

“CAREFUL WHAT YOU HOPE/WISH FOR...”

3-7-10

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HOPES, WISHES, DESIRES, PLANS, INTENTIONS, EXPECTATIONS, DESIRES.....

IF I WERE TO PREACH THIS MORNING FROM THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION, I WOULD QUOTE THE BIBLICAL LETTER OF JAMES AND SAY: “WISHING AND PRAYING IS INSUFFICIENT; “FAITH WITHOUT WORK IS DEAD.” IF I WERE TO PREACH FROM THE JEWISH TRADITION, I WOULD PARAPHRASE THE BIBLICAL BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES WHICH SAYS ESSENTIALLY: “WHAT ARE YOU WHINING ABOUT? RELAX! ENJOY WHAT YOU HAVE. THIS IS AS GOOD AS IT GETS.” IF I WERE TO PREACH FROM THE BUDDHIST TRADITION, I WOULD FOCUS ON THE CONCEPT OF DESIRE, AND NOTE THAT DESIRE LEADS TO SUFFERING. SO WISHING HOPING PRAYING PLANNING INTENDING EXPECTING DESIRING IS NOT ONLY INSUFFICIENT, IT COULD BE A PATH TO PAIN. AND SPEAKING OF PATHS, THE PATH TO HELL, OF COURSE, IS PAVED WITH GOOD INTENTIONS. SO WISHING PRAYING HOPING INTENDING MAY NOT ONLY GET US NOWHERE, THEY MAY GET US SOMEWHERE WE DON’T WANT TO BE. AND, IF I WERE TO PREACH FROM THE TAOIST TRADITION, I WOULD TELL THE STORY OF MAYBE/MAYBE NOT. YOU MAY RECALL THIS STORY – I HAVE ACTUALLY TOLD A VERSION OF IT TO THE CHILDREN IN THE PAST. A FARMER FINDS A WILD HORSE. IS THIS GOOD OR BAD? WHO CAN TELL – HIS SON FALLS OFF THE HORSE AND BREAKS HIS ARM. IS THIS GOOD OR BAD? WHO CAN TELL – THE NEXT DAY THE ARMY MARCHES BY LOOKING TO TAKE EVERY HEALTHY YOUNG MAN; THE FARMER’S SON GETS A PASS BECAUSE OF HIS BROKEN ARM. IS THIS GOOD OR BAD – WHO CAN TELL? SO NO MATTER WHAT OUR RELIGIOUS TRADITION – WE ARE ALL CAUTIONED TO BE CAREFUL WHAT WE WISH OR HOPE FOR. WHY? BECAUSE WE MIGHT GET IT – AND GET IT IN EXCESS. OR WE MIGHT GET IT AND FIND OUT WE DIDN’T WANT IT. OR WE MIGHT GET IT AND WANT IT, BUT FIND THAT IT BRINGS NEW RESPONSIBILITIES – OR UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES FOR NOT ONLY OURSELVES BUT FOR OTHERS AS WELL. SO SHOULD WE STOP HOPING OR WISHING? NOT MAKE ANY PLANS? I DON’T THINK SO – A MORE REALISTIC ALTERNATIVE IS TO BE CAREFUL ABOUT WHAT WE WISH OR HOPE FOR. BE WISE ABOUT IT. WE NEED TO WISH AND HOPE WITH A FULL AWARENESS OF THE WORK REQUIRED TO MAKE OUR WISHES AND HOPES COME

