

**UUA Large Church Conference**  
Louisville, KY  
13 March 2008 Worship Service  
Worship Leader: Rev. Davidson Loehr, Ph.D.

**PRAYER:**

If we must fail, let us fail at high endeavors. Let us not fail to be mediocre when we could instead fail to be absolutely brilliant. Let us not fall short of being moderately compassionate. Let us rather fall short of being wellsprings of love.

Of all our failures in life, perhaps the saddest are those in which we failed even to try and serve the highest and noblest ideals.

It is a sin to fail at low aims. Not because we failed, but because we aimed so low.

But it is not a sin to fail at very high aims, like aiming for truth, justice, compassion and character. Because even our failure puts us into the company of the saints, the company of those who also believe that rising to our full humanity and rising to our full divinity may be the same rising.

Striving after low and paltry ends is a boring sin, not worthy of us. Let us have greater ambition for our shortcomings. Let us vow never to fail at anything that wasn't noble and proud, never to accept lower aspirations for ourselves, our lives, our country or our world.

We confess that we will all fail at some things. But let it not be a failure of vision, or a failure of aspiration. If we must fail, let us fail at high endeavors, and then let our failures bless us — for they will.

Amen.

**SERMON: “Size Matters!”**

**Davidson Loehr**

Let's begin with Three Big Stories:

1. “On Size” (by Bernard Loomer)

*By "size" I mean the stature of one's soul, the range and depth of one's love, one's capacity for relationships. I mean the volume of life you can take into your being and still maintain your integrity and individuality, the intensity and variety of outlook you can entertain in the unity of your being without feeling defensive or insecure. I mean the strength of your spirit to encourage others to become freer in the development of their diversity and uniqueness. I mean the power to sustain more complex and enrich-*

*ing tensions. I mean the magnanimity of concern to provide conditions that enable others to increase in stature. To me, this is the fundamental category, this is the essential principle. This is the size that matters.*

## 2. “The Little Tin Fiddle”

*This is a story about the world-famous violinist Yehudi Menuhin, who died a few years back. When he was only three years old, he heard a solo violinist at a concert and found his calling. He asked for a violin for his fourth birthday. His father bought him a toy violin made of metal with metal strings. Young Menuhin burst into sobs, threw it on the ground and would have nothing more to do with it. (James Hillman, The Soul's Code, p. 17)*

*There was something in him even at age four that was insulted by being offered a toy instrument, as though he had no better music in him than that. The little tin fiddle didn't have the range, the depth or the nuance, and nobody would want to listen to it for long even if it could be played well.*

## 3. “A Magnificent Calling”

*In the 12th century, when the great cathedrals were being built in France, a visitor went into one of these huge buildings. Over to the right were carpenters, and he said to them, “What are you doing?” They looked at him like he was an idiot, and said “Can't you see? We're carpenters. We're building pews!” Then he went to some stone masons. Again he asked, “What are you doing?” They laughed, and said they were members of the masons' guild, the finest of all the guilds. They acted like just belonging to that group meant they didn't need to be doing anything at all.*

*On the other side of the room there was a peasant woman with a broom, cleaning up after the carpenters, the masons and the others. Of her too, he asked, “What are you doing?” This woman stopped sweeping, stood up to her full height, and announced proudly to him, “Me? Why I am building a magnificent cathedral to the greater glory of God!”*

That first Big Story, “On Size,” was written over thirty years ago by a liberal theologian named Bernard Loomer. He was the Dean of the University of Chicago Divinity School for a decade, then finished his career teaching religion in California, where he also began attending, and joined, a Unitarian church. Some may think he was one of us because he once joined a Unitarian church. I don't care what church he joined; I think he was one of us because he understood just what kind of size matters, and why it must be a commanding presence in our lives.

