

Whose Are We?

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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.

Reading from Jeff Golliver's from *A Deeper Faith*.

You have a journey to make, a sacred journey, that I hope you'll eventually come to understand as a path to follow. This will be the most important thing you've ever done. Call it the "call of God," call it the "call of the Spirit," call it the "call of the Great Mystery," call it a "catastrophe," call it whatever you like, but a "call" of some kind is hidden within the troubles.

The purpose of this call may be to draw out something hidden and wonderful within you, and if you don't mind me saying so, to bring about your awakening from a kind of spiritual slumber. I should tell you now: the journey ahead may not follow a very straightforward path, with clear-cut steps to take and easily identifiable problems to solve. Why? Because the foundation of your life, the core of who you believe yourself to be, is shaking quite a bit. It doesn't really matter how secure or insecure you believe that foundation is. It is unnerving and outright scary when this happens. At the same time, all those doubts about yourself and questions about God are evidence of a Great Mystery at work within you.

Sermon: "Whose Are We?"

A couple of years ago, my mentor, Jon Luopa, the minister of University Unitarian in Seattle, stumbled upon a question that is now making its way through Unitarian Universalism in both Canada and the U.S.

As Sarah Lammert relates the story, Jon was attending a meeting of the Seattle interfaith clergy group, which has a tradition of asking its most senior members to share their life stories, to look back on their careers

and try to make meaning of the odyssey of a life lived in ministry.

On this particular morning, a Roman Catholic priest was telling his story, and he reported that his life had been, in large measure, a complete failure.

He remembered the heady days of Vatican II and how hopeful he and his generation of liberal priests had been that real change was coming, at last, to the church they so dearly loved.

And yet; all these many years later, he felt that the church had, if anything, become hardened and deeply conservative, and his dreams farther than ever from being realized.

Now, this priest was someone who was widely respected among his interfaith colleagues, and so they were somewhat hurt and stunned by his revelation.

And yet; one colleague noted, despite the severity of his words, that his demeanor seemed quite peaceful and content.

“How can you claim that your life has been a failure, and still appear so calm and serene?” he was asked.

“I know whose I am,” said the [elderly] priest. “I know whose I am.”

Trusting his life belongs to God, he believed he had not lived his life in vain.

As a Unitarian Universalist, sitting there, Jon was struck—and not a little bit envious—by this priest’s sacred sense of certainty—of his clear understanding of his life’s calling, even though he hadn’t reached his promised land after a lifetime of labour and longing.

This moving testimony left Jon wondering to himself whether and how Unitarian Universalists might find a similar measure of confidence and consolation—how we might come to recognise in our own lives what, if anything, is our unshakable source of strength and succor,

even and especially when we feel our efforts haven't amounted to very much.

Jon wondered if we really have any idea whose we are.

It's a hard question for some of us to stomach.
With our celebration of individual freedom,
it's natural that at least some of us might take offence at the notion
we belong to anyone or anything other than ourselves.

But, is that really true?
Does our life belong only to each of us?
Do I belong only to me, and you only to you?

Over the past year, ministers across Canada have taken part
in a series of retreats to wrestle with all of these questions.

One of the first exercises in our time together was to sit in pairs,
while one person asked the other—over and over, for five long minutes—
“Whose are you?”

In my pair, I went first.

“Whose are you?,” my colleague asked.

There was an awkward silence.
I felt I had plenty to say, but no ready answer.

This exercise was harder than it seemed at first blush.
I was in a theological tussle with the terminology.
I resisted the notion of being possessed by anyone other than myself.

I could barely cobble together two syllables, let alone a recognizable word.

But, when I eventually made the shift
to thinking about those with whom my life is bound up—
of those to whom I am connected through and through,
of the many, vital relationships that ultimately define who I am
and give shape to most everything I know of myself and my life—
well, then, it suddenly was a whole lot easier to answer that question,
and a lot harder to shut me up.

According to Victoria Safford,

Douglas Steere, a Quaker teacher,
says that the ancient question, “What am I?”
inevitably leads a deeper one, “Whose am I?” –
because there is no identity outside of relationships.
You can’t be a person by yourself.

To ask “Whose Am I?” is to extend the questions far beyond
the little self-absorbed self, and wonder:
Who needs you? Who loves you?
To whom are you accountable?

To whom do you answer? Whose life is altered by your choices?
With whose life, whose lives, is your own all bound up,
inextricably, in obvious or invisible ways?

Whose am I?

I know I belong to life itself.

I am Bob’s, and I am yours.

I belong to my parents and those who’ve carried over millennia
the fragile DNA that finally brought me into being.

I am tied to everyone who has ever taught and mentored me,
and those countless, unknown names that built this world I now call home.

I belong to a spirit of hope and possibility,
and to a life lived with holy curiosity.

I am possessed by a sense of justice and a responsibility to compassion.

I belong to my call to the ministry—
and I belong to the call to the ministry of this congregation.

I belong to the world and to the vision of what we might still make of it,
if we were to summon the courage and the will.

And, in the end, I also, of course, know that I belong to myself,
but, I realise, more and more, not to myself alone.

John Donne had it right, centuries ago:
not one of us is an island, entire to ourselves.

This faith celebrates that we live in endless webs of connection with all of life,
and, perhaps, most importantly, with the precious thread of life itself.

