

“Recounting & Celebrating Blessings: A Farewell Sermon”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on June 26, 2022

This morning I feel a heaviness in my chest. The heaviness I feel comes from the awareness that this is the last Sunday I will share a sermon as your minister. As I stand before you I ask myself, how can I, in a single sermon, recount the many blessings I have both experienced and witnessed over the course of my time as your minister? The answer is clear to me but totally unsatisfactory. I can't possibly speak this morning of all the blessings I have witnessed and experienced in my time with you. There are so many blessings that I just can't recall them all. And even if I could, I wouldn't be able to mention all of them, or even most of them, in one sermon. So this morning I hope to recount some of the significant blessings I recall. I hope that by sharing a few significant blessings that stand out in my mind you will recall other blessings that I have either forgotten or neglected to mention.

Where do I begin with recounting the blessings during my time as your minister? I think an appropriate place to begin would be May 15th, 2016. On that Sunday morning I stood before you and shared a sermon titled “From Change to Transition.” That was the second sermon I shared with you during my eight day interview as a candidate to be your settled minister. I delivered that sermon in this very building—well actually, in the original A-frame portion of this building prior to the major remodeling that occurred over the following year-plus. After that sermon the members of this Fellowship voted to call me as your settled minister. I can't possibly convey the level of blessing you gave me, and not just me but Sandy, my wife, as well, with that vote. With that vote you gave us the blessing of becoming part of this special and incredible community. I don't have the words adequate to express my gratitude to you for the opportunities you have given Sandy and me as a result of that vote. Thank you is totally inadequate, but I hope it gives you at least a small sense of the gratitude I feel.

That vote was just one of the many blessings I have received from the members and friends of this Fellowship. I could easily recount many others but I want to shift the focus from me to we at this point. By we, I mean all of the people who have actively engaged with this Fellowship in one way or another. The we I am speaking about here includes UUFB members, friends, and visitors. To make that shift from me to we I think this building is a good place to begin.

Until shortly before I came to be your minister, UUFB didn't have a building of its own. For well over 50 years, members, friends and visitors to the Fellowship met in people's homes or in rented space. That changed quite suddenly when a member of the Fellowship purchased this building and presented an offer to the congregation membership that was too good to refuse. The member offered to donate the building if the congregation would commit to raising the money required to remodel the building to meet the congregation's needs. That offer was both an invitation and a challenge. It was an invitation to achieve the goal of the Fellowship having its own building—a goal that had been around for decades. The challenge was to raise an amount of money that was beyond, or even far beyond, what some people in the congregation thought was possible. But this community accepted the invitation and took on the challenge. The Fellowship didn't just raise the money that was needed, members and friends also volunteered many hours of effort and work as well. The result is that for almost 5 years now we have been blessed to have this beautiful building that we call home.

I did two services in this building while I was a candidate to be your minister. After those two sermons in May of 2016 I didn't get to deliver a sermon here as your settled minister until August 27, 2017. That was the date of our first service in the newly remodeled building. What an exciting day that was after a year of holding services in two different facilities, first at Eagle Mount and then at Christus Collegium. Having our own building has been a blessing that keeps on giving.

Let me offer a few examples of what I mean by that statement. Prior to having this building, UUFB had a practice of holding regular Sunday services for about ten months of the year. Services were only infrequently

held during the months of July and August, and those summer services were typically held outdoors, such as in a local park. Within the first year of being in this building, we began holding services every Sunday of the year. As a result of instituting year-round services, UU's who live or visit here in the summer months are able to attend services and get better connected to the Fellowship community. Having year-round services also provided the Fellowship with an opportunity to invite UU ministers who wanted to take a vacation here to be a guest minister during their trip. Going to year-round services led to significantly more UU ministers becoming aware that this Fellowship exists and is a vibrant UU community. The word spread in the UU minister community to the point where I had a number of UU ministers or ministers-to-be contact me asking if it would be possible for them to be a guest minister here.

Here is another blessing I have witnessed in my time with you. Since moving into our building in August of 2017, we have welcomed a significant number of new members—members who didn't know us when we were, as I heard several congregants say, the church in a Subaru. Since we moved into this building we have held a wedding as well as memorial services here. In April 2018 we hosted a leadership training program for all of the Montana UU Fellowships as well as the UU Fellowship in Sheridan, Wyoming. That leadership program was organized and led by staff of the Pacific Western Region. And on October 13, 2019, just five months before the arrival of COVID in Montana, we celebrated UUFB's 60th anniversary in this, our Fellowship home.

