

Why Second Parish?
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Introduction

Last week I discussed how religion can help us, why people might turn to church as a “spiritual gym” to keep their souls in shape just as they go to a physical fitness gym to take care of their bodies. Since giving that sermon, I have found a passage from contemporary theologian Stanley Hauerwas who sums up most of what I was trying to say:

Saints cannot exist without a community, as they require, like all of us, nurturance by a people who, while often unfaithful, preserve the habits necessary to learn the story of God.

We need help preserving habits, and the effort matters even when the result may falter. I could have made my sermon a good deal shorter with that quotation! But building on consideration of “why go to church” in general, this morning I’d like to look at the question of “why go to Second Parish” specifically. What is it about this church that nurtures and develops spiritual growth?

This little church has been around for 269 years as a church of worshippers. There must be some reason why it has lasted so long; something it has managed to offer that justifies its existence; something that has made it worth the time and the effort and the commitment of almost three centuries. I’d suggest two things: the church theology and the church community. Now, it’s not completely possible to separate theology and community here, but I’m going to give it a try and hope you’ll give me some space where I find it impossible to separate the two.

Theology

First of all, the theology of Second Parish offers a rich atmosphere for exploring and expanding an understanding of the meaning of life and its spiritual nature. Unitarian

Universalism welcomes many religious and even non-religious points of view. It's not a faith with dogma, rather it is one with principles for behavior and guidance for the great search for meaning. If you turn to the responsive reading based on the Unitarian Principles, found in #594 in the back of the gray hymnal, you'll see that these principles affirm and promote rather than instruct to believe. Unitarian Universalism doesn't tell you what to think. Rather, it encourages the search for belief and suggests characteristics of that search that might help achieve its goal. We are open to all sorts and sources of wisdom in addition to the Bible: Jewish, Hindu, Islamic, Buddhist, Chinese sources as well as National Public Radio, *Scientific American*, *The New York Times*, contemporary fiction and many, many others.

This openness has been part of Second Parish from the beginning. Even in the church's early days the parishioners embraced hearing about different Christian denominations, avoiding sectarianism. They were, after all, grounded in keeping open minds – having built the church as a radical solution to the need for winter church services in South Hingham. In 1742 the people of South Hingham broke away from 1st Parish downtown because that church appeared indifferent to the needs of residents in this end of town. There was just one church in town, and in those days it was the official church as church and state were still intertwined. The 18th century church in this Commonwealth was charged with serving the community in many ways, but the problem people of South Hingham faced traveling to winter worship seemed unimportant to the town. So the people of South Hingham built this church to address the problem. Those rebellious folks took action to make sure “loving your neighbor as yourself” was being lived. Of the sixty-five people who signed the church's first covenant, about two-thirds were women, a marginalized group in colonial government. This church wasn't going to leave anyone out.

Yes, Second Parish remembers its history (and you can see the concept of community trying to creep in here.) We have a tendency to look back on what has been learned in the past to see if any of that experience and insight might be useful now. So we appreciate where we have come from; we value our religious heritage. And if initially it was Jesus's

second great commandment that supported action, in time that allowed welcoming Buddha's insight that "seeing himself in others, one ... feels compassion for all beings;" or in "Nothing but good comes to him who loves others as he loves himself" from *The Tao Te Ching*; or "the true yogi, recognizes the Self in all beings and acts accordingly" from *The Bhagavad Gita*. Our own history reminds us of the importance of loving one another. We have a strong commitment to taking care of community, a commitment expressed in our focus on local need that defined us from the beginning and leads us to concern with issues of social justice.

As this church developed through the late 18th and early 19th century, it remained true to maintaining respect for each individual, specifically in terms of religious views. Many New England Congregational churches of the time became Unitarian. Our first minister, the Reverend Daniel Shute, had been moving the church towards consideration of Jesus as an exceptional teacher, but not the Son of God. Supported by a congregation that sought to minimize differences among Protestant denominations, he guided the church toward seeking to make life on earth better for all, in the spirit of Jesus's teachings. Second Parish churchgoers were eager to hear sermons from wide ranging points of view even then – actually specifying in an 1830's charge to the minister that Universalist teachings were to be heard in one-fifth of all services.

