



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

## Deepening Our Roots

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Imagine being Michael Servetus, tied to a stake, surrounded by the many books and essays you have written about theology and faith, your past as a physician in your mind, as the flame is put to the wood and the fire begins. You must know that the pain will be awful, and your death slow, and that it was happening only because you took your faith so seriously and believed so strongly that honesty and reason would prevail, that people could disagree, but converse and come to agreement.

Just imagine. You are in your forties, and as the heat increases, the flames rising, you think back over your life. You remember growing up in Spain and of the religious foment there, the inquisition and the beginnings of the reformation, of traveling to Rome and being repulsed by the opulence of the Roman Church and the trappings around the papacy, of fleeing to Switzerland and becoming a protestant, of publishing a book 'On the Errors of the Trinity.' You might wonder if that was the best title for a book on theology during the Inquisition.

You think back to your time in Paris as a physician, of being convinced there is no such thing as original sin. You remember corresponding with John Calvin, and you probably wonder why you chose to stop in Geneva as you fled France where you had been condemned.

Was it worth it, you wonder? Your pursuit of truth, your belief in reason, your hope that others would listen, that you were not alone? Was it worth it?

Michael Servetus was burned at the stake, his books tied around him, in Geneva, Switzerland on October 27<sup>th</sup>, 1553 for the crime of heresy.

We often claim Servetus as one of our heroes. In some ways, he is and in some ways not. Not really a Unitarian, he did, however, deny the doctrine of original sin – we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person. And he was a free thinker; he did believe in thinking about what we hold to be true, and in that way he is one of ours.

So imagine being Servetus. He may have been right, but he was alone, cut off, separated from what could sustain him.

Ever feel like that? Ever come to some conclusion about living and then wonder where the others who think like that are? Ever wonder where those who share your values, your beliefs are hiding? Ever felt alone in your beliefs or thoughts?

Ever feel how good it is to walk through these doors and enter this room, and know you will not be burned at the stake for what you believe, that you will not be shunned for what you think, not condemned for what you believe, that you can question things, and think about things, that you do not have to be alone? Have you felt like you have come home here? Found a refuge, a sanctuary, a place to be and become who you truly are, a place to put down spiritual roots?

We begin, today, in earnest, our Canvass time; this is the time of the year we ask everyone to consider their financial commitment to the congregation for the coming fiscal year beginning in June. This is known, in the preaching business, as the 'sermon on the amount.'

I know these are not the best of economic times. I know that some of you are struggling; I also know some of you are doing well. I would guess we are bit like Goldilocks here – some down, some up, some in the middle.

You should have received a letter this week spelling out our hopes and our theme – Deepening our Roots. We are asking for an overall increase of 7%. Our total budget is worth about 10-11 seconds of a commercial

at today's Super Bowl. [I am rooting for the Pittsburgh Packers.] It costs just about \$1600 per member to run the church. If you give at that level, 7% more is about \$10.00 a month or \$2.50 a week, or 35 cents a day, or a penny and a half an hour, or well, not much per minute. If you are not at \$1600 per member, maybe you can get there. Maybe if you are doing well, maybe you can increase more. I know some members are struggling and giving all that they can. Maybe these are hard times and you cannot give much – but we do need to ask this once a year and this is the time.

With that increase – which I believe is really possible – we can first cover some increased costs. We have cut our expenses for two years in a row and they are at skeleton level. And we can give a small cost of living increase to our staff – they haven't had any for the past two years. I know this is something to ask in these times – but this is the right thing to do. With a little more, we can support a part time intern minister, and with just some more, we can make sure that the Jericho Road project has adequate funding and we can transform the courtyard by the program building into a place where kids can play, where we can gather for events, with opportunities for memorial recognition and a labyrinth.

That is it. We can do this.

This last Fall, we celebrated 125 years of liberal religion in Pasadena. Neighborhood church has been a voice in this community for free faith, for tolerance, for justice and for peace. We are now at about 730 members with 200 children registered – the largest UU congregation in California; we have an active social justice program, we have been recognized by local and state organizations for our environmental efforts. We have superb and expanding music. We are increasingly diverse. We have tons of babies and more on the way.

It is time to begin a new chapter in our life together, a time where those deep roots of 125 years go deeper and wider.

Here is an image for you: This past Fall, Kathe and I took a brief trip to Yosemite and stayed at the Wawona Hotel, took a number of hikes, and sat and read, and, as John Muir loved to say 'take in the gladness of the mountains.' It is beautiful, of course, magnificent, awesome. I cannot imagine not being moved by the sheer magnitude and beauty of Yosemite. We took a great little hike up to Sentinel Dome and got to see the whole sweep of the valley below.

