THE ICE CREAM CONE

or

THE FUTURE IS NOW

The Josephine Gould Discourse
delivered by the Rev. Martha L. Munson
at the St. Lawrence District Annual Meeting
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Loyal Jones tells the story of some friends who spend their summers in the same small town in Vermont as does Paul Newman. The woman in the family got up very early one weekend morning to take a long walk and do some bird watching. When she got back to the house, it was still early and the rest of the family was still sleeping. Craving something cold and sweet, she decided to drive into town to the bakery (which was also an ice cream shop) for a double-dip cone. She hopped into the car, drove into town, and at such an early hour, found it almost completely deserted. She parked and went in.

The only other customer there was Paul Newman, sitting at the counter eating a doughnut and having coffee. She thought to herself, this is no big deal, it's his town, too, and this poor man is entitled to his privacy just like anyone else. So I'll not make a big deal out of this. I'll just go up and get my ice cream like he is any other person in the world. And she did."

She nodded to Paul Newman, put her two dollars on the counter and ordered the double-dip cone. Completing the transaction, she walked out, got in her car and realized that she had a handful of change but no ice cream.

So she went back inside expecting to see the ice cream cone in the little holder, or in the hand of the clerk, or something. She went to the counter and was about to tell the clerk what happened, but she glanced first at Paul Newman, who broke into a friendly, warm grin and said, "You put it in your purse."[1]

I want to tell you how honored I am to have been chosen by my colleagues to give this Discourse. I am very much aware, as I stand before you this evening, of the esteemed line of colleagues I follow here. I only hope that, in my desire to

be calm, serious, and -- dare I say -- deep, we will not find, at the conclusion, I have put the ice cream cone in my purse!

The first Josephine Gould Discourse was delivered at the District Annual Meeting in Ithaca in 1983 by Charles Howe.[2] In it, he paid tribute to his mentor and friend, Jo Gould, who had died the year before: "Her contributions to our denomination and district were immense. . . ." -- And so they were, perhaps nowhere more so than in the companion volume she wrote as a teacher's guide to the Martin and Judy series, which was a mainstay in our religious education programs for preschool and early elementary children in the 1960s. The theme for the District Meeting in 1983 was "Your Future/Our Future: the Next Twenty Years." Charles' topic was "The Future the of Ministry." He approached the topic with caution, noting that "the future is <u>not</u> forseeable." Still, he was remarkably on-target with a number of things which I wish to lift up for our consideration again this evening. Although it is not the future which concerns me as much as the present moment. In the intervening 13 years I have looked often to the words of his Discourse to guide my ministry.

In my experience, our musings about the future are always predicated on our experiences of the past. Who we were and who we are will necessarily influence who we will become. This is true of individuals and it is true of communities.

There is an story told of a community of religious people and their wise and holy leader. When the community was in danger or trouble, the holy leader would retire to a special place in the forest, kindle a sacred flame, and recite a particular prayer, asking for help. And it was granted. It had been many years since last there was trouble among these people, and the new holy leader was unsure exactly what to do. He

found the special place in the forest, and kindled the sacred flame, but he did not know the prayer. He spoke of the trouble, and it was sufficient. Help was granted. Many years later, yet another holy leader was confronted with yet more trouble. She found the special place in the forest, but she did not know how to kindle the sacred flame and she did not know the prayer. But she told the story of her people and that was sufficient. Help was granted. Many years later still, another holy leader was charged with finding the help. By this time, the path to the special place in the forest was long overgrown and he could not find it. He knew neither the prayer nor how to kindle the sacred flame. So he said, simply, "I cannot find the special place; I do not know how to kindle the sacred flame; I do not know the prayer. But I know the story of my people, and that must be sufficient. And it was; help was granted. (source unknown)

I want to tell you the stories this evening of how I became a minister, about my great love for this Unitarian Universalist faith of ours, and how I continue to become a minister each day of my life. I want to tell you that our churches save lives, save souls.

