

# Why We Exist

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

## Call to Worship

I stand here this morning to ask who you are—who we are.

To wonder aloud at what draws us together,  
what high purpose summons our spirits to this place.

To ask what shining goal is our life's deepest longing,  
what enduring cause sits at the centre of our faith.

And, so, I ask who you are,  
and invite you to respond in the words of our covenant,  
not from rote, but with renewed conviction  
that these words speak to who we are and who we intend to be.

Love is our doctrine.  
The quest for truth is our sacrament  
And service is our prayer.  
To dwell together in peace,  
To seek knowledge in freedom,  
To serve life,  
To the end that all souls shall grow  
into harmony with the divine—  
Thus do we covenant with each other and with all.

## Reading

Our reading this morning is something of a parable from the writer Megan McKenna.<sup>1</sup>

There once was a woman who wanted peace in the world and peace in her heart and all sorts of good things, but she was very frustrated.

The world seemed to be falling apart.  
She would read the papers and get depressed.

One day she decided to go shopping,  
and she went into a mall and picked a store at random.

She walked in and was surprised to see God behind the counter.

She knew it was God, because God looked just like the pictures  
she'd seen on holy cards and devotional pictures.

She looked again and again, and finally she got up her nerve and asked,  
“Excuse me, are you God?”

“I am.”

“Do you work here?”

“No,” said God, “I own the store.”

“Oh, what do you sell in here?”

“Oh, just about anything!”

“Anything?”

“Yeah, anything you want. What do you want?”

She said she didn't know.

“Well,” God said, “feel free, walk up and down the aisles,

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Megan McKenna (God substituted for Jesus), quoted in *Spiritual Direction: Beyond the Beginnings* by Janet Ruffing

make a list, see what it is you want,  
then come back and we'll see what we can do for you.”

The woman did just that. She walked up and down the aisles.  
There was peace on earth,  
no more war, no hunger or poverty,  
peace in families, no more drugs, harmony, clean air,  
careful use of resources. She wrote furiously.

By the time she got back to the counter, she had a long list.  
God took the list, skimmed through it, looked up at her and smiled.

“No problem.”

And then God bent down behind the counter  
and picked out all sorts of things, stood up, and laid out the packets.

“What are these?” the woman asked.

“Seed packets,” God said. This is a catalogue store.” She said,

“You mean I don't get the finished product?”

“No, this is a place of dreams.  
You come and see what it looks like, and I give you the seeds.  
You go home and nurture them and help them grow  
and someone else reaps the benefits.”

“Oh,” the woman said.

And, then she left the store without buying anything.

### **Sermon: “Why We Exist”**

I've recently been thinking a lot about the year 2175,  
the year when this congregation will be 330 years old,  
or twice as old as it is today.

I've wondered if the First Unitarian of that far-off year  
will resemble anything we know—

and whether we will seem as odd and antiquated to them,  
as those first members who gathered in 1845 now seem to us.

I wonder if they'll still gather in person for worship,  
or whether they'll have taken to completely virtual ways of meeting.

I wonder if they'll still drink astonishing amounts of coffee,  
if they'll come together for potlucks, and trek north together for winter retreats.

I wonder if they'll still have theological differences with one another and their  
neighbours, or if spiritual questions will have grown seemingly obsolete and  
religion been reduced to the lowest common denominator.

I wonder at the enormous challenges they will surely face, and I can only hope  
they will have overcome some of the problems we struggle with today.

And, of course, part of me questions if any of this will matter,  
because I wonder if the human race will have found a way to survive into a  
sustainable future on this planet.

For better or worse, none of us will ever likely know how the story turns out.

But, this little spell of speculation has had me reflecting this week  
on the larger question of what endures in our ever-changing world.

That's why, over the past few days, I've returned to one of the most important  
sermons ever preached in the Unitarian tradition.

The year was 1841 and the preacher was Theodore Parker.

The occasion was the ordination of a new minister in South Boston.

The title was "A Discourse on the Transient and the Permanent in  
Christianity."

The sermon caused quite the theological stir.

Parker's goal had been to make a distinction between the essence of  
Christianity and the trappings of Christianity.

A distinction between the words and character of Jesus

and the rituals and doctrines he felt  
had come to be mistaken for the religion itself.