TRUE...AND THE CONSEQUENCES AND RESPONSIBILITIES THAT MIGHT ARISE. BUT, OF COURSE, SOMETIMES WE GET CAUGHT UP IN THE ENTHUSIASM OF OTHERS FOR A CERTAIN WISH AND DON'T THINK ABOUT WHAT ACHIEVING THAT WISH MIGHT REALLY MEAN FOR OUR EVERY DAY LIFE. AND SO THIS MORNING, I AM GOING TO PREACH FROM THE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST TRADITION – AND TALK ABOUT WHAT OUR HOPES FOR GROWTH FOR NEW HOPE WILL REALLY MEAN FOR ALL OF US. BECAUSE I AM LOOKING AROUND TODAY AND SEEING THAT OUR PEWS ARE FILLING UP ON SUNDAY MORNING. IT IS WHAT WE HOPED FOR, AS A CONGREGATION, FROM THE DAY WE MOVED INTO THIS BUILDING. ON MARCH 17TH, WE WILL CELEBRATE OUR TWO YEAR ANNIVERSARY IN THIS BUILDING. WHAT AN AMAZING JOURNEY IT HAS BEEN FOR EACH OF US. WHEN WE LOOK AROUND OUR MEETING ROOM HERE, WE SEE THE CREATIVITY AND HARD WORK OF MANY HANDS. WITHIN SIX WEEKS OF MOVING INTO THIS FACILITY – THIS ROOM WAS TRANSFORMED INTO THE WELCOMING AND WARM ROOM WE ARE ALL ENJOYING TODAY. AND THE EFFORT WAS NOT JUST FOR US – THE EFFORT THAT WENT INTO THIS ROOM WAS MADE FOR ALL THE FUTURE PEOPLE WHO WOULD COME TO NEW HOPE AND BECOME PART OF OUR FAITH COMMUNITY. BUT AT THE TIME, WE FOCUSED ON JUST THOSE WHO WERE PART OF OUR ORIGINAL GROUP. IN SOME WAYS, I COULD HAVE ENTITLED MY SERMON THIS MORNING “SIZE REALLY DOES MAKE A DIFFERENCE” – BUT I THOUGHT THAT WAS TOO PROVOCATIVE. IF YOU HAVE HAD AN OPPORTUNITY TO READ YOUR MARCH NEWSLETTER, YOU WILL NOTE THAT THERE ARE NO LESS THAN THREE ARTICLES ABOUT THE CHANGES THAT WILL HAPPEN WHEN A FAMILY SIZE CHURCH GROWS. AND GROWING WE ARE. SO I SETTLED FOR THE SERMON TITLE CAREFUL FOR WHAT YOU HOPE OR WISH FOR.... – AND LET ME TELL YOU WHY. WE HAVE BEEN A SMALL CONGREGATION – A FAMILY CHURCH - FROM THE BEGINNING – BUT OUR GOAL IS TO BE A BIGGER CONGREGATION – BUT I NEED TO TELL YOU SOMETHING ABOUT BIGGER. BIGGER CONGREGATIONS ARE DIFFERENT. THIS IS AS TRUE FOR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATIONS AS IT IS FOR ANY OTHER DENOMINATION. WHEN WE LOOK AT THE INTERIOR WORKINGS OF A CONGREGATION TO SEE HOW THINGS ACTUALLY HAPPEN, WE DISCOVER THAT LARGE UU CONGREGATIONS BEHAVE MORE LIKE THE LARGE CHURCHES OF OTHER DENOMINATIONS THAN LIKE THE SMALLER UU CONGREGATIONS NEARBY. SO ONE OF

