“The Place of the Pulpit”
Reverend Shawn Newton
The First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
16 October 2022

Reading

*Our first reading for today, from the novel Heaven Help Us by Herbert Tarr, comes from a scene when the old seminary dean is preaching at the installation service for Rabbi Gideon Abel, and he says to the congregation the following:*

“The though he is a man of dedication and kindness, intelligence and good humour, Rabbi Abel cannot serve you if you do not assist him. Your rabbi is not a soloist, and you are not his audience; he is not a professional Jew, and you are not amateurs. But together you are a holy congregation.”

Reading

*This reading comes from the book Preaching by Barbara Brown Taylor, in which she captures so much of the relationship between the pulpit and the pew.*

Watching a preacher climb into the pulpit
is a lot like watching a tight rope walker
climb onto the platform as the drum roll begins.

The first clears her throat and spreads her notes;
the second loosens his shoulders and stretches out
one rosin-soled foot to test the taut rope.

They both step out into the air,
trusting everything they have done to prepare for this moment
as they surrender themselves to it,
counting now on something beyond themselves
to help them do what they love and fear and most want to do.

If they reach the other side without falling,
it is skill but it is also grace—a benevolent God’s decision
to let these daredevils tread the high places
where ordinary mortals have the good sense not to go.

No other modern public speaker does what the preacher tries to do.
The trial attorney has glossy photographs and bagged evidence to hand around; the teacher has blackboards and overhead projectors; the politician has brass bands and media consultants. All the preacher has is words.

Climbing into the pulpit without props or sound effects, the preacher speaks—for ten or twenty or thirty minutes—to people who are used to being communicated with in very different ways.

Most of the messages in our culture are sent and received in thirty seconds or less and no image on a television screen lasts more than twenty, yet a sermon requires sustained and focussed attention.

If the topic is not appealing, there are no other channels to be tried. If a phrase is missed, there is no replay button to be pressed.

The sermon counts on listeners who will stay tuned to a message that takes time to introduce, develop, and bring to a conclusion.

Listeners, for their part, count on a sermon that will not waste the time they give to it.

This is only one of many ways in which the sermon proves to be a communal act, not the creation of one person, but the creation of a body of people for whom and to whom one of them speaks.

A congregation can make or break a sermon by the quality of their response to it.

An inspired sermon can wind up skewered somewhere near the second pew by a congregation of people who sit with their arms crossed and their eyes narrowed, coughing and scuffing their feet as the minister struggles to be heard.

Similarly, a weak sermon can grow strong in the presence of people who attend carefully to it, leaning forward in their [seats] and opening their faces to a preacher from whom they clearly expect to receive good news.

If the preacher is also their [minister], then the sermon is theirs in another way.

The quality of their life together—
the memories, conversations, and experiences, and hopes they share—is the fabric from which the sermon is made.

The preacher is their parson, their representative person, who never gets into the pulpit without them.

Whatever else the sermon is about, it is first of all about them, because they are the community in whose midst the preacher stands.

In a very real way, the preacher would have no voice without them.

By calling someone to preach to them and by listening to that person week after week, a congregation gives their minister both the authority to speak and a relationship from which to speak, so that every sermon begins and ends with them.

**Sermon: “The Place of the Pulpit”**

“So, the [second] hymn comes to a close... and the organist gestures [for] the choir to sit down.

Fresh from breakfast... and a quick run-through of the Sunday papers, the preacher climbs the steps to the pulpit with his sermon in... hand.

He hikes his black robe at the knee so he will not trip over it on the way up.

His mouth is a little dry. He has cut himself shaving.

He feels as if he has swallowed an anchor.

If it weren’t for the honour of the [whole] thing, he would just as soon be somewhere else.

[But] in the front pews [someone] turns up a hearing aid, and a young lady slips her six-year-old a lifesaver and a magic marker.

A college [student] home [for] vacation, who is [only] there because he was dragged there, slumps forward with his chin in his hand.