When COVID arrived things changed dramatically as we were unable to meet in-person in this building from late March, 2020, until early June of last year. The arrival of COVID certainly wasn't a blessing. I think the word curse is a more appropriate descriptor of the virus. The pandemic threatened our lives individually as well as the life of our Fellowship. It severely restricted our options for being with others and with one another. Yet, in spite of the virus, we found a way to continue holding services, children's religious education, and committee meetings via the internet. The pandemic forced us to change in ways that we previously considered unnecessary and even burdensome. But utilizing technology, and live-streaming services, classes and meetings has provided benefits we couldn't imagine three years ago. Doing so has allowed people who weren't able to be physically present in our building to connect with one another in spite of the pandemic. While we are now able to meet together in our building for a service, people who aren't able to join us in-person for whatever reason can attend from wherever they may be. We have had people regularly attending our services from places like, Camas, Washington, Atlanta, Georgia, and Tampa, Florida. Live-streaming our services means that people who want to worship with us on Sunday mornings aren't limited by whether they live in Bozeman, in Montana, in the United States or even on this continent. And people who have never previously attended one of our services can check us out for the first time via the internet. I know of several people who have done this, and one of them recently contacted me asking how they can become a Fellowship member. By live-streaming our services, we are welcoming people who might otherwise have missed out on the many blessings the members and friends of this Fellowship have to offer. In other words, a decision we made out of necessity has been a blessing for many of our members, friends, and visitors. This seems like a good time to again say welcome to those who are attending our service on-line. Thank you for joining us this morning and for being a part of this community.

So far I have talked about some of the blessings I have experienced as well as some of the blessings we, as a Fellowship, have experienced during my time as your minister. But the blessings go far beyond this. The blessings go beyond what any individual of this Fellowship, and even beyond what all of us collectively as a Fellowship, have experienced or received. Earlier I said I wanted to shift from me to we. I defined we at that point as "all of the people who have actively engaged with this Fellowship in one way or another." Now I want to expand what I mean by we. I want us to consider a we that includes people we have never met, people we will never meet, and people who will never even know that this Fellowship exists. There are many, many people who have received blessings as a result of our practices here at UUFB. Let me offer some examples of what I am talking about here.

From January, 2018, through December, 2021 we donated, through second & fifth Sunday offerings, more than \$54,000. We donated that money to organizations who work to put our values into action. These organizations have spanned the spectrum from local to national to international. The organizations we have

donated to have been focused on issues such as feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, providing medical care for those in need, combating racism, sexism and homophobia, offering support to undocumented immigrants and assistance to those who have been displaced by some natural disaster or war, and so much more. This year we have already donated more than \$14,000 to organizations that are doing the kind of work I just mentioned. And we don't just give money to address such issues, we give time and energy as well. Members and friends of this Fellowship have gained a reputation in Bozeman—a reputation I have heard numerous community members make comments about. The reputation is that members and friends of this Fellowship show up to marches and demonstrations, show up to volunteer for causes like those I just mentioned, and you write letters to the editor about important issues in our community and beyond. By actions such as these, we offer support to those who need it most—to those who are neglected, to those who are marginalized, to those who are discriminated against and to those who deserve but are denied equality and justice. Through such efforts, we offer blessings to many more people than we will ever know.

There are so many blessings we have received and given that I could share with you this morning but the time for this sermon is short. I am reasonably sure you don't want this sermon to last an hour or more. Besides, there is a celebration that everyone is invited to that begins shortly after this service ends. But I feel I must share a bit more. So please bear with me for a few more minutes. I would be remiss if I didn't mention the important work that was done to create new Mission and Vision statements while I have been your minister. The Mission statement is printed on the front page of our Order of Service every week. I encourage you to read it, not just this morning but every week. It is concise and powerful. When we invest time, energy and resources, including money, into actualizing the elements of our Mission Statement, we bless ourselves, our community, people around the world and our living planet.

Our Vision Statement is too long to put in our Order of Service. Because it isn't easily accessible, many of us don't get to see or read it often. It is found on our website. If you haven't read our Vision Statement in a while, or even ever, please go to the website and read it through, not once but several times. It is profound and inspirational. I want to share the final lines of it with you this morning.

We of UUFB...

Will move forward into an uncertain future with grace and humility, fostering compassion and love, claiming our prophetic heritage, and making our fellowship, larger community and world a safer and better place.

Sit with that for a moment. Sit with it as it reverberates through your body, as it echos through this room and beyond these walls. (Pause) Now let's hear it again.

We of UUFB...

Will move forward into an uncertain future with grace and humility, fostering compassion and love, claiming our prophetic heritage, and making our fellowship, larger community and world a safer and better place.

As I end my tenure as your minister and retire from UU ministry, I leave knowing that you have a vision that has the ability to bless you individually as well as you collectively for years to come. And you have a vision that can send ripples of blessings out to the far corners of the world.

Finally, before I end this sermon, I want you to know the reason I selected the Story for All Ages this morning. I selected it because it spoke of a practice I have had during my time as your minister. Throughout the course of my ministry at UUFB, I have had a wish, a dream, a prayer, if you will, for you. That wish, dream or prayer has been, and continues to be, not that all of your hopes, dreams or prayers would be answered. It is instead that you would be blessed, that you will be blessed, both individually and collectively, with the gifts you need to address the challenges that you must face. I don't believe there is, as is indicated in the Story for All Ages this morning, some great determiner from above that answers such wishes, dreams or prayers. But I

do believe that by setting an intention, I, or you, may have an influence, even if it is ever so small, in the fulfillment of that intention. Through my wish, dream, prayer, words and actions, I hope I have been able to play a part in some blessing that you have received. I know you have blessed me many times and in so many ways. It is with humility and deep gratitude then, that I say thank you, and bless you. May that which is greater than we can understand or comprehend bless the time we have had together, the endeavors we have engaged in over these past six years, and the work you, as members and friends of UUFb, will do in the days and years ahead.

So may it be.