeless people in the Bozeman area. And soon, we will be able to volunteer our time and talents to actually build some of the tiny homes at HRDC’s Housing First Village. And last year, along with other members of GVIA, we raised more than enough money to allow the Fork and Spoon Café to keep its doors open. As you may be aware, the Fork and Spoon Café is the only pay-as-you-can restaurant in the state. Fork and Spoon Café makes it possible for many people who are struggling financially to have adequate food to eat on a

regular basis. The café is one example of how we use our long spoons to feed one another. For those of you who have only been involved with the Fellowship for a short time, there is some history about the Café that is important to share here. In March of 2012 this Fellowship, in partnership with other local faith communities and HRDC, helped to establish the Community Café, which was the predecessor of the Fork and Spoon Café. And speaking of being part of establishing things, UUFB also worked with other religious communities who are part of GVIA to start Family Promise, a program that works to house homeless families. We continue to volunteer with both of these programs. For the past several years we have partnered with Congregation Beth Shalom and Pilgrim Congregational Church to provide volunteers who take orders, serve food and wash dishes once a month at Fork and Spoon Café. And for a number of years we have been partnering with St. James Episcopal Church in our efforts with Family Promise. If you want to know more about Family Promise, get in touch with Tonya, who shared our Stewardship Moment this morning. She is the person who coordinates our work with Family Promise.

I hope what I have just shared gives you some idea of why we work to cultivate relationships between religious communities. Through our work and involvement with Montana Interfaith Power and Light, the Gallatin Valley Interfaith Association, Housing First Village, Fork and Spoon Café, and Family Promise, we are working to actualize our Principles. As UU's, we don't pay much, if any, attention to what may occur after life here ends. We do, however, pay a great deal of attention to what life is like here on earth, not just for ourselves, but also for those we share time with on this planet. We seek to bring our Principles to life, to make them more than just lofty words on a page. We want our Principles to be a lived reality for every person on the planet. If I were to sum up, in a single sentence, what we are seeking to do, I might say it this way. We want to, and we intend to, love the hell **out** of this world.

May it be so.