It's no surprise that Parker is the person who famously said he was drawn  
more to the religion *of* Jesus than the religion *about* Jesus,  
which is what he thought so much of Christianity had become.

While Parker's aim in his sermon had been to argue  
that Jesus preached what he called "Absolute Religion,"  
what people most clearly seemed to hear that day  
was his vehement denial that biblical miracles had any basis in reality,  
and that neither the Bible nor Jesus held some sort of ongoing supernatural  
authority.<sup>2</sup>

While the ordination service unfolded as planned,  
that afternoon in the congregation there sat three guest ministers—  
a Congregationalist, a Baptist, and a Methodist—  
who, as you might imagine, were greatly put off by Parker's remarks.

They were so offended, they promptly published an attack in all the papers,  
demanding to know if Unitarians considered him to be a Christian minister.

Out of the ensuing uproar, it became clear that  
the majority of Parker's colleagues and most Unitarian lay people did not.

He was shunned by the city's Unitarian ministers,  
banned from preaching in other pulpits,  
and shut out of writing for Unitarian publications.

His colleagues wouldn't even shake his outstretched hand  
when passing him on the street.

It's as close as we've come to excommunication.

The good news is that his congregation stood by him,  
and he went on to become the most popular preacher in Boston,  
drawing some 3,000 people on a Sunday.

After his death, as Unitarianism took a more Transcendentalist turn,

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<sup>2</sup> Dean Grodzins, "Theodore Parker" profile, Unitarian Universalist Historical Society.

Parker was embraced as one of our most vital voices.

Through the years, our tradition has returned time and again to wrestle with meaning of his work and his words.

One of his most enduring concepts has been his distinction between the permanent and the transient.

Parker felt that pure religion—the permanent—rested on a timeless truth—the command to love God with all of one's being and one's neighbours as one's self.

And he regarded as transient all of the creeds and the catechisms, the doctrines and the rituals that come and go, that crumble and change from one generation to the next.

There is but one kind of religion, [he said,]  
as there is but one kind of love, though the manifestations of this religion, in forms, doctrines, and life, be never so diverse.

It is through these [manifestations],  
[we] approximate to the true expression of this religion.

Now while this religion is one and always the same thing,  
there may be numerous systems of theology or philosophies of religion. .  
. .

Now the solar system as it exists is permanent,  
though the notions of...Ptolemy...and Copernicus...prove transient,  
impermanent approximations to the true expression.

So the Christianity of Jesus is permanent,  
though what passes for Christianity with Popes and catechisms,  
with sects and churches, in the first century or in the nineteenth century,  
prove transient also.

I share this colourful bit of Parker's thought with you this morning,  
because I believe it has something to say to us as a congregation.

What of who we are and what we do is permanent and what is transient?  
What is fleeting, and what will endure?

To what do we devote ourselves, and the energy of our lives?

These are never easy questions to consider—  
for what we usually end up with  
is an unsettling inventory of our impermanence.

If we look around, we begin to see that little is as timeless as it may seem.

This is certainly true for our congregation.

Take ministers. We are, ultimately, transient figures.

As the twenty-second settled minister of this congregation,  
I'm mindful that though I look forward to many more wonderful years  
of ministry here, with a number like twenty-two,  
it's clear enough that I am not the first minister in this place,  
and I certainly won't be the last.

Ministers come and go, and we eventually blend into the woodwork of the  
congregation's history, if we're remembered much at all.

In part, that happens because the congregation itself comes and goes, too.

Across our long history, thousands of people have made this place their  
spiritual home—committing the labour of their hands and hearts to the well-  
being of First Unitarian.

They have served on committees, and they have served coffee.  
They have taught our children, tended the gardens, and folded countless orders  
of service. They have made this congregation what it is.

But, being human—dying, and moving, and sometimes fighting in the ways  
that we do—the membership of this and every congregation out there  
is forever in flux.

That means the staff, the committees, the choir—  
all of it is, of course, ultimately transient, too.

So are the ways we worship, the hymns we sing, and the theology we hold.

All if it will change and evolve, with some of it forever tossed aside,

and some of it reformed to meet the needs of a different generation.

