

Introduction – Red Sox Nation

It's almost summer vacation time when school is out, and families will be flocking to Fenway Park, the northeast's Mecca for major league baseball. I grew up collecting baseball cards when they still came with chewing gum. My favorite team was the Boston Red Sox, and I tried to collect the whole team in baseball cards. Even though Brattleboro was 2 hours away from Boston, I figured everyone in town was a Red Sox fan? I could easily participate in the excitement, listening to the play-by-play on radio or watching on TV. These baseball cards turned thousands of kids into educated fans, and kept the chewing gum company in business. Red Sox fans are loyal, dedicated and insanely die-hard. During my childhood and beyond, they never won the pennant. When I was growing up, the New York Yankees seemed to win the pennant every year, and I hated them for it!

In the last several years, I have got to know the Red Sox again from watching many games on TV with my mother, so I decided to check into the Red Sox Nation website on the Internet this week. They offer a Red Sox Nation game package that is sure to please committed fans. It's set for June 18th, and since my brother will be visiting Brattleboro on that date, I asked him if he wanted it for his birthday! (Fortunately for me, that's the night of his 45 high school reunion!)

Well..... here's the Red Sox Nation package:

- Two tickets to Red Sox Nation Day -- June 18, 2010 vs. Los Angeles Dodgers -- included
- Red Sox baseball hat
- Exclusive RSN Day t-shirt
- Fenway Park Tour for two people
- Personalized Scoreboard Picture
- 2010 Commemorative Citizenship Card
- 2010 Red Sox Nation decal
- Early entry to Fenway Park on game days to watch BP from the Monster (with valid game ticket)

The great thing about this package is that it is guaranteed to help any fan bond with the team and fellow fans. With a logo embossed hat and t-shirt, it will be easy for other fans to know that YOU belong to Red Sox Nation. There's not just a team, but there's a whole country of fans! What bonding and togetherness, as we united to support the Red Sox quest for the pennant in the Fall. Yes, thanks to T-shirts, logo engraved baseball caps, and the belonging and bonding experience of sitting with 37,811 fans at Fenway Park, you can truly belong to Red Sox Nation and join the journey to the land of World Series playoffs!

Scripture Connection Text and Title Jesus intercessory prayer

In our scripture this morning Jesus is praying for his fan club. His fan club, is, of course the eleven disciples. This is a very interesting passage, for we get to experience Jesus' intercessory prayer for us. Jesus is praying not for us to win the pennant in the church baseball league, but for us to be one with God the Father, as he is one with God the Father.

Life and Spiritual Goal

Jesus is right on target with his prayer, for our life spiritual goal is indeed to become one with God. Becoming one with God, finding spiritual closeness to God is a life-long task that is never quite achieved. How do we achieve this goal? Because becoming one with God is a life-long quest, I believe the phrase in the sermon title describes the spiritual journey best: "Begin, Belong, Become."

Begin, Belong, Become

First off I want to confess that I did not invent this pithy phrase. I saw it on the signboard on the front of the Methodist church in Montpelier when I was parked so I could visit the Kellogg Library. I thought it was the sermon title until I later learned that it was the un-official motto of the church. It is such a good motto, that it would fit any church. I think it is a great motto for a church, and I challenge you all to find a motto for the United Church during the interim time. Let's look at this motto and see how it fits the church and Jesus' intercessory prayer for us.

Begin

This motto reminds us that our faith life is a journey. Our faith journey does not begin at birth, but it begins with an awareness of the spiritual path. Sometimes the beginning story starts with "my parents took me to church, and I became aware of God in Sunday School" Sometimes our faith moves toward depth, and begins to take on some a new form with a life event. In order for depth to be reached, there must be a first step, a beginning.

Belong

Belonging is the most important thing in becoming part of and living in community. Jesus knew that faith development is nurtured and supported through community. Ironically, I don't think Jesus viewed our faith journey as a purely personal thing. That is why he called the twelve disciples, so they could grow together in faith, so they could "become." Peter Block in his excellent book on community puts "belonging" at the center of community building and social transformation. In fact, this theme is built into the title of the book: Community: The Structure of Belonging.