And the touching story of young Yehudi Menuhin. If he'd been given an 18<sup>th</sup> century Guarneri violin for his fourth birthday – like the one he played later in his life – he wouldn't have done justice to it. An instrument like that really takes your measure. To pick up a first-rate violin then just fiddle around with it can mark you as some sort of a tourist, or a fool. But that violin would have been good enough that he could have spent

years growing into it, and even someone with his gifts would never be likely to outplay a first-rate instrument.

Then that peasant woman in the cathedral! Her job was bigger than the jobs of the carpenters and stone masons. Not “bigger” in the sense that it was more important to the cathedral, but in the sense that it was more important to her. She lived in a world where her simple role was part of a calling that transcended even her time and place. And living within a perspective that big absolutely blesses us.

It doesn't require great talent, only a great soul. The carpenters and stonemasons were connected, in their imaginations, only to petty causes: building pews or just feeling smug because they belonged to a cool club. And whatever satisfactions or gifts of life they got from that would be equally shallow and unfulfilling.

All three of these stories are metaphors, and I want to add a fourth story, to bring them together and tie them to religion, and to us. Fifteen to twenty years ago I belonged to an ecumenical ministers' group of about forty ministers. Every Thursday, we had lunch together, and the different churches took turns hosting and preparing it. One Thursday I arrived fairly early at the small rural Presbyterian church that would serve us, and got to overhear a remarkable conversation between three Presbyterian woman who were setting the tables.

I entered in the middle of it, and pretended to ignore them, so that they would keep talking and I could eavesdrop. They had been trashing some religion — either Baptist or Catholic — and finally one woman exclaimed, “Well, thank God we're Presbyterians!” There was a silence. After a few seconds, the second woman said, “I don't think we're supposed to be Presbyterians. I think we're supposed to be Christians.” Another awkward silence, and after a few more seconds the third woman spoke. “No,” she said, “even that's too small. We're supposed to love one another, that's all.”

In this story, you have both first- and second-rate instruments. Actually, the first woman, the mere Presbyterian, was clutching about a third-rate fiddle. If she had a religion, it didn't show. She treated the church as a club — like the stonemasons in the other story — where just being around people like her made her superior to those damned Baptists or Catholics. If you asked her what these Presbyterians of hers believed, she may have done no better than giving you a half-memorized list of third-hand beliefs she had learned the way you learn the rules of a sorority or an Elks' Club.

Like the little tin fiddle, there's no moral range here, there's a bad tone to it, and it couldn't even sound good if it were played well. If all she has is that self-important hand-me-down identity of being a Presbyterian, you have to hope she'll be led around by somebody using a far better instrument in the service of a much bigger vision.

The second woman was also holding a toy instrument, though a larger one. Her second-hand identity was called “Christian.” If you asked her what she meant by that, the odds are she too would have recited a tattered list of other people's beliefs. Maybe that list would include a set of prescribed rants on things like Jesus, God, the Bible and two or three favorite teachings. But the odds are they'd be someone else's beliefs, especially if she expressed them in the same words as everyone else in the club: she would just be ranting. So she might have picked up the instrument, but had never actually

practiced it. Once more, you'd hope she'll be led around by somebody coming from a much bigger and richer place.

But that third woman — she made music. You assume she also belongs to the Presbyterian club and the Christian club. But she would not settle for such a paltry calling, any more than the four-year-old Yehudi Menuhin would pick up the tin fiddle. She made music because she was the only one who seemed to know that religion was about behavior, not belief — it's about being, not saying. After all, only members of our club or some rival club care what we believe. Those are only turf battles. And doesn't conformity of belief prove that we haven't thought any more deeply than the other club members? In any tradition, that's just the second-hand religion for their masses — whether it's called Presbyterianism or Unitarian-Universalism. It's exalting our group because they're Our Kind of People. But this is a definition of narcissism, isn't it? Those outside our club only want to know whether we can sing them a song of active caring rather than a self-righteous little ditty.

