

Testimonial *But First We . . . What?* Given By Darla Tewell 2/18/2018

Good morning.

My name is Darla Tewell.

Like Nancy, who spoke to us last week, I took a few wrong turns before I got here.

I was hoping to volunteer at a local organization that serves a needy population. Apparently I wasn't exactly a hot prospect. My online applications seemed to vanish. No one returned my calls. Whenever I visited, they said that no one in the building was authorized to talk to would-be volunteers. It was like trying to collect an overdue bill or serve a subpoena.

The name of the organization is "The Shepherd's Staff," and it's supported by local churches. So I figured that if I couldn't get in through the front door, maybe I could sort of weasel in through a church door. All I needed was a church affiliation.

I have known about UU forever; it was my likeliest choice. But the local UU church is tiny, and was between ministers. I ruled it out, and checked other churches. One was bold enough to hang a rainbow flag and a peace sign in conservative Westminster. But as a credal church, it wasn't right for me. With no local church tie, I abandoned the plan to volunteer at Shepherd's Staff.

While I was church shopping in Westminster, I was coming to TUUC regularly, to attend the concerts of Music in the Great Hall. I liked the bulletin boards and the newsletters that were often lying around. So I decided to look here for the opportunities that I'd been seeking at the Shepherd's Staff.

And I found them. But I also found something I wasn't really looking for. I found . . . a church.

I actually flinched the first time I heard Rev. Clare say, "But first, we have gathered to worship."

Worship?! What? I hadn't really gathered for that. I thought of worship the way Paul Simon describes it in "Sounds of Silence:" "And the people bowed and prayed, to the neon god they made."

But she kept saying the word every Sunday, and I kept flinching, until I finally heard what she often says next: Worship is about formation, and who we are as people. Worship is about considering that which is worthy of reverence. It's about lifting up the highest of human values. And as Emerson explains, "That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and our character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping, we are becoming."

And when I got past Paul Simon's neon god idea, and went with Emerson and Rev. Clare instead, I knew that I wanted the uplift that worship offers.

I'm drawn to reading pundits and cultural critics. It can be pretty unsettling stuff. In the past year, I've often encountered a couple of lines from a poem called "The Second Coming," by William Butler Yeats.

*The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

Those lines look spot-on to me. Much of our public life seems dominated by the passionate intensity of meanness. Mistrust and ill-will squirt into normal, everyday spaces, and love and compassion are often outshouted by hate and contempt.

But here, every week, the conviction and passionate intensity of the best are reflected in the words and music of our Sunday services, and in the loving and generous acts of this congregation. What I find here in worship is a reassertion of the highest of human values. And I am grateful for this reorientation toward that which is worthy of reverence.

To close, I want to say a few words about what maintains this wonderful place, stewardship.

I'm not a member of TUUC. I haven't signed the membership book. I don't participate in congregational governance. In other words, I'm not exactly a pillar of the church. But one needn't be a pillar to support TUUC. One can be a flying buttress, upholding the church from the outside. TUUC calls its flying buttresses "friends."

My financial support of this church says thanks to all who make this weekly worship experience possible. And it says thanks to our lay leaders and those who create and participate in the many wonderful opportunities we of all ages have for engagement here at TUUC.

To everyone, thank you so much, and please, do it again, and again. And to you who, first, have gathered to worship, thanks for listening to me today.