

“Our Mission, Should We Choose to Accept It”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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Sermon

Words are what first drew me to Unitarian Universalism.

The stirring words of Henry David Thoreau I spotted on a sign outside the First Unitarian Church of Dallas when I was a teenager.

The shocking words “Silence=Death” in the late 80s, that I read on an ACT UP billboard in the midst of the AIDS crisis, outside of Boston’s Arlington Street Church.

The collection of words I discovered in my 20’s in the back of our hymnal— words that stretch back through time and around the world and across religious traditions to get at questions of the meaning of our days on this planet and our purpose as a people of faith in this time and place.

For me, some of the most important words in our hymnal are those of my predecessor, Mark Morrison-Reed.

The central task of the religious community[, Mark reminds us,] is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all.

There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. [that] once felt, inspires us to act for justice.

It is the [gathered congregation] that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community.

The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen,

and our strength too limited to do all that must be done.

Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.

This is the most concise statement I know
about the process of creating Beloved Community—
that through a deepening connection with ourselves and with others,
in truly knowing that what affects the life of one us affects us all,
our hearts are moved to take up the work of building a better world.

Beloved Community is a concept championed by Martin Luther King, Jr.

It holds forth a vision of the world being transformed
by those who dare to answer the call of love and justice.

Beloved Community is not so much a destination we ever reach,
but an aspiration—and a process—
by which we move ever and always onward
towards healing, wholeness, and reconciliation,
towards a lasting justice and an enduring peace.

Obviously, it is an ideal.
A dream we carry in our hearts.
Always ultimately out of reach,
but forever beckoning us to work to make it real.

It's no surprise that Unitarian Universalists
have long been taken by the notion of Beloved Community.

Without a doctrine of heaven or hell—
and, for many, a deep-seated sense
that this “one wild and precious life” is all we are promised—
UUs for decades now have embraced the quest
to build the Beloved Community
as a calling, a commitment, a shared way of life.

A way to create heaven on earth in the here and now
by ridding the world of its countless hells.

Admittedly, that's a bit ambitious.

It may sound like a tall order. And it is.
Yet, any goal worthy of our highest devotion should be.

But trying somehow to singlehandedly
fix every problem on earth is overwhelming. And impossible.

Which is why I take comfort in the words from the Jewish Talmud:

Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief.
Do justly now, love mercy now, walk humbly now.
You are not obligated to complete the work,
but neither are you free to abandon it.

We are not obligated to heal the whole wide world,
but we are responsible for tending to the portion that is ours,
in the small sliver of time we are given upon this good green earth.

This sacred task is what draws us together as a congregation.

We gather to help one another figure out
what part is ours to play.

To impart to one another courage to take action.

To sustain our spirits when they flag.

To inspire us to live lives of integrity, justice, and joy.

And to help us make sense of life,
when it confronts us with hard truths
or confounds us with heartbreak.

All of this is the slow and steady work of transformation
that we undertake together as a congregation,
week in and week out.

Sometimes it is tough going.

In this little loving laboratory of the human spirit,
we eventually have to grapple with our shortcomings,

sit with the gap between our action and our aspirations.

In the face of that gap,
we sometimes retreat, and we sometimes retool.

We learn to be gentle with ourselves and one another.

We find the strength to forgive ourselves and each other,
and come to know what it truly means to “begin again in love.”

And, in this ongoing, evolving process, we grow.
We change. We are transformed.

When we are living up to the high calling of this faith,
that is what we are all about—
changing hearts and minds (sometimes even our own!),
challenging ourselves to lead lives of meaning and purpose,
bending the long arc of history ever on toward justice,
and, ultimately, transforming the world by transforming ourselves.

It may not always look like that is what’s going on here,
between breakout room conversations and committee meetings,
but those of you who have been at this faith for some time,
can attest that it has a way of working on you over the long haul.

Over time, in ways you may never have imagined,
this faith has hopefully made you a different person—
causing you to understand the world in different ways,
prompting you to question old assumptions,
calling you to live out your life in accord with your deepest values.

It’s hard to say exactly what does it—it’s not always
the sacred blend of inspiration and irritation that comes from our pulpit,
it’s not always by attending a meeting of a social justice committee
or through teaching our children here about equity and compassion,
but somewhere, somehow, when we’re doing our real work,
making connections and asking what those connections demand of us,
this faith transforms us—from the inside out.