The vice-president of a bank who twice that week
has seriously contemplated suicide places his hymnal in the rack.

A pregnant girl feels [new] life stir inside her.

A high-school [English] teacher, who for twenty years has managed to keep his homosexuality a secret, for the most part even from himself, creases his order of service down the centre with his thumbnail and tucks it under his knee.

The preacher pulls a little cord that turns on the [pulpit] light and deals out his note cards like a riverboat gambler.

The stakes” says Frederick Buechner, in describing this familiar scene, “have never been higher.”

Of course, Buechner’s images from his book *Telling the Truth* only partially describe our situation.

. . . for instance, I didn’t cut myself shaving this morning. . .

but the rest of it comes close enough to the truth on any given Sunday.

Though the particulars of our experience may be different in the details, most Sunday mornings, I do, indeed, feel as though I’ve swallowed an anchor.

And, I do feel, too, that across some twenty years of preaching that I’ve come to know something of what it means to be that riverboat gambler, dealing out my cards.

For every time I enter this pulpit, all of us are taking a gamble.

Of course, in gambling, sometimes you win, and sometimes you don’t.

As I’m fond of saying about worship and preaching alike, there are many weeks that will be “your week,” and there will surely be weeks that are not.

The same goes for me.

I’ve learned all this, like most of you, through trial and error.
Over the course of my life, I’ve heard some truly dreadful sermons, but I have also heard sermons that have profoundly changed my life—though if put to the test, I’m not sure I could actually tell you why, or what most of those sermons were about.

I only know that I have carried with me images and a few choice turns of phrase from sermons otherwise long forgotten that have guided and goaded me into becoming a better version of myself.

Over my journey in ministry, I have preached some not-so-great sermons of my own.

But I’ve also given a few that I know have struck a deep and meaningful chord, giving people the courage to leave abusive relationships or jobs that were killing them, inspiring others to reconcile broken relationships, and still others to take decisive action to work for the common good.

In this, I’ve come to deeply honour the sacred responsibilities that come with the privilege of preaching.

Yet, as we heard in the readings I shared earlier, preaching is not a solitary endeavour, and the burden of a successful sermon is not carried by the preacher alone.

We make a sermon by what we, together, bring to it.

While there may be only one sermon given—and only one person giving it—there are at least as many sermons heard on any given Sunday morning as there are people taking it in, here in the sanctuary or on Zoom or YouTube.

It’s always fascinating for me to have people, either in the receiving line or over the following week, tell me what my sermon was really about.

It reminds me that sermons are organic and dynamic, as alive (or more!) in the hearer’s mind as in my own.

A friend of mine had a woman in his church ask for a copy of one of his recent sermons.

He was stunned when she called him up, shortly after receiving it, livid that he had sent her a version of the sermon that she was just certain was different from the one he had delivered from the pulpit.
It, of course, was not.

Indeed, a good sermon allows us to weave into it a bit of our own story—to bring to mind some aspect of our life that we hold up to the light of truth, hoping for a deeper insight than we had before the sermon began.

So, let me clearly state that you are free to let your mind wander during my sermons. I believe it to be a meaningful part of the experience.

And, while I hope your wanderings are somehow related to the topic at hand, I encourage you to let the sermon take you wherever you need to go.

With this possibility in mind, I often create on-ramps in my sermons so that you can periodically find your way back into the sermon, when you return from wherever your mental travels may have taken you.

(And, if you’re just now in this moment re-joining us, let me say, welcome back!)

So, here’s an on-ramp, if you will.

As you may know, some 500 of my sermons are posted on First’s website.

While we’ve been uploading them in this way for years, I will confess to you that it is not without deep reservations on my part.

Sermons are, to me, at their best, a two-way conversation, situated in the context of worship within a covenanted religious community.

The readings, the hymns, the shared silence, the being and breathing together all create a context into which a sermon is spoken—a context not easily translated in a pdf copy of the sermon found on a website.