THE REALITIES THAT WE HAVE TO COME TO TERMS WITH WHEN WE ARE WISHING FOR A LARGER CONGREGATION IS THAT NOT EVERYTHING WE DO AS A UU CONGREGATION IS DETERMINED BY THEOLOGY OR OUR CELEBRATED UU PRINCIPLES. NEXT TO A CONGREGATION'S HISTORY AND CULTURE, SIZE IS THE MOST REVEALING FRAME OF REFERENCE FOR UNDERSTANDING A CHURCH. MAKING MY POINT OF SIZE REALLY DOES MAKE A DIFFERENCE. OVER THE YEARS, I HAVE SPENT A GREAT DEAL OF TIME READING AND ATTENDING CONFERENCES AND WORKSHOPS ON WHAT IS CALLED – CHURCH SIZE DYNAMICS. AND WHETHER A CHURCH IS DEALING WITH STAFFING, GOVERNANCE, FINANCE, CONFLICT, MANAGING CHANGE, GROWTH, OR OUTREACH, SIZE WILL PROVE TO BE A FACTOR. CHURCH SIZE HAS BEEN IDENTIFIED INTO FOUR BASIC SIZES OF CONGREGATIONS, WHERE SIZE IS DETERMINED BY THE AVERAGE ATTENDANCE ON SUNDAYS. YOU MAY BE SURPRISED TO LEARN THAT MOST MAINLINE PROTESTANT CHURCHES HAVE AN ATTENDANCE OF AROUND 100 ON SUNDAY MORNINGS. NO MORE THAN THAT. THEIR DECLINE HAS STEADILY FALLEN SINCE THE 1950'S. IN MEASURING ATTENDANCE, CHILDREN ARE INCLUDED ALONG WITH THE ADULTS. AND EACH SIZE OF CONGREGATION HAS ITS OWN DISTINCT STYLE. SO WHAT I WANT TO DO TODAY IS DESCRIBE THREE STYLES OF CHURCHES THAT ARE RELEVANT TO NEW HOPE AND I'LL BEGIN WITH NEW HOPE – ALTHOUGH I AM CONVINCED THAT WE ARE ON THE CUSP OF THE FIRST TWO SIZES – WITH OUR GOAL THIS YEAR TO ACHIEVE THE THIRD LEVEL. CURRENTLY NEW HOPE IS THE SIZE OF THE FAMILY CHURCH – WHICH AVERAGES FEWER THAN 50 PEOPLE ON SUNDAY MORNING. HOWEVER, IF WE COUNT CHILDREN WE ARE FAST APPROACHING THE PASTORAL CHURCH WHICH AVERAGES BETWEEN 50 AND 150 ON SUNDAY MORNINGS. THE FAMILY CHURCH IS SO NAMED BECAUSE IT BEHAVES LIKE AN EXTENDED FAMILY. AS WITH HUMAN FAMILIES, INDIVIDUALS WE DESCRIBE AS MATRIARCHS AND PATRIARCHS TEND TO DOMINATE LIFE IN THE FAMILY CHURCH. THIS IS NOT A VALUE JUDGMENT, IT'S JUST WHAT IS FOUND MOST OFTEN IN THIS SIZE OF CHURCH. FAMILY CHURCHES TEND NOT TO HAVE THEIR OWN MINISTERS, BUT WHEN THEY DO, THE MINISTER IS RARELY AT THE CENTER OF CONGREGATIONAL LIFE. NEW HOPE HAS NOT FOLLOWED THIS MODEL, SINCE I WAS AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE FORMATION OF THIS CONGREGATION – THUS PUTTING ME IN THE POSITION OF BOTH MINISTER AND MATRIARCH. THE BOARD TENDS TO HAVE LESS

INFLUENCE IN THE FAMILY CHURCH SINCE IMPORTANT DECISIONS ARE MOSTLY MADE EITHER BY THE MATRIARCHS AND PATRIARCHS OR BY THE CONGREGATION AS A WHOLE – THROUGH A TOWN MEETING APPROACH. THE FAMILY CHURCH IS SOMETIMES REFERRED TO AS THE CHEERS CHURCH BECAUSE QUITE LITERALLY IT IS POSSIBLE THAT EVERYONE KNOWS YOUR NAME. MORE THAN ONE IN THREE UU CONGREGATIONS IS FAMILY SIZED. IN FAIRNESS TO NEW HOPE – WHILE WE HAVE FUNCTIONED ON SOME LEVELS WITH THIS MODEL – WE HAVE ALSO BEEN VERY CAREFUL TO AVOID SOME OF THE PITFALLS OF THIS MODEL. YES, IN TERMS OF NUMBERS WE ARE A FAMILY CHURCH – BUT WE HAVE NOT SET UP A SYSTEM THAT HAS ALLOWED ANY ONE PERSON OR A SELECT FEW PEOPLE TO BECOME THE CONTROLLING VOICE OF THE CONGREGATION. MANY OF US HAVE EXPERIENCED THE PIT FALLS OF LETTING THAT HAPPEN AND WE HAVE TAKEN GREAT PAINS TO ACT MORE LIKE THE NEXT MODEL THAT I AM GOING TO DESCRIBE, WHICH IS THE PASTORAL CHURCH. THE PASTORAL CHURCH AVERAGES 50 TO 150 PEOPLE ON SUNDAYS, AND IS WHAT MOST AMERICANS HAVE IN MIND WHEN THEY THINK ABOUT CHURCHES. IN THIS SIZE OF CHURCH, THE ROLE OF BOTH THE MINISTER AND THE BOARD SHIFTS TOWARD THE CENTER OF THE SYSTEM. THE PASTORAL CHURCH IS NO LONGER ONE WHERE “EVERYBODY KNOWS YOUR NAME.” THE BOARD’S ROLE OF MAKING DECISIONS ON BEHALF OF THE CONGREGATION INCREASES. USUALLY THIS IS WHEN STAFF IS ADDED – NEW HOPE HAS BEEN FORTUNATE TO HAVE A STAFF FROM ITS INCEPTION. GENERALLY COMMITTEES ARE FORMED AT THIS LEVEL AND BECOME RESPONSIBLE FOR MANY OF THE THINGS THAT WERE PREVIOUSLY HANDLED BY THE MATRIARCH AND PATRIARCHS. AS YOU CAN SEE, NEW HOPE HAS BEEN SOMETHING OF AN ANOMALY BECAUSE WE HAVE FUNCTIONED VERY WELL THESE PAST FOUR YEARS BY INCORPORATING THE BEST FEATURES OF THE FAMILY CHURCH AND THE PASTORAL CHURCH. IT HAS HELPED US MOVE FORWARD IN OUR DEVELOPMENT AS QUICKLY AS WE HAVE. MANY FAMILY CHURCHES STAY STUCK AT THAT LEVEL FOR YEARS AND SOME NEVER GAIN ENOUGH MOMENTUM TO BECOME CHARTERED WITH THE UUA. THE MATRIARCHS AND PATRIARCHS BECOME ENTRENCHED AND DO NOT ALLOW FOR GROWTH. MANY BECOME FEARFUL OF THE CHANGES THAT WILL OCCUR WITHIN THE CHURCH THAT WILL UNDERMINE THEIR CONTROL. WE AT NEW HOPE HAVE TAKEN GREAT PAINS TO