A thread we are privileged to hold and to carry and pass on
through the days of our being—
toward a hopefully brighter world, not merely for ourselves,
but for this grand and often bewildering experiment called life.

This question of *whose we are*, then, is about as serious as they come.

Because our response speaks to how we understand
our deepest connections and our highest calling upon this earth.

And because our answer is what can sustain us—what can keep us going
when our fortunes fail and our last best hope crumbles in the dust of
disappointment.

So, allow me to gently ask, “whose are you?”
To whom and to what do you belong?
What is it that you hold on to,
when you find yourself holding on for dearest life?

It’s worth wrestling with and coming to trust our answer to these questions.

Because our answer may be our most enduring source of strength
when the proverbial rug is pulled out from under us,
when we find ourselves flailing about, adrift at sea,
desperate for some anchor, some rock, some sure and steady thing,
on which our lives can depend.

Do you know what that is for you?
Do you have any idea?

Some may call it by one of its most ancient names,
while others see it as something so sacred, it's beyond all naming.

For some of us, it's what science and the reaches of the human mind
have revealed to us about our place in the universe.

For many of us, we see it as the Spirit of Life, or the sacred web itself.

Whatever you call it, whatever its source,
I wonder if you have come to truly trust it in the depths of your being.

I wonder if you have you come to know whose you are—
to whom your life belongs.

And I wonder if you have you come to see
that that to which your life belongs
is very often that to which your life is most deeply committed.

What is a central question to the meaning of our individual lives
is equally important for us as a congregation.

This afternoon, we will gather
for the first of this year's Congregational Conversations.

We will celebrate our accomplishments
over these past four years together,
and begin to dream, in earnest, our direction for the years ahead.

But, as we dream, I hope we will also consider to whom we belong.

I hope in thinking of the great goals that will guide us into the future,
we will give also ourselves over to asking:

Who needs us?
To whom are we accountable?
Whose lives are altered by our choices?

Our answer, as a congregation, will, I believe,
draw us into both our past and our future.

It will take us into the heart of who we already know ourselves to be,
and it will, if we take the question seriously,
move us beyond the comfortable bounds
of most everything we think we know.

So, whose are we, as First Unitarian?

I believe we belong to that generation of Unitarian immigrants
who founded this congregation in 1845
to be a beacon of religious freedom in the cradle of this newborn city.

And, I believe we equally belong to the future generations
who, after we are long gone, will carry this faith forward
to serve that same spirit of freedom for a distant and different day.

And, I believe, suspended as we are,
here between those who've come before and those yet to come,
that we belong to each other.

We are a community of love, and commitment, and hope
that comes together in this place to celebrate the precious gift of life,
to wrestle with our calling in this world,
to challenge each other to lives of greater integrity,
and to honour the delicate web of being to which we all belong.

And, yet, for all that we are to each other,
we also know that we do not—that we cannot—serve only ourselves.
We know that as a congregation, we do not exist merely to serve our own
needs.

For to ask *whose we are* draws us beyond the walls of this building—
to serve those yearning for a religious home like this
where they will be called to engage heads, and hearts, and hands
in creating a better world than the one we now know.

For to ask *whose we are* draws us
into the transformative work of love in this world
that we might practice the arts of healing, compassion, and forgiveness.

For to ask *whose we are*,
draws us fully and ultimately into the heart of the times in which we live.

The theologian Frederick Buechner says that our vocation—our calling—is the place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need.

To ask *whose we are* requires looking fearlessly into that deep need and then giving thought to what gifts of gladness we will offer in response.

I am frequently humbled by the incredible resources of this congregation, from the stores of wisdom to an incredible range of talent, from the endless ways people give of themselves and their energy, to the generosity of spirit and financial support.

In the years to come, how will we use these gifts—our deep gladness—to serve our great city?

How will we live out our faith in this moment that is ours that we might make a difference with our lives?

Four and a half years ago when you called me to be your minister, I heard in your heart a desire for us to work together to become a force for healing and transformation, a beacon of hope and of liberal religious values put into powerful practice.

We have made tremendous strides, as we have renewed many aspects of our common life here. But there are fields of opportunity standing open before us, if we will accept the challenges they bring by putting our faith into action and boldly stepping into the uncertainty of the future.

With every fiber of my being, I believe our increasingly fractured world, desperately needs places like this—where we endeavour to create beloved community that transcends the barriers of fear and misunderstanding that might otherwise keep people apart.

Our city needs places where people come together in multigenerational community to engage both their differences and their common dreams—where people join to honour and uphold the spirit of life in a place where art and dance and literature and music are summoned forth and celebrated with gratitude and praise

for the great gift of life itself.

If such a cathedral of the human spirit didn't already exist,
we would need to create it to answer the needs of the world around us.

But, here it is. All under the roof of this meeting house.

The promise of this place is what gets me out of bed every morning.
It's what stirs my soul and makes my heart sing.
But, this isn't my vision alone.

This is a vision that has been nurtured and worked for and sacrificed for down
through human history and through the history of this congregation.

It is the legacy we have inherited.
It is the tradition in which we now stand.
It is the responsibility we share.

And it is the promise we are called to pass along
to those who will carry on from us
the beautiful, fragile flame of this faith to bring light to another day.

So be it.

Amen.