It might be tempting to think our building is a sure thing,  
but, of course, there's nothing particularly permanent about it either.

Depending on how you count them, this building is at least our fourth home.

And, so, what, then, is left?!

If so much of what we know to be First Unitarian is transient,  
subject to the toll of time and the change of custom,  
what, if anything, is permanent about this place?

My colleague David Rankin says that what is left is  
“a moving vision, a blend of dream and reality,  
a seeking that is never satisfied, the constancy of change,  
the road unending, the call to be what we were meant to be.”

It's easy in congregational life to sometimes lose sight of that vision,  
when we are bogged down with the details of renovations or budgets  
or the perennial search for volunteers for this project or that.

Yet, when we pull back, the thread of that vision of what we were meant to be  
is always there to be found, animating the life of our congregation.

Our earliest constitution, adopted in 1846,  
asserted that, as beings responsible to our Creator,  
“the privilege of worshipping God according to the dictates of conscience is an  
inherent right. . .”

Our very first members came together to create a religious society  
“for the purpose of public worship,” guided by the principle  
of “the free exercise of private judgment in all matters of belief,  
and the rejection of all tests, creeds, or formal declarations of opinion.”

That same constitution made clear that “in all proceedings of this congregation,  
it shall be competent to females to attend all meetings of the congregation and  
to exercise the same privileges as members of this Society as are exercised by  
males.”

Somehow, across four buildings, 22 ministers, thousands of members, and 165 years, this congregation has managed to keep alive these guiding principles of theological freedom, conscience, and equality.

Amid all the transient elements, something deeper, something permanent abides.

It's not always obvious, and it's not always a given.

At many points along the way, we have needed to be called back to our highest purpose, to our best selves, to what we are meant to be.

Last Sunday, among the names of those in the congregation who have died in the past year, we remembered Elaine Oakes.

Not long ago, I found a note Elaine wrote to the board of trustees back in the spring of 1973.

The subject line of her memo gives you a sense of where she's headed.

It reads: "Regarding Some Outdated and Morally Corrupt Social Customs as Practiced by First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto."

She goes on to say:

I read where the church directory is going to be improved by the addition of photographs. A good idea... This year, why not [also] put the woman's name first and put the man's name in the brackets. . .

Mr. and Mrs. Mary Smith (David). How does that strike you?

Oh well, I know you can't do that. Because it is INSULTING TO MEN, and after all, they make the money, and money is power and status in our world. . . . Insulting women is OK, because presumably they have no money.

And by the way...how are you going to list homophile married couples whose membership at our church could be a reality one of these days. Mr. and Mr. John Cooper (Robert), Mrs. and Mrs. Harris (Mary and Betty)???

What are you going to do[, she asks,] with the sequence  
when you cannot discriminate innately by sex?

I would love to know how the board responded.  
The answer is probably buried somewhere down in our archives—  
but whatever those old board minutes might have to say,  
I'm mindful that it is transient.

What endures is that the principle of equality is reflected in our directory today,  
with all couples cross-referenced by last name,  
regardless of gender or sexual orientation.

It may sound like a simple thing on the surface,  
but there's something of that vision of who we are meant to be  
spelled out, even there, in black and white in our directory.

Elaine's was the voice calling us to who we were meant to be.

As the woman in this morning's parable discovered,  
she knew that to make real our dreams for this world,  
they must be nurtured.

Such work takes time, and patience, and dedication.

Two weeks from today, we will gather  
to renew our commitment to the well-being and the future of this  
congregation—to nurture the dreams that it stirs in our hearts.

We will take up our place in this great, living tradition,  
transient, though it is, that we might dedicate ourselves anew—  
through the gifts of our time, energy, and money—  
not only to meeting present needs,  
but to serving that which is permanent in our religion:  
the enduring Unitarian values of freedom, reason, and tolerance.

As you contemplate your commitments for the coming year,  
I encourage you to consider why this place exists.

I encourage you to examine the role it plays in your life—  
or could play, if you were to deepen your engagement

and invest of yourself in nurturing the seeds of hope  
you have for yourself, for this congregation, and for this world.  
May this beloved community of memory and hope  
ever stand to inspire our commitment  
to that which ennobles the days of our lives,  
and that which will endure, when our days are done.

Amen.