

Claire Feingold Thoryn
May 4, 2014 – Flower Communion
Theme: Teachers
Sermon: A Month of Sundays

Call to Worship:

Unitarian minister Rebecca Parