

Tim DeChristopher addresses First Unitarian Church

February 24, 2011

Reverend Tom Goldsmith: So, in addition to celebrating the past 120 years, let's look towards the future, and continue the tradition whereby we glimpse a distant perfection, and are roused to action. Nobody embraces the contemporary Unitarian spirit better than Tim DeChristopher. When he was arrested, he was in fact the same age as was Samuel Atkins Elliott when he came to Salt Lake City to speak and start this church. To glimpse a distant perfection, we must be forward-looking. And so what I'd like to do right now is a hand off. We've covered the last 120 years. Let's look toward next week and the future, by welcoming Tim DeChristopher to our pulpit to finish this sermon this morning.

Tim DeChristopher: Thank you. I appreciate the opportunity to have a few minutes today to offer up a thank you, a request, and an apology. First with the thank you: it's been a pretty interesting couple of years for me, and a pretty intense couple of years, that I really don't think I could have made it through without the support of this community. This church has been incredibly supportive of me, and that's been incredibly empowering on my part. And I feel like I've continued to grow throughout this process to meet the challenges that are continually thrown at me. And going into this process, I had no idea if I'd be able to handle it, and I figured that there was a good chance that I couldn't. But I've seen that this church has given me the strength to carry through that, and this community, with their support—with your support—has helped me to rise to that challenge. And I'm deeply, deeply grateful for that. And there's been a lot of things that have come up because of my action, and I think that there's been a lot of success from it; but the one thing that is still yet to be decided is the legacy of my action. And there's a lot of attention on my trial next week, and I think only a little bit of that attention is to see what happens inside the courtroom. I think most people know what's probably going to happen inside the courtroom. I think that attention is to see what happens outside. Because the prosecution and the government has been so clear with their intent with this prosecution: they've said that it's about setting an example, making an example out of me, that discourages others from standing up to their government when they think the government is acting unjustly. And that's really what's at stake with this trial. It's an attempt at intimidation, and it's trying to establish the precedent of fear with my action; the legacy of fear. And Terry Tempest Williams and Bill McKibben said that the best response to intimidation is joy and resolve. So my request is that this congregation lead the way in showing that joy and resolve outside of the trial, in a way that people have for hundreds of years, which is coming together and singing in the street.

I think there's something tremendously powerful that can be accomplished with people singing outside of that courtroom. It's been something that has held people together with that joy and resolve throughout social movements throughout our history, and yet has been largely forgotten by social movements of my generation. We've replaced singing in the street with the three-word chant, and we've lost a lot with in that transition. We've lost some of that power that comes from singing in the street—and part of that is that singing is kind of

like activism: if you're not very good at it, you have to do it with a lot of other people. And even for those of us that don't have that beautiful of a voice, when we sing together with a lot of other people, we see that we're a lot better than we thought we were. And it's the same with activism. I think a lot of what's holding us back is this sense of hyper-individualism; that we're just one little person, fighting against these huge forces. And that act of singing together with many other people in the street is a reminder that we're not just isolated individuals, but that we're part of something much bigger and more powerful than we ever realized; and I think this church holds a unique place to send that message. Partly because so much of the people who are on the right and are part of religious communities, they're blinded by an anti-science view that distorts their understanding of the issue. And so they don't really understand the problem. And most of those on the left, who understand the problem, they're not part of a religious community that empowers them to realize that they're actually strong enough to do something about the problem. And this church, this community, holds a unique position, where we understand the problem, and we understand that we're connected to something powerful enough to do something about the problem.

And I think that's exactly what this movement needs right now. And that's why I'm asking you to take to the streets and sing outside of my trial. And I think for me and perhaps for others who will be inside the courtroom, hearing, however softly, your voices rising up from the streets, can make a tremendous difference. And the weather forecast for next Monday doesn't look a whole lot better than today, and so I'm asking that even if it's cold and even if it's snowing, to sing out in the streets. And I have a lot of confidence that this community will, because you've been so supportive in carrying me through to this point. But the one unanswered question, I think the question that a lot of people want to know, is when you're out there singing, and someone comes up to you and tells you to stop singing, and that someone happens to be wearing a badge, and says that you'll be arrested if you don't stop singing on this street corner: will you keep singing? That's the question that the world wants to know right now. That's the reason that the world is watching, and that so many young people around the country are watching this moment: to see if you'll back down. I think a lot of people understand that we have a lot of support on our side, but we don't know yet if that support will stand firm in the face of intimidation. And that's the question that needs to be answered next Monday, and for better or worse, this community, this congregation, bears the brunt of that responsibility for answering that question.

And that's why I have to apologize, for bringing that burden on to this congregation, and one that can't defend itself by excommunicating members. So you're stuck with it. And I don't meant hat lightly; I realize what a burden that is, because I've had the experience of facing a responsibility that you didn't ask for, that you probably don't deserve, and that you have no idea whether or not you can handle. I understand what that's like. And that's taught me that responsibility is really only meaningful when it's responsibility that you didn't volunteer for. But it's also taught me that we can handle a lot more than we think we can, when we stand strong as a community, and when we realize that we're not just isolated individuals; and when we realize that we're attached to

something big enough and powerful enough to actually shape the world that we want to see. And that's the message that our movement so desperately needs to see right now; it's the message that my generation so desperately needs to see right now. And so that's why with confidence I can put this responsibility on you, knowing that when the time comes to keep signing, I know that you can. I know that this congregation can be there to keep singing. And I thank you for that.

Reverend Tom Goldsmith: I know this is good news or not, but Mary and I will be there the 28th singing. And if that doesn't shut the place down, I don't know what will. My hope is that we will create headlines larger than Wisconsin. That's what I hope.