And just as important as the context of worship is the context of the community.

It is the quality of our life together as a congregation—“the memories, conversations, experiences, and hopes” that we share—that are, as Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, “the fabric from which the sermon is made.”
Over time, the conversation between a minister and a congregation deepens, with each sermon building upon the last, and the dialogue between them strengthening the bonds of community.

This ongoing dialogue is some of the most important and lasting work we do together, which makes it somewhat surprising, then, that ministers so rarely preach about preaching itself.

So, here, sixteen years into our preaching relationship, it seems timely to share some of my central assumptions about what it is that you and I are doing each week with this thing we call a sermon.

First off, it seems I should explain why I’m dressed like this.

I wear a stole and robe to remind me of my responsibilities.

This black robe is an academic gown.

During the Reformation, Protestant ministers began wearing them to distinguish themselves from the “popish attire” worn by priests.

Shakespeare noted this trend in All’s Well That Ends Well, when he wrote:

“Though honesty be no puritan, yet it will do no hurt; it will wear the surplice of humility over the black gown of the big heart.”

In our tradition, for over 400 years, our ministers have worn these robes as a reminder that ours is a learned and learning ministry.

For me, wearing it reminds me that I am to bring to my work among you the best of my learning, thinking, and reason.

It also means I don’t have to put a lot of thought into what I’m wearing on a Sunday, when I already have a lot on my mind.

This robe, however, has also come to provide a thread of continuity.

Not only is this the robe I wore the day I graduated from divinity school, it is also the robe that I wore on the day I was ordained to ministry.

It is the robe I have worn as I’ve dedicated your children,
as I’ve joined couples in marriage, and as I’ve buried the dead.

Into this “black gown of the big heart”
have been cried tears of sorrow and of great joy, and I wear it,
because all of that comes into the pulpit with me each week.

(For the germ-phobic, fear not, I do have it cleaned on a regular basis.)

This stole around my shoulders is an ancient symbol of ministry.

The one I’m wearing today was given to me by this congregation
on the day of my ordination in Boston.

It was placed on my shoulders by Edith Burton,
who had been on the Search Committee that invited me to candidate here.

To put on this mantle of ministry,
or one of the other stoles in my collection,
serves as a reminder of the vows I took on the day
that I committed my life to Unitarian Universalist ministry.

So I wear these garments to remind me of my responsibilities
to our tradition, and to you.

The second thing I want to say about sermons may come as a surprise—
and that’s that I don’t necessarily consider a sermon
to be the centrepiece of the service.

It’s important, and it certainly merits my full devotion to its craft.

The conventional wisdom is that every minute of a sermon
requires a full hour of preparation—between reading, reflection, and writing.

But, my concern, is that if any of you allow
the strength and commitment of your faith to somehow hinge
on the quality of a particular sermon, we all risk grave disappointment!

In any given service,
there are other elements of worship that can often
minister to you as well or better than the sermon.

One week it might be the meditation, another week the silence,
one Sunday it will be the anthem from the choir, and a children’s story the next.
So, I encourage you to approach the overall experience of our worship each week with an open heart and an open mind.

Because you never really know what might happen.

One of our foundational beliefs as Unitarian Universalists is that revelation is not sealed, and I’ve certainly found this to be true—sometimes right up to the very moment I step into the pulpit.

Part of sermon preparation, for me, involves living with the topic for some time, a gestation period, if you will.

Beyond my reading and research, I will often sprinkle ideas for upcoming sermons into conversations with many of you to see what response they bring.

This sort of sharing is helpful to my own creative process.

Through the years, many of you have indicated on your way out on a Sunday that a particular sermon felt that it was bring preached directly to you.

That is only true in a general sense, because a big part of my work is to listen carefully to what you all collectively reflect to me as the challenges you are contending with.

For the record, I would never—and will never—preach directly at anyone.