We also took a long walk through the Mariposa Grove of Sequoias, taking the tram to the top and walking down. They are, of course, as magnificent as the geology, among the largest living things on land – my favorite is the clothespin tree. Ancient, massive, stately – those trees are a testament to endurance and stability, of the importance of finding a home and of putting down roots. Sequoias grow only in a very narrow range of climate – they exist only along this stretch of the Western slope of the Sierra Nevada mountains in California.

Now, curiously, especially in light of my sermon today, Sequoias have very shallow roots, though extensive, spreading out about three times the height of the tree, but the roots are there, spread wide into the shallow but fertile soils of the forest's top layer.

My other favorite tree that graces the slopes of the Sierras is the Jeffrey pine – the one smelling of vanilla or lemon or butterscotch. It has a deep taproot, anchoring itself to the rocky slopes. Like the Sequoia, it is magnificent, and beautiful, but its roots are deep.

That is the image – the two of them, Sequoia and Jeffrey – roots that go wide and roots that go deep.

The deep part is concerned with our spiritual lives – deepening our roots. I am leading a sermon writing class this spring and a weekend retreat next September. [We'll all smell like lemons or vanilla!] If we do well in our Canvass, I hope we will transform the courtyard of the programs building – I affectionately call

it the dirt patch. It will be a place for our kids to play; it will drain water that will be captured for irrigation; it can have a memorial aspect, and a labyrinth.

Anyone here ever walked a labyrinth? It is a walking meditation, replicating a journey into the center of our being [there will be a mosaic chalice in the middle!]. I am really excited about this, about using it for my own spiritual practice and for yours, too. This could be the only publicly available outdoor labyrinth in the San Gabriel valley and we can extend our spiritual roots wider for those looking for a free faith. I am excited about deepening and widening our spiritual roots.

So let's deepen our roots here, and widen them as well. That is the point of our Canvass Fellowship dinner on March 5. Come and eat together, share stories, make a commitment – sign up on the patio after the service. Any Board member can explain it. We want to deepen our roots with each other.

And if we can engage a part time intern minister, that can serve to deepen our roots to our wider UU movement, helping to grow ministry, take the roots of Neighborhood out into our wider faith community. That is what the Jericho Road project is all about – spreading our roots wide into the community by serving community benefit organizations through the professional skills of our members.

The thing about Servetus for me is that he was courageous; he was bold; he was willing to think about what he believed; he wanted to be free. He needed others, to be sure, but he was bold. And while he died alone, Servetus stood at the beginnings of a great liberation in western thought. And I have thought, too, of the twenty six year-old Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi who on December 17, this year, lit the fuse that ended his life and ignited the current unrest sweeping the Middle East. Bouazizi, a street vendor, set himself on fire in despair and in protest of his treatment at the hands of local authorities. Maybe out of despair or frustration, but also an act of courage and of freedom.

And it seems as if a wave of liberation is spreading across Northern Africa; alone, yes, but linked with others in liberation. These are tragic and awful events – Servetus and Bouazizi, but they demonstrate that the desire for freedom and for connection runs deep in human history.

What is the line we sing every week – roots hold me close, wings set me free?

Deepening our roots. When we do that, our lives are nourished and we live more abundantly, more authentically. That is what we do here – deep roots and strong wings, an abundant spirit and a beloved community. Our Canvass is about tending the soil of our congregation and the soil of our lives so that we are nourished and roots will grow deep and wide.

The essence of our faith is abundance, and the early Unitarians and Universalists knew this. It was John Murray, the Universalist who said 'Give them not hell, but hope and courage.' They broke out of doctrinal constraints, proclaiming that God was love rather than judgment, insisting - as Emerson and Whitman and Dickinson and we claim - that the holy is in the world.

Emerson told us to feel the fullness of life and see the sacred in everything. He said that faith is about abundance; it is about hope; it is about those moments in life that break in with unutterable beauty and joy. It is about throwing ourselves into living. If we see the glass as half empty, we will miss those moments and despair and bitterness will be our companions.

Emerson said that our faith is to help us to live fully and with passion. He wanted us grow deep and wide – for justice, for equity, for our own soul. Isn't Emerson right? Isn't that the vision we need? Does anyone here want help in living a smaller life, in being more timid, in believing less, in hoping less, in living more fearfully? What if we are timid and unwilling to risk, to dig deeper? Who here wants to be a spiritual miser?

Our faith is about abundance - intellectual abundance, social abundance, abundance in music, in art, in relationships, abundance in service, spiritual abundance. Here is a place where we take out what we have - our beliefs, our hopes, our dreams and ideals. This is a place where life, not death, should rule, where hope, not despair, should live; where courage not fear should rule. It is about diving deep into the core of life. This is the essence of faith - it is about life, about abundant life. It is about the open heart and the open hand. It is about hearing the song of your own heart. It is about those roots that grow deep and wide.

Deepening Our Roots – in spirit and in community. We can do it. Let's.

Amen

Readings:

*Feeding the Pit* Rev Barbara Merritt

*Axe Handles* Gary Snyder