AVOID THIS FROM HAPPENING. AS A RESULT I THINK THAT NEW HOPE HAS ESSENTIALLY FUNCTIONED LIKE A PASTORAL CHURCH WHILE HAVING THE NUMBERS OF THE FAMILY CHURCH. BUT NOW WE ARE EXPERIENCING AN INCREASE IN NUMBERS AND THERE WILL BE CHANGES. NOW I AM HEARING FROM FOLKS THAT THEY DO NOT ALWAYS KNOW EVERYONE'S NAME ON SUNDAY – AND THIS MAY BE A LITTLE DISCONCERTING. SOME FOLKS ARE SAYING, “GEE, I DIDN'T KNOW IF THAT PERSON WAS A FIRST TIME VISITOR, OR A NEW MEMBER.” OR I'LL MENTION SOMEONE AT A MEETING, AND SEVERAL PEOPLE WILL SAY “WOW, I DON'T KNOW WHO YOU ARE TALKING ABOUT.” THESE ARE ALL SIGNS OF A HEALTHY, GROWING CHURCH – BUT THEY CAN ALSO BE A LITTLE UNSETTLING FOR THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN AROUND FOR AWHILE. SINCE JANUARY, NEW HOPE HAS VISITORS EVERY SUNDAY. THIS IS WONDERFUL. WE HOPE THAT THOSE VISITORS LIKE WHAT THEY EXPERIENCE AND WILL COME BACK. WE HOPE THAT OUR MESSAGE OF UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM WILL EXCITE THEM ENOUGH TO GIVE US ANOTHER LOOK. OUR GOAL MUST BE TO REACH THAT 50-150 IN ATTENDANCE ON SUNDAY MORNINGS. AND TO DO THIS WE MUST NOW START TO EMULATE THE NEXT LEVEL – WHICH IS THE PROGRAM CHURCH. AT THIS LEVEL THE CHURCH STARTS TO BE KNOWN FOR THE QUALITY AND GROWING VARIETY OF ITS PROGRAMS. AT THE PROGRAM CHURCH LEVEL WE MUST OFFER A VARIETY OF EVENTS AND ACTIVITIES THAT APPEAL TO DIFFERENT DEMOGRAPHICS WITHIN THE CHURCH. AS A PROGRAM CHURCH WE DON'T ORGANIZE AN EVENT THAT IS INTENDED FOR EVERY SINGLE MEMBER OF THE CHURCH TO ATTEND BY CHECKING WITH EVERY MEMBER'S CALENDAR. THAT'S FAMILY CHURCH BEHAVIOR AND WE HAVE MOVED BEYOND THAT. AND SO TO MOVE US TOWARD OUR NEW LEVEL, SEVERAL THINGS HAVE TO HAPPEN. THE MEMBERS OF NEW HOPE MUST TAKE ON MORE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE EVENTS AND ACTIVITIES THAT HAPPEN WITHIN THE CHURCH – AND THAT HAS ALREADY BEGUN. THE NEW HOPE CHOIR IS OFFERING AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THOSE PEOPLE WHO LIKE TO SING ALONG – A MAKE A JOYFUL NOISE SING-A-LONG NEXT SUNDAY, MARCH 14. NOW, WE RECOGNIZE THAT THIS IS NOT EVERYONE'S THING – BUT MANY PEOPLE DO ENJOY THIS TYPE OF ACTIVITY, SO NEW HOPE SHOULD OFFER IT. THEN FOLLOWING THE SING-A-LONG, THE WOMEN OF HOPE (NEW HOPE'S WOMEN'S GROUP) IS HOSTING A WINTER BLAH'S PARTY – NOW THIS IS AN ACTIVITY THAT MAY