But if something in a sermon engages you in a deeper-than-usual way, pay attention to that, as it may suggest there’s something there to further explore. It may point to work that is yours to do.

Echoing the words we heard earlier, I am not a soloist, and you are not an audience.

I am not a professional Unitarian Universalist, and you are not amateurs.

This work of preaching (and ministry, in general) is something that we share.

And more than anything, I want this pulpit to be relevant to your lives, and to the times in which we live.
Preaching is, for me, as Barbara Brown Taylor put it, the thing I “love and fear and most want to do.”

With that, my job is to make as much sense as possible of the human condition, and to draw on the best our Unitarian Universalist faith has to offer, in conversation with the wisdom of the world’s religions, the latest discoveries of science, and the vital insights of our lived experience.

To do all this, you have also extended to me what, in our own tradition, is called “The Freedom of the Pulpit.”

In fact, these are the pertinent words in the letter of agreement between us:

> It is a basic premise of this Congregation that the pulpit is free and untrammelled.

> The Minister is expected to express his values, views, and commitments without fear or favour.

This is the greatest a gift a congregation can grant its minister, and I am not aware of any tradition but ours that makes it such an explicit aspect of ministry.

A few years ago, I attended the installation mass of a Catholic priest in a nearby church.

I had forgotten that, as part of the liturgy, a new priest is required to recite the Nicene Creed as a profession of faith before the bishop and his new congregation.

Listening to this priest speak of heaven and hell, virgin births and bodily resurrection, I was so grateful knowing that in our tradition, there is no such expectation that I profess a certain set of beliefs.

As a minister that is a privilege that I cherish and take very seriously.

It is a privilege because I am given, with the call to this pulpit, the sacred right to speak the truth in love to you as I am best able to understand it.

What this means to me is that our call to build up a better world
demands of us that we use this pulpit for more than drive-by enlightenment or casual entertainment.

I take, then, with the responsibilities of this pulpit the charge to call you repeatedly to your best and highest selves, to challenge you to live lives of integrity and purpose, to help you to understand and cherish this faith that we together hold, and to inspire us all to reach out to the wider world to labour on to create to the best of our abilities a more just and loving world.

Along the way, I certainly have spoken difficult and uncomfortable truths that may well have angered and irritated some of you, but I have always done so with the utmost love and devotion for this congregation and for the faith that we share.

I have tried never to shrink from the responsibility you’ve granted me: to call us, both as individuals and as a congregation, to fulfil our deepest commitments and our highest potential.

Now, of course, in our free faith, we uphold, alongside the freedom of the pulpit, freedom of the pew.

Blessedly, this means you aren’t required or expected to agree with everything or anything a given minister might have to say.

This way of being, then, is unique and precious in the world of religion.

It is what has helped us to change over time, intentionally becoming a living tradition.

It’s been said that, if visitors from the 18th century were to appear among us, they’d be baffled by most of our modern creations, but they would, more-or-less, recognize a sermon.

This venerable form—minus an hour or two—remains largely unchanged from ancient days: one among us strives to speak to the human condition, while others listen intently for words that somehow resonate.

At the same time, everything has changed.

It’s no longer the job of the minister, at least not for UUs, to hand down pre-packaged truths from on high.
There are no more absolute truths to be sold.

Instead, we preachers take our place in the pulpit, with a measure of humility, in the face of all that we do not yet know, acknowledging the doubts of our hearts and the inadequacy of our words.

But, the saving grace in all of this, is that this is work that we do together.

As a colleague of mine is fond of saying, in our tradition, the sermon is never the last word on anything, but an invitation to further dialogue and discernment.

So, may this ongoing conversation lead us on to ever-deeper understandings of ourselves and our faith.

As for my part, by the end of my career, I will have likely preached roughly a thousand sermons, adding up to more than 10,000 pages.

At 300 pages apiece, that’s 35 books.

Sometimes I wonder what, if anything, will come of all that work.

But I take comfort knowing that the answer isn’t up to me. . .

Amen.