

## Seeing Through Windows

May 27, 2007

Rev. Jim Sherblom

First Parish in Brookline

These words from Rev. Forrest Church: You are at a dinner party, and somehow the uncomfortable information leaks out that you are the only one there who goes to church. “What sort of church?” the others ask. “Well, it’s not really a church – you see I am a UU.” “Oh, I have always wondered about UUs. What do you actually believe?” “Actually nothing – well, no, not really nothing, more like anything...” Forrest Church, minister at the All Souls UU congregation in NYC knows the difficulty of describing who we are. He writes: “Theology is poetry not science. We are inside the Cathedral of the World where there are millions of windows. In this respect we are many, but the same light shines through all. We cannot look directly at the sun, even though one sun (a Unitarian idea) shines on all that we see through every window (a Universalist idea). Some conclude theirs is the only window. However, we are more alike in our limited perspectives than we differ in our limited knowledge. This is our essential unity, the central pillar of the Cathedral. Faced with different perspectives, we can convert, destroy, ignore, or respect. However, we do not and must not permit stone throwing in the Cathedral.”

Notice the combination of setting, light, music, word, and images in this place. They reflect a transcendentalist orientation which came here with Frederick Henry Hedge, minister here during the third quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. So it is fitting that we remember him with a window that portrays the lamp of inspiration and the words: “They that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament.” Our chancel table generally holds two candles, flowers, and a flaming chalice. The candles are a centering device for our contemplation and a reminder that this is sacred space. The beauty and transience of the flowers remind us that we partake of the beauty, blessings, and sorrows of this world as transient beings. And we have added flaming chalice banners here in the chancel to help us remember who we are! The flaming chalice is the most central symbol of 21<sup>st</sup> century Unitarian Universalism, and has as many meanings as there are UUs, but can be thought of as the fire of inspiration within the loving community of the chalice. On some Sundays we supplement these symbols with other religious symbols that reflect other aspects of Unitarian Universalist or honor particular religious traditions. There are crosses engraved into some of the wood fixtures and an old chancel bible lying open on the table near the silent candles of joy and concern, which also serve to honor our heritage. The engraved crosses on the chairs and the center of the cross in the window honoring John Pierce are Canterbury crosses, which is to say they have four arms of equal length, commemorating the four elements of life and the four directions. These equilateral crosses, common in Anglican churches, seek to balance the newness of Christianity with the ancient traditions of more earth-centered religions.

The seven Tiffany windows in the chancel commemorating our first seven ministers include among their symbols: a crown, a sword, a shield, a suit of armor, a six pointed star, a menorah, a cross wrapped in grape vines, and this flaming genie lamp (predecessor to our flaming chalice). The star honors Jesus’ birth, the cross his death, and the crown his resurrection, all still today used as strong Christian images of incarnation of the divine in the midst of life. So we memorialize our first minister Rev. Allen here in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century with words from Jesus: “I am the resurrection and the life.” These early Congregationalists share with many of us today the understanding that Jesus is human, a great prophet, God’s anointed and beloved one (which

is what Christ means), but clearly human. When they sang “Jesus Christ is Risen Today” on Easter, they celebrated the transformative power of Jesus for them, not his divinity. The sword, the shield, and the suit of armor are medieval Christian symbols meaning putting on the breastplate of love, the helmet of hope, the shield of faith; which along with the light of good works, and the lamp of righteousness will strengthen one’s way through life. So we remember Rev. Cotton Brown with these words: “Putting on the breastplate of Faith and Love, our helmet our hope of salvation.” And his successor Rev. Nathaniel Potter has this admonition for us: “Above all take the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked.” This was mid-18<sup>th</sup> century Brookline, peaceful yet surrounded by religious upheaval and the great Awakening.