Now you see how this mixed metaphor of making big music on first-rate instruments can work in religion. It works pretty well. But it's more complex, because religion adds an ontological dimension that must command us. Honest religion isn't about anything as shallow as belief. It's about who we most deeply are and how we should live. So if this is really ontological — really about how we're built as noble humans — then you can prove it within yourselves, right now. And you can, because you knew when you heard the story of those three women that only that third woman even got it. And I suspect you may also have felt that there is something very wrong about posing as a religious person but not getting it. You know this. You're built this way. Almost all of us are. That's what it means to say it's ontological: it is absolutely built into who we are and must be if we are to come into our full humanity.

Honest religion — big-souled religion — is about that kind of size and that quality of spiritual vision that can make us useful rather than merely decorative.

This bigger size that is the real soul of liberal religion is not a new thing. Even professors of religion often speak as though it had been born in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, in the work of the great German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher. But Schleiermacher — as he knew — was a late-comer.

The spirit of liberal religion — which is opposed to the spirit of literal religion — is between about two and four thousand years old. It's not new at all, and it had multiple births. It was born in the Hindu Upanishads, where they saw that Brahman, the creative and sustaining force of the universe, is present in each of us just as the taste of salt is present throughout the oceans.

It was born in the Buddha, who saw that the secret of life isn't about gods or supernatural end-runs. It's available to all of us here and now, if only we will wake up to life's less dramatic but more authentic possibilities — and if, once awakened, we will understand that compassion is the only appropriate and life-enhancing response to all other creatures.

The spirit of liberal religion was born at about the same time in some of the ancient Hebrew prophets, who attacked the self-important rituals of the priests, and said

God was not interested in what we believed or how we bowed and scraped, but only in how we treated one another, especially the most vulnerable among us.

It was also born at least twice in China. First, in Confucius, who was concerned not with gods but with our selves here and now. And he saw that our mistake was that we conceived of ourselves as far too small, whereas our biggest and most necessary self only exists as part of the larger society around us. So our job, he believed, is to learn the care and respect that make our relationships with others flow smoothly.

Lao Tzu also gave birth to the spirit of liberal religion, the spirit of deeds not creeds in Taoism, when he wrote one of the finest moral teachings in history:

*What is a good man but a bad man's teacher?  
What is a bad man but a good man's job?  
If you don't understand this, you will get lost,  
However intelligent you are.  
It is the great secret.*

The spirit of honest religion, of being human religiously, was born at the highest and most nuanced levels of all great religions and philosophies.

My own most important spiritual and psychological center came through the Paideia culture of ancient Greece. You may not know the odd word “paideia,” but you know its ideals. The Greeks believed that the best kind of humans were both born and made. Breeding mattered – after all, all their mythic heroes were imagined as the offspring of a human parent and a god. But the noblest humans were also made, by shaping them in the image of the highest ideals the culture could articulate. That meant the most sacred treasures in ancient Greek culture were those collective ideals so high and commanding that they bestowed a dignity of character on both gods and humans. The collective noun for these highest ideals was paideia. It was in the root of their words for both children and education, as it still is for us (e.g., pediatrics and pedagogy). Mortimer Adler started a “Paideia Project,” and there are still a few Paideia Schools around. But mostly, we know of this ancient project of “salvation by character” through the Romans.

When Cicero read of the Paideia culture, he realized that the Romans had neither the word nor the concept for these noblest forms of humans that could be made through shaping their character in the image of transcendent ideals. The word he coined to translate “paideia” into Latin was perfect: humanitas, which means the essence of being most fully human. It was the root of all our Humanities education, those courses now fading from our schools, designed to bring us near the intersection of that place where our full humanity and our full divinity merged, like the ancient mythic breeding of the human and the divine. Even the Greek gods had been projections of the enduring forces of psychology and nature that always weave the fabric of the human condition. They're timeless and inclusive in ways that Western religions' Yahweh, Jesus and Mohammad are not.