APPEAL MORE TO FAMILIES WHO ARE SUFFERING FROM CABIN FEVER AND WOULD LIKE TO COME WITH THEIR KIDS AND BLOW OFF SOME STEAM WHILE EATING A GRILLED HOT DOG. TWO OR THREE FELLOWS HERE AT NEW HOPE ORGANIZED THE FIRST GET TOGETHER FOR JUST THE MEN OF NEW HOPE. THEY ARE GOING TO TRY TO MEET ON THE LAST THURSDAY OF EVERY MONTH. IT'S A GREAT ATTEMPT TO PROVIDE JUST THE MEN WITH A SPECIAL EVENT OF THEIR OWN. AND ON THE LAST THURSDAY OF EACH MONTH, I AM ORGANIZING A NEW GROUP CALLED THE ARMCHAIR PHILOSOPHER'S GROUP. WE WILL MEET HERE AT NEW HOPE FROM 3-4:30 PM. NOW I RECOGNIZE THAT NOT EVERYONE WHO MIGHT LIKE TO ATTEND CAN DO SO ON A WEEKDAY DURING THE AFTERNOON. BUT THAT'S WHAT PROGRAM CHURCHES DO – THEY OFFER A VARIETY OF PROGRAMMING TO REACH VARIOUS DEMOGRAPHIC SEGMENTS OF THE CONGREGATION. I BELIEVE WE HAVE A SUFFICIENT NUMBER OF PEOPLE FOR WHOM THIS DAY AND TIME AND SUBJECT MATERIAL WILL BE OF INTEREST. AND SO, I HOPE THAT IF YOU ARE INTERESTED AND ABLE – MEMBER AND NON-MEMBER ALIKE – YOU WILL COME TO OUR FIRST SESSION ON THURSDAY, MARCH 25. THERE IS FURTHER INFORMATION IN YOUR MARCH NEWSLETTER ABOUT THIS GROUP. PROGRAM CHURCHES RELY MORE HEAVILY ON THEIR WEB PAGE TO GET THEIR INFORMATION OUT TO THEIR CONGREGATION AND TO THOSE SEEKING A UU CHURCH IN THEIR AREA. TO THAT END WE HAVE A BRAND NEW LOOK TO OUR WEB SITE. THAT IS THE WAY OF CHURCHES IN THE 21ST CENTURY – AND NEW HOPE NEEDS TO KEEP UP. AND I THINK WE'RE DOING A VERY GOOD JOB. SO WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN FOR YOU – IT MEANS THAT IF YOU HAVE FOUND NEW HOPE TO BE YOUR SPIRITUAL AND FAITH COMMUNITY OF CHOICE – IT IS ONLY GOING TO GET BETTER. HOPES, WISHES, DESIRES, PLANS, INTENTIONS, EXPECTATIONS, DESIRES – NEW HOPE HAS THEM ALL. SO BE IT.

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**SOURCES USED IN THE PREPARATION OF THIS PAPER:
“SIZE REALLY DOES MAKE A DIFFERENCE! BY REV. STEFAN JONASSON**