I was born into the Cobblestone Church in Cortland, N.Y.. We left Cortland, my mother, my father and I, when I was not yet 5. But I remember that church, not the things I formally learned, but its <u>feel</u>. It felt warm, like it was safe to be a kid there. Shortly after I started first grade near our new home, my parents separated and were subsequently divorced. It seemed as if all of the constants of my young life were gone. When I was in third grade, we began to attend the First Unitarian Church, in Providence, R.I.. I don't know whether it was on my own initiative or at my mother's suggestion, but I took my 9 year old self to talk with the minister, Bob Schacht, about my hurt and disbelief at what had happened to my world. Bob responded warmly to

this little girl who felt frightened and alone. He recognized that I needed extra attention and he saw that I got it. It seemed that at church there were always willing adults to listen to me, to take me seriously, to care for me. I was traumatized and in shock, a lonely child, hurt and angry. Not surprisingly, in this state, I had few friends in elementary school. Things were different for me on Sunday morning, however. I remember clearly the first day at First Church, the warmth of the teacher, Laure Sweet, and the acceptance of me in the class by the other children. In public school I was singled out for ridicule; at church that never happened. At the time, I didn't know why this was, I just knew that I felt enormous relief. In retrospect, I believe that it had to do with the teacher and the church school program. I believe that it had to do with what was expected of children in their treatment of others. Slowly, I ventured out of my shell. By the time I got to high school, I'd managed to make some friends in public school, but at church I became a leader. I was active in youth group (those good ol' L.R.Y. days!) at church and in the District. The church and its minister saved my life, saved my soul. Never doubt for a moment the importance of the work that our congregations are involved in, that **we** are involved in.

Bob Schacht's ministry to me and the example he set at First Church set me on the road to ministry. I went to theological school in 1977. Bob died in 1978. I was by then long gone from R.I.. A "Parson's Creed" by George Patterson was printed in First Unitarian's newsletter in Bob's honor. I cut it out, wanting it to guide my ministry. This is "A Parson's Creed" by George Patterson, in honor of Bob:

To find what shining quality it is that makes each one of us loved by someone; to learn to listen interestedly and like it; to leave as much of the talking as possible to those who thrive on it; never to exhaust my resources by endeavoring to impress others of what I know; to avoid finalities in thought, words, and deeds, both as to persons and principles; to be generous in my speech of pleasant truths and when

unpleasant truths must be spoken to do it in love; to maintain at all times the maximum of serenity; to ration strictly all unforgiving angry acts and words down to the actual need in maintaining my self-respect; to avoid wholesale condemnations at all times; to have sufficient courage to be simple, direct, and unassuming; to keep my sense of humor and to dispense it with discrimination and care; to be sympathetic and helpful but not beyond the point where it contributes to weakness and selfish evasion of plain duty; to be friendly and sympathetic without the tinge of professionalism; to think of myself as being settled in my parish rather than over it; to bear in mind always that it is the people to whom the title of the church is entailed, not the minister; to be able at all times to put myself in the pew in my church and honestly report to myself whether I'd be there the next Sunday or not, having listened to me; to be appreciative and ever aware that while the church is my principle business it has the right to claim only its just proportion of my people's time; to maintain a quality of dignity that bends but does not break; never to relinquish my right to say what I think nor my obligation to listen courteously and graciously to what others think; to live in such a way that argument for my religion is unnecessary. Selah.

Now, I daresay that most of you gathered here this evening have never before heard of Bob Schacht or perhaps even the First Unitarian Church. Bob was active in District affairs but wrote no great books of prayers or sermons. The church he served -- tho large -- does not stand out as a pillar in our Association. He was just a regular minister, in a regular church. When Charles Brookfield, an actor, was mistakenly reported to be dead, he read his obituary in the paper. It said, "He was not a great actor, but he was invaluable in many small parts."[3] For most of us, ministers and churches alike, that's no small thing: to be invaluable in many small parts. To be invaluable in many small parts saves souls.

Charles Howe said that a minister "should serve as a leader -- the leader of a religious community . . . ." Yet, being <u>the</u> leader or even <u>a</u> leader, seems more difficult than it was 13 years ago. It is a function of our culture, I think, to be increasingly mistrustful of leadership. Certainly our political leaders inspire no great following among most of us. Some of us took secret delight when a couple of the great leaders of the "Religious Right" fell in disgrace. But

then, we have not been immune from our own scandals, both large and small. Leadership is suspect in our culture and it is no wonder that it is suspect among us. We have been called, after all, "the Protestants of the Protestants," the protesters of the protesters. We have a kind of radical laicizm in our form of governance, our polity. First and last, in congregational polity, the church belongs to its members, not its minister. Yet the clergy are the people we set apart to inspire us, to provide leadership in our churches. -- Even as we do this, some of us are ambivalent about it. Some of us are ambivalent about it because we do not feel confidence in the minister, do not want to follow him or her. Some of us have problems with authority (yes, it's true), or want to be the leader ourselves. Yet it is sure that an institution without leadership isn't going very far or very fast. Sometimes the ambivalence about leadership is ambivalence about change itself. Hamstring the leadership, clergy or lay, in a congregation and the congregation cannot move.

But perhaps we don't <u>want</u> our churches to change, to go very far very fast. W.H. Auden, dead now 20 years, called his the "age of anxiety." -- How much more anxious we seem now! Most of us would readily acknowledge that anxiety about change and loss of control are at the root of the activities of the militia and of terrorists, domestic and otherwise. Although I doubt that many in this room are militia members or builders of bombs in our basements, I have no doubt that even we are anxious in the present age. We are well aware of the problems of the world yet we hardly know what is most pressing or most deserving of our time and attention. So many things need to be done, and we have limited time and energy. We worry, too, about losing our jobs in "downsizing." Will healthcare continue to be universal in Canada or will those of us living in the U.S. keep our medical insurance? Are our children safe? Are we safe? It

seems as if there are a lot of problems, individual and collective, with little sense among us about how to proceed in dealing with them. That is, of course, just the problem with anxiety: it is very diffuse. June Callwood (in her book, Emotions) says, " . . . (T)he difference between fear and anxiety is whether something appropriate can be done; indecision produces vast quantities of anxiety. Anxiety itself is anxiety producing."[4] Cultural historian Ray Browne observes, "We have always had two or three Rocks of Gibraltar we could count on: the church, the bank, and the law."[5] In this country, the bank you had last week has changed its name this week and the law seems often to have little to do with justice. Is it any wonder that the anxieties of our age sometimes ooze out inappropriately in conflict in our churches?

Still, when our churches are functioning well, the minister does have authority. I would say that the minister **must** have authority. We long ago discarded the absolute authority of particular scriptures. Even before that, we in the liberal tradition discarded the authority of a hierarchical church. We need, I believe, the authority of the clergy. We need to invest authority in the office of minister.

The minister's authority to lead is derived from several sources. First is the calling to ministry, a sense that one must become a minister. (This is not unique to clergy as some are called to other professions, other kinds of work.) There is specialized training for ministry, most often theological education. It is one of the few kinds of education left that would make one a generalist as well as a specialist. Clergy are expected to know a little bit about finance, a little bit about music, a little bit about administration, something of church history, something about world religions, as well as quite a bit about counseling, lifespan religious education, and preaching and worship

design. AND the minister is expected to be a specialist in weaving it all together in a meaningful design. Unitarian Universalist ministers are credentialed by the Ministerial Fellowship Committee of the UUA. In effect, the MFC examines the call and the training and commends candidates to churches and institutions. There is the authority conferred at ordination, the public avowal of commitment to Unitarian Universalism and its congregations. In our free church tradition, ordination is conferred only by churches. It says, in effect, "We see your gift for professional religious leadership. We wish to set you apart while affirming that you are part of us." Finally, for Parish Ministers and Ministers of Religious Education, there is a call from a particular congregation which says, "Come, be our minister. You are the person we choose to guide us at this time. Inspire us! Comfort us! Challenge us! Preach and teach the truth to us, as you are given to know it, in love." -- In the final analysis, the authority to be your minister, personally or as a congregation, must come from you. You make someone your minister. That power can only come from you.

When I was in theological school, I did an internship with Judy and Harry Hoehler in Weston, MA. I marveled then at Judy's ability to speak a prophetic message about hunger, poverty, and homelessness to the folks in that very affluent Boston suburb. I did not understand, then, how she (to my mind) "got away with it." The message seemed extraordinarily radical and challenging. Later this story, her story, was published:

When I was in Divinity School, I had a course with George Buttrick who at that time was Preacher to the University but had been for many years Minister of the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, one of the Great pulpits in New York City. He used to tell the story of a Unitarian minister in whose congregation sat an important industrialist. Sunday after Sunday this man was in his pew, even though the views espoused from the pulpit were frequently anathema to him. After one particularly disconcerting sermon, another member of the congregation approached the

industrialist with the following question: "Why do you come so faithfully when you so often disagree with what the minister says?" "Ah," smiled the industrialist, "Let me tell you. About a year ago I was very depressed, on the verge of suicide. I went to see the minister, spent over an hour in the parsonage study, but, when I left, I was still intent on ending my life. It was early evening and I walked to the bridge over the river. As I prepared to mount the rail, I was aware that I was not alone. I turned and there was the minister, about 30 paces behind me. 'Go away,' I called. 'I don't want your company.'

'I'm not accompanying you,' the minister replied. 'I'm simply out for an evening stroll.' Angrily, I plunged deeper into the park. Seeing that I was still being followed, I turned back into the city. All night I walked the streets. Every time I turned around, there was the minister, a discreet distance behind me. Finally morning came. Exhaustion overtook me and the urge to kill myself left. Only when I put the key in my own door did the minister turn to go home. Let me tell you: whatever the minister wishes to preach about, I will listen."[6]

And who is the hero of this story? At first it would seem to be the minister, who saved the parishioner from suicide. -- But I'm not so sure. If the industrialist had not <u>first</u> sought out HIS minister, there would be no story to tell. And further, the industrialist might have acknowledged the minister's help on that one occasion, but stayed away from the church on account of the views from the pulpit with which he disagreed. He did not do that either. He acknowledged the covenant between himself and his minister. He honored the covenant. He kept the covenant.

Ministers are not "hired" by congregations nor are we "employed" by boards. We are <u>called</u>. The nature of the relationship is a covenant. It's a subtle but important difference that bears lifting up, I think. After a Search Process, a whole congregation extends a call to a minister. It's not just that the minister has the right skills for the job at hand. It's more elusive than this. Skills are important, to be sure, but it's your ability to invest this particular minister with authority for you and your congregation that is key. It's your ability to say, "Come, let us work together to build up this church."

In the letter to the Ephesians (3:7) in the Christian

Scriptures, Paul wrote, "Of this gospel, I was made a minister." "I was made a minister." How strange this seems to me! I am "made a minister" and re-made, all of the time. It is the people with who I minister that make and re-make me. I was 27 years old when I graduated from theological school and was ordained. Feeling ill-equipped for parish ministry, I applied to do a residency in Clinical Pastoral Education at the University of Virginia Medical Center. I felt very young and very green -- and indeed I was! On my first day with a floor assignment, I was told that a patient wanted to see me. This was something of a relief as, presumably, the patient had an agenda. I'd least I'd have something to respond to. With some trepidation I went into the room. I was shocked at what I found there. There was an old but quite beautiful black woman, in silk pajamas, wearing full make up, and with the longest fingernails I'd ever seen painted bright red. -- Definitely not your average hospital patient! After I introduced myself she said, "Pastor, please sit down. I've been waiting for you. There's a lot weighing on my heart as I wait for the test results." And I sat and she talked and I listened. She asked me to pray and I did. I stayed at the University of Virginia for 2 years, and she was in and out of the hospital for much of that time, battling the illness that would finally claim her life. Each time she was admitted, she asked for me, her "hospital pastor." Her name was Georgia Brown, the very one for whom the Harlem Globetrotters themesong is named. Her husband, Chauncy, wrote it for her. Sweet Georgia Brown made me a minister.