And then, more than a thousand years before any of these others, the spirit of liberal religion was born in the world's oldest story, the still-magnificently modern story of Gilgamesh. He ruled over 4700 years ago, and the earliest texts of the story are from

4100 years ago – before any of today’s great religions or philosophies had been born. They saw themselves as living in the “modern age,” because writing had just been invented there a hundred years earlier. And they asked of what use were the old gods to modern people. They decided the gods had become impotent ornaments, but that the meaning and purpose of life – now up to us – were still immeasurably rich, and close at hand: through the deeds we do, the positive differences we make, the art and music we create, the love and joy we can share with families and friends, and the influence we can have on those who will come after us. There in that most ancient story was a religious vision more courageous and unfettered than that of any Western religion.

You can feel how big all of these ancient liberal visions are – a bigness that doesn’t insult the human spirit by offering the religious equivalent of little tin fiddles.

All of these were among the births of the multiple spirits of liberal religion. Any one of them can offer a commanding vision big enough to let us feel that we are building a magnificent cathedral to the greater glory of God — or the legitimate heir to what was once called God, as Gilgamesh, the Chinese, the Buddha, the Greeks and many moderns would have it.

That rich and ancient history is the tradition I stand within and try to serve as a religious liberal. I’m not a “Unitarian-Universalist,” and I hope you’re not either. Understand that I don’t mean that in a cheap way. I mean it in an expensive way, a demanding way. Denominational identities like the banalities of creeds or official “principles” are just too paltry to do justice to the human spirit. They’re little toy instruments on which no interesting music is ever going to be played, and which will drive the more aware and gifted people away, as it did the four-year-old Yehudi Menuhin. I suspect that tin-fiddle spirituality is the chief reason why we have lost almost half of our market share in the U.S. since 1961, and still don’t have many more members than we did then.

We owe our people spiritual and intellectual bigness, especially in the larger churches. These are the churches with the best chance of reaching the most people, of getting the attention of public officials and more talented teachers, writers and creative movers and shakers who need the inspiration of more than just the generic biases of cultural liberalism or a few pietistic bromides.

We gather here in Louisville, Kentucky to talk about big churches, which are defined in terms of numbers of members. But a church with a lot of members serving a shallow or self-absorbed vision is a nuisance. We each need to offer our people and our communities deep and nuanced spiritual instruments that can challenge even the most gifted among them, and an understanding of the human condition big enough both to contain our spirits and to command them. If what we offer can’t take its place proudly among the world’s most profound religions, we should be ashamed to offer it.

In the end, it doesn’t matter whether we call our spiritual center God or something else. What matters is whether we can call it forth, and invite it into our lives, our churches, and our world. The people who trust us for guidance toward becoming more fully human need to feel that their best efforts are helping to build a magnificent cathedral to God — or the legitimate heirs to what was once called God. That kind of a vision, that kind of an instrument, is big. And that kind of size matters more than all the self-important politically correct blather in the world.

From the dawn of recorded time, the human spirit, when it's at its very best, has risen to magnificent heights, and those heights still beckon to us. We have found that spiritual size through the courage of a Gilgamesh. We have found those ennobling depths of human nature through the ontological insights of the Buddha and those anonymous authors of the Upanishads. We have learned of our larger social and political selves through the genius of sages like Confucius and Lao-Tzu. And we've learned of salvation by character and the longed-for mating of the human and divine within us, from the Greeks.

Throughout our history, when we have had the courage to seek and live our fullest humanity, we have created a few first-rate spiritual instruments which take us seriously and deeply, which both commission and command us to grow down to their depth and up to their height. None of this can be done second-hand, by joining the local "masons' guild" or reciting someone else's creeds or principles. Every one of them involves our own deep personal work to become that which beckons to us. Against this rich and poignant background, paltry denominational identities – whether Presbyterianism or Unitarian-Universalism – are inadequate, insulting and obscene.

We are called to serve bigger spirits, to play upon better instruments, and to offer those spirits and those instruments to the people who trust us – who trust us!

We owe this to those who look to us for help in recognizing a path through our complicated world. On behalf of the members of our churches and on behalf of the best that we humans have been and can be, we are invited – no, we are commanded – to serve only callings that deep and that high. Never, never anything less!