It will be no surprise to many of you that Peter Block emphasizes the small group as the basic element of growth and change. He says this, "The future is created one room at a time, one gathering at a time. Each gathering needs to become an example of the future we want to create. This means the small group is where transformation takes place. Large-scale transformation occurs when enough small group shifts lead to the larger change. Small groups of have the most leverage when they meet as part of a larger gathering. At these moments, citizens experience the intimacy of the small circle and are simultaneously aware that they are part of a larger whole that shares their concerns."

Indeed, when Jesus called the disciples, he began with a small group ministry. Even the Apostle Paul created small groups when he founded small house churches throughout Asia Minor.

This is also why Jesus promised his disciples that he would send the Comforter, the Holy Spirit to help them out and strengthen them. This event happened

at Pentecost, which we celebrate next Sunday, so you'll hear more about the Holy Spirit next week.

Becoming

Our movement toward oneness and closeness with God is the third part – out becoming, our personal spiritual movement toward God. All of you who have children and grandchildren have observed the “becoming” process – as toddlers become young children, and as grade schoolers become terrifyingly wonderful teens. We know from childhood development that growing up is sometimes one step ahead and two steps back. Let me now share with you an example of small group becoming that is deeply related to the present life of our church.

Search Committee Connection to Begin, Belong, Become

The Search Committee is our newest small group ministry. The choir and the Bible study group are two more of our small group ministries, and there are more. Since the Search Committee was dedicated this morning, I want to use them as a sermon illustration. The Search Committee is very much living into the “Begin, Belong, Become,” spiritual growth process. The Search Committee really “began” when they met with Rev. Pam Lucas of the Vermont Conference about 2 months ago for some training in the search process. Belonging means sharing the same journey, the same values and interests. Now “belonging” takes some sharing and some journeying together to achieve. The Search Committee Chaplain, Billie Porter, has been nurturing the belonging process in early meetings by asking each member to share their faith journey. (Sharing our personal faith story is something we could benefit from doing on an all-church basis, by the way.)

One of the ideal goals of the search process, the calling of your permanent minister, is for the Search Committee to reach a unanimous, decision about which candidate God is calling. The Search Committee will need to come to a consensus about the essential qualities needed for this church. That will take some time, and you, the congregation will be part of that discernment process. Thus over time, this church is “becoming” closer to God and seeking his will for this church, and that takes time.

The Search Committee will be alert to this “begin, belong, become” spiritual development process as they read the profiles (resumes) of prospective candidates. Candidates will inevitably talk about how they began the journey toward ordination when they felt a call to ministry. They will be explaining what it means to “belong” to a local church, and how the their local church nurtured and sustained them toward ordination and the clarification of their call. Candidates will also be sharing some of the growth areas of their spiritual life and ministry. For clergy, like all of us, are on a journey to become one with God. If some of the directions for spiritual growth for a candidate are the same as directions for spiritual growth for the United Church, then that minister might be a good candidate to help the United Church in its “becoming” closer to God.

William Barclay Quote (Daily Study Bible)

Jesus' prayer for his disciples and really for all people, “that they may all be one” has been chosen as the motto for the United Church of Christ. You will find it on the UCC logo. Because, the United Church of Christ is the union of four denominations, you might think this logo is a claim for world-wide church unity? I think this is a good idea, but not practically achievable. Listen to Biblical scholar William Barclay's take on Jesus' prayer:

“What was that unity for which Jesus prayed? It was not a unity of administration or organization. It was not in any sense an ecclesiastical unity. It was a unity of personal relationship. We have already seen that the union between Jesus and God was one of love and obedience. It was a unity of love for which Jesus prayed, a

unity in which men loved each other because they loved him, a unity based entirely on the relationship between heart and heart.”

“Christians will never organize their Churches in all the same way. They will never worship God in all the same way.... But Christian unity transcends all these differences and joins men together in love..”

Conclusion

So, we may not be enthusiastic sports fans, and we may not be concerned with becoming active citizens of Red Sox Nation, but we are committed citizens of the United Church of Christ and the Unitarian Universalist Association. As we overhear once again Jesus prayer for us that we may all be one, we can seek for practical goals of unity within our small group gatherings and beyond. Jesus charges us to love one another as he has loved us. This love for one another is the key to finding and experiencing the unity for which Jesus prayed.

I think we will discover that the more we love God, the more we will be able to love one another, and the more we love one another, the more we will be able to love God. We are on a spiritual journey with one another in Christ's church. We grow toward mystical union with God through the mysterious process of beginning, belonging and becoming. Amen!