In 1982 I was called to be the minister at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda, the westernmost congregation in our District, in Southern Ontario. While I was slightly less young and less green by this time, I knew no more about the parish than I had when I went to Virginia. But Olinda, too, made me a minister. They knew what a church was. They

had trained their share of fresh-out-of-seminary-graduates over the years. The first year I was there, the United Nations Sunday theme was aging. So, I preached on it, given what I knew from my 29 years of living. It did not go especially well. The following week was the Board Meeting. As people gathered, there was critique of my efforts of the Sunday before. Finally Marion, a somewhat crusty woman of few words, spoke up. "Well," she said, "I didn't think she did too badly . . . for not knowing what she was talking about." The criticism was justified yet warmhearted. And I was made a minister. These are but two examples of my being made a minister. I am made and re-made all of the time.

In his Discourse, Charles Howe predicated that power would be shared "more freely and easily" between clergy and lay people. He said, "The minister should promote the idea that in a church the members are called on to support and sustain each other in a mutual ministry. Thus the minister serves as a 'minister to ministers.'" He was, I believe, right on target with this prediction. We have long talked about "the ministry of the laity." This has been thought of as empowering lay people to do ministry in their churches. More recently, however, attention has been drawn (by, for example, such places as the Alban Institute) to the ministry that lay people do in their day to day lives. How, for example, do the Purposes and Principles inform what you do with your Monday to Saturday self, the life you have away from your congregation? If religion is about the highest and the best that we know, isn't it logical to imagine that how we live day by day will be informed by those values? -- Of course it is!

I believe that Charles is also right about power sharing in our churches. I believe that this is a good thing, but it is also a delicate balance, easily out of kilter. It is these issues of power and authority between clergy and laity to

which I wish to devote the remainder of my time. Power and authority can cause us, clergy and laity, no end of trouble. Charles noted, "The minister's commitment to the church is not necessarily greater than that of a layperson, but the opportunity for service is." A congregation calls a minister (or ministers, but even when there is more than one, they are often called separately) and that person devotes his or her time to the work. Presumably, laypeople do something else with most of their time. This time differential gives the minister some power.

Now I know, I know, that we do not like to think about power and authority. We like to think that in our egalitarian religion that all are equal. In some senses, of course, we are. Recently, the East Aurora church has been working on Mission and Vision Statements. One phrase that made it into a draft said that they would aspire to have each voice have power. I liked it, found it rather poetic, but several folks hated the word, power, and out it went. This is reflective, I think, of how we want to focus on equality at the expense of naming power. We all know, at least intellectually, that it is impossible to maintain structures of any size without power and authority. Surely it is better to have power and authority out in the open, articulated, regularized, than to pretend that they do not exist at all.

The most obvious way that authority is set out in church is by the by-laws. The by-laws empower groups (boards, councils, committees) and individuals to do the work of the church. Normally, by-laws give some formal power to the clergy, most often the power of a free pulpit, the ability to "speak the truth, in love." -- But woe to the board that does not have its finger on the pulse of the congregation and woe to the minister who tries to be a prophet without being, without first being, a pastor. The board may have the power to make some important decision, but it will lose its

authority if it is not listening carefully. The minister may have the power to say anything he or she wishes, but will lose authority with the congregation if the people do not know first that the minister loves them.

As I said before, ministers have authority by training, Fellowship, ordination, and the call to a particular congregation. In my experience, individual laypeople in a congregation also have power, hold sway. In some congregations big givers have inordinate power (a dangerous situation, I might add). In most congregations there are "elders," people who have reputational power, individuals who have widespread respect. Often these elders do not hold formal positions any longer, but they once did. They've been around a long time, seen ministers and fads and fashions come and go. I've been blessed (mostly), with elders who used their power judiciously and well, for the good of the whole congregation. But there is also another kind, the elder who would use his or her power to maintain control, to block sharing with others, to prevent change and growth.

At one point in our history, boards were thought to have control of the church's temporal affairs and ministers were thought to have control of the church's spiritual affairs. This is not a bad distinction, although stated like that it is a bit too cut and dried. It feels to me as if there is something of the truth in it. At least it suggests a balance, the balance which exists, I believe, between the power of the clergy and the power of the laity.