The menorah and the Star of David are in the 21<sup>st</sup> century often used exclusively as Jewish symbols but they hold meaning here as well. The six-pointed star was a frequent mystical symbol in ancient religions, notably among the ancient Akkadians, Babylonians, Egyptians, and Zoroastrians. It was often used as indicative of the universality of divinity breaking into life, symbolized by its interlocking male and female triangles and is pointing to the six directions, including up and down, or time and the inward journey. Early Jewish mystics, later featured in Kabbalah, came to this symbol to recognize the particular Jewish covenant with God, and the dichotomy of human life. Note this commentary: “In Kabbalah the two triangles represent the dichotomies inherent in man: good vs. evil, spiritual vs. physical, etc. The two triangles may also represent the reciprocal relationship between the Jewish people and God. The triangle pointing up symbolizes our good deeds which go up to heaven and then activate a flow of goodness down to the world, symbolized by the triangle pointing down.” Thus in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when these windows were made, the Star of David still represented a reciprocal relationship between God and his people, for all those in the Judeo-Christian tradition. So we remember Rev. Joseph Jackson with these words of St. Paul: “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you.” However in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Nazis used this star as a symbol to identify Jews in the Holocaust, and ever since it has become increasingly a primarily Jewish symbol, often used as a sign of the nation of Israel, so a very secular symbol.

The menorah dates to the earliest Jewish texts, those that became part of the book of Exodus in the Torah, and is the name given to the seven branched golden candlesticks designed to illuminate the interior of the most holy of holies. When Moses spent forty days and forty nights on Mount Sinai with God, he got the ten commandments on stone tablets, but he also received directions on how to make the Ark of the Covenant, the table for the chancel, the Tabernacle to hold the Ten Commandments and later the Torah, and a menorah to light the way in the dark interior of holiness. As instructed in Exodus 25:31-40: “You shall make a lampshade of pure gold...and there shall be six branches going out of its sides, three branches of the lampshade going out of one side of it and three branches of the lampshade going out of the other side of it... and their branches shall be of one piece with it, the whole of it one hammered piece of gold. You shall make the seven lamps for it; and the lamps shall be set up so as to give light on the space in front of it... And see that you make them according to the pattern for them, which is being shown you on the mountain.” These instructions for the traveling Tabernacle, used while the Israelites still wandered in the desert, were further elaborated in 1Kings 7:48-49 when Solomon replicated and expanded the holy candlesticks in the Temple in Jerusalem: “So Solomon made all the vessels that were in the house of the Lord: the golden altar, the golden table for the bread of the Presence, the lampshades of pure gold, five on the south side and five on the north, in front of the inner sanctuary; the flowers, the lamps, and tongs of gold.” The bread of the Presence and the wine of the essence date back at least 3,000 years in these ancient

Judeo-Christian traditions. They go back to ancient texts, and the builders of this place followed an ancient formula. The text they chose to go with this menorah in memorializing Rev. Fred Knapp was: "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in Heaven." This too is a quote from the Apostle Paul.

Which brings us to this central window commemorating the Rev. John Pierce: the cross depicted here with grape vines or plants entwining it, and the quote from Jesus: "I am the true vine, you are the branches," which is known as a living cross or the tree of life. It focuses upon the interconnected nature of being and the very centrality of such life in our worship. These seven windows move from darkness into light, centering on the central window which reminds us in our living to choose life. This Transcendentalist etude widens out into the sanctuary with the side windows topped with eightfold blossoms, reflecting the eightfold path into being, a hidden wholeness here in our midst. There are angels in this place, as these two large side windows depict for us, a holy grail still to be sought and found here, compassion both given and received, which is the secret of this place. So how shall we enter into the fullness of such a place? Bring your whole selves, be aware of the setting, symbols, and transparent light that surrounds you. Look for that which helps you on your own spiritual journey, ignoring or letting go of that which hinders or distracts upon your journey. Notice the community when it fills this space with laughter, joy, sorrow, and feeling. Try to move with the words and music each week from the darkness into the light. Most of all please refrain from throwing stones in this Cathedral! This is our spiritual home and respite on our journey. May it always be a comforting one. Amen.