For when we truly behold our connections with others,

we can't help but act in ways
that honour our place in the great web of being,
we can't help but see that our lives are lived in a covenant with all of life.

Such a sense of covenant is at the heart of what it means
to be a community striving to build the Beloved Community.

Now, that covenant is not always kept, of course,
its promises not always fulfilled.

Too often we lose sight of the ways we are connected,
and lose sight of the covenant itself.

And, yet, even in those times,
life seems to have a way of continually calling us back—
into relationship, into wholeness, into covenant.

Something shifts and our vision becomes clear.

We suddenly see with stunning clarity
where the covenant, our sacred trust with life,
is tattered and torn, and where it needs desperately to be repaired.

Life calls us back into covenant,
and we see a piece that is ours to tend—
a section of the web that we know is somehow ours
to nurture, restore, or heal.

We see that piece of the web that is entrusted to us,
where we are called to make a difference with our very lives.

We glimpse Beloved Community,
and we boldly move in its direction.

I recently heard a story that's been hard to forget.

It's the story of Julio Diaz, a young social worker who,
every evening on his way home from work,
gets off the subway one stop early to eat at his favorite diner.

One night, not long ago, but before the pandemic,
he stepped off the subway
and his evening took an unexpected turn.

As he walked along the empty platform,
a teenage boy stepped toward him,
pulled out a knife and demanded money.

As Julio tells the story, “He want[ed] my money,
so I just gave him my wallet and told him, ‘Here you go.’”

As the teenager began to walk away, Julio called out,
“Hey, wait a minute. You forgot something.
If you’re going to be robbing people for the rest of the night,
you might as well take my coat to keep you warm.”

Julio remembers the puzzled teen looking at him,
wondering “what’s going on here?”
and asking, “Why are you doing this?”

Julio said to him:
“If you’re willing to risk your freedom for a few dollars,
then I guess you must really need the money.
. . . all I wanted to do [tonight]was get dinner
and if you want to join me, you’re more than welcome.”

So, to their mutual surprise, Julio and the boy went to the diner.

At the restaurant, the manager wandered by their table,
the dishwasher came by to visit,
the waiters stopped to say ‘hello’.

The boy was shocked.

“You know everybody here.
Do you own this place?”

“No, I just eat here a lot.”

“But you’re even nice to the dishwasher.”

“Well, haven’t you been taught you should be nice to everybody?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t think people actually behaved that way.”

As they finished up their meal,
Julio asked the boy what he wanted out of life.

With a sad face, he “couldn’t answer, or he didn’t want to.”

When the bill came, Julio said to the boy,
“Look, I guess you’re going to have to pay for this
‘cause you have my money and I can’t. . .
[But,] if you give me my wallet back, I’ll gladly treat you.”

The teen “didn’t even think about it” and returned the wallet.

Julio gave him \$20, figuring it might help him,
but then he asked for something in return.

And, in that instant, the boy turned over the knife without protest.¹

It is when we see the ways our lives are connected
that we uphold our covenant and begin to build the beloved community, one severed
strand, one broken relationship at a time.

Julio’s actions that night speak to me
of one who has done some of their own work—their inner work—
someone who has committed himself to genuine spiritual growth.

Victoria Safford reminds us that:

Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of hope.
A sometimes lonely place, the place of truth-telling,
about your own soul first of all and its condition,
The place of resistance and defiance,
the piece of ground from which you see the world
both as it is and as it could be, as it will be;
The place from which you glimpse not only struggle,
but joy in the struggle.

¹ A Victim Treats His Mugger Right, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=89164759>.

This morning we begin the process as a congregation
of envisioning our future in a changed and changing world.

As we slowly, hopefully, emerge
toward lives lived beyond the worst of the pandemic,
we are being called to put our principles into practice as never before.

To live out of our values in a way that calls us
to spiritual growth and social action.

And we are being called to dedicate ourselves anew
to the work and well-being of this congregation—
through our gifts of financial support and volunteer energy.

Let us then commit ourselves
to sustaining this laboratory of the human spirit,
this place where we practice the difficult and desperately-needed art
of creating beloved community.

Not that it might stay confined to this congregation,
but in the high and holy hope
that it might empower and embolden each of us,
through our hands and hearts,
to help build up a better world.

So may it be.