A congregation calls a minister, not a search committee, not a board. The congregation also has a formal structure, usually in the by-laws, to revoke the call. Yet, in another sense, the only way for me to be the minister to a particular congregation is for the congregation, the individuals and the board and the committees, to let me be the minister, to

invite me into the life of the church. I will always have the authority of the office of ministry. Any authority I have with you, you give to me, and you may take away. Ministers know that the church belongs to its members, who were there before we came, and who will go on being the church long after we are gone. Do not underestimate the power of the laity. Certainly, wise ministers do not.

A particular minister has the authority inherent in the office. He or she also has a kind of authority that grows as the years increase in a particular congregation. It is no small thing to be granted the power to preach, teach, and speak the truth as we may be given to know it. Ministers take this seriously, and if we are wise, we use it judiciously. Ministers have power because of the time we spend at the task and because of the information we are, of necessity, privy to.

Of course, some of the powers held by clergy and laity are overlapping. But power is not some finite resource which must be carefully guarded. Ministers who are secure in their power and authority, working together with laypeople who are secure in their power and authority, build powerful churches. Together we might build churches that change things -- and people. Heaven knows, we might even save a soul or two or three -- or more.

All of us, clergy and lay alike, at our best, want what's best for the institution and its members. Each partner in this mysterious covenant is powerful, has authority. You need not wrestle with me for mine and I need not wrestle with you for yours. God knows, there's plenty to be done by each of us and by all of us together. Together. We're in this together. A covenant must be carefully kept by all parties. I do my best when others look for the best in me. I'll bet you do, too.

And one final story:

There was a Benedictine community to whom nobody came. As the monks grew old, they became more and more disheartened because they couldn't understand why their community was not attractive to other people. Now in the woods outside the monastery there lived an old rabbi. People came from all over to talk to him about the presence of Yahweh in creation. Years went by and finally the abbot himself went into the woods, leaving word with his monks, "I have gone to speak to the rabbi." (It was of course considered humiliating that a Christian community had to go back to the synagogue to find out what was wrong with them.)

When the abbot found the rabbi's hut in the woods, the rabbi welcomed him with open arms as if he had known that he was coming. They put their arms around each other and had a good cry. The abbot told the rabbi that his monks were good men but they spread not fire, and the community was dying. He asked the rabbi if he had any insight into the work of Yahweh in their lives. The rabbi replied, "I have the secret and I will tell you once. You may tell the monks and then none of you is ever to repeat it to one another." The abbot declared that if they could have the secret, he was sure his monks would grow.

So the rabbi looked at him long and hard and said, "The secret is that among you, in one of you is the Messiah!" The abbot went back to his community and told the monks the secret. And lo! as they began to search for the Messiah in one another they grew, they loved, they became very strong, very prophetic. And the old (story) ends: "From that day on, the community saw (God) in one another and flourished!"[7]

NOTES

1. Jones, Loyal and Edd Wheeler, eds., Hometown Humor, USA: Over 300 Jokes and Stories From the Porch Swings, Barber Shops, Corner Cafes and Beauty Parlors of America (Little Rock, Ark.: August House, 1991), 140-41., cited by Sweet, Leonard I. and K. Elizabeth Rennie, Homiletics (North Canton, OH: Communication Resources, 1993) Vol. 5, No. 2, p. 17.

2. Howe, Charles, "The Future of the Ministry," Josephine Gould Discourse delivered at the St. Lawrence District Annual Meeting, Ithaca, NY., April 16, 1983.

3. Sweet, Leonard I. and K. Elizabeth Rennie, Homiletics, Op. cit., Vol. 5, No. 3, p. 46.

4. Callwood, June, Emotions (Toronto: Doubleday Canada Ltd., 1986), p. 211.

5. Op. cit., Homiletics, Vol 4, No.4, p. 34.

6. Schulz, William, ed., Transforming Words (Boston, Skinner House. 1984) p. 78.

7. Chittiser, Joan D., Living the Rule Today: A Series of Conferences on the Rule of Benedict (Erie, PA,: Benet Press, 1982) p. 98-99, cited in Homiletics, Op. cit. Vol. 3, No. 3, p. 34.