This approach reflects a strong vein of pragmatism in theology. As early as the 17th century, leading scholar John Selden pointed out that:

Glorious church is like a magnificent feast; there is all the variety that may be, but every one chooses out a dish or two that he likes, and lets the rest alone; how glorious soever the Church is, every one chooses out of it his own religion, by which he governs himself, and lets the rest alone. (*Table Talk 1686*)

People WILL believe what they want, perhaps treating the teachings of their church as a buffet from which they select what appeals. Second Parish has just always been quite open about that possibility and sought to nurture everyone at the table.

Interestingly enough, Second Parish – a Unitarian Universalist church – has never moved fully away from certain elements of Christian tradition such as studying Jesus and recognizing the Bible as great narrative, a source of profound insight. This church manages to hold in balance some traditional theology, elements of world religions, and the latest scientific explanations. Which isn't to say that individuals don't have strong individual beliefs. But it is to acknowledge the truth in today's Centering Thought: "We find comfort among those who agree with us - growth among those who don't." Church should be a spiritual home that offers comfort and challenge. As Beecher said in this morning's reading, it is the differences among us that add to the "richness and beauty of the wood." So we encourage discussion; we model diversity in thought; we take the responsibility for the search and for service to others. Our theology here requires that we own what we believe, respect what others believe, and join together to act for service to others. No, we're not perfect in our quest to do all this. But we understand and share the goal.

Community

If our theology is one response to "Why Second Parish?" the second response is community. Second Parish offers a caring, family-sized community that accepts you as you are; offering love and respect freely in the context our imperfect humanity.

Yes, we are officially considered a family-sized church, which is defined as a church with 50 people in attendance at weekly services. We could grow quite a bit and still be family-sized. In this sized church, there is a strong commitment and care amongst the parishioners. Everyone DOES know your name. Empathy is powerfully present. I see that in so many instances when joys and concerns expressed in the sanctuary are followed up by parishioners at coffee hour and during the week. People genuinely care about each other. Oh, at times such dynamics can be both exasperating and enriching. Sound like family? But there is a strong foundation of acceptance, respect and love; a history of commitment and shared work; an awareness that we are all human, we all have gifts and failings, good times and bad times.

One reason why our social outreach is so local is because our church heart beats around relationship. By design we are not to know the clients of the Food Pantry we house, but we have deep and strong relationships with the Food Pantry workers. On our Second Sunday we give our full offering to organizations that are usually local – doing work to help in our own and surrounding communities where there is considerable and complex need. Still, strong empathy allows our horizons to expand. Just this past week a parishioner was talking to me about how we might adopt a refugee family from Syria. I believe the impetus for that idea came from empathetic relationship – identifying as a parent with desperate parents carrying children from one hell to another. We are family sized in the family of humanity.

Like any family, we have our own stories to tell. So we retell our stories, we honor our traditions – never more so than when they speak to the present and the future. We celebrate Christmas and Palm Sunday and Easter for their richness in the narrative and the promise of who this family has been; can be. Like any family, we delight in the description and in the understanding, we ponder the questions that the words of the narrative bring. We hear what still resonates, and in these particular stories it is the “bringing in of a better hope” – words from Hebrews in the New Testament and words that still echo. The voice echoes and the voice evolves as we learn more.

So Why Second Parish?

So why Second Parish? Two major reasons. One, the theology. This is a place that looks for how faith speaks to us and OF us. This is a church that invites you into the exploration, the search for answers and will embrace you as you seek. Two, the community. This is a place that values you – however you struggle; however you strive. This is a church that welcomes you and asks that you show the same openness; a church that stands by you; a church that is able to take the long view because it remembers and remembering helps it look ahead.

Why Second Parish, indeed. It has so much to offer as a spiritual home or as a step towards a spiritual home. Enter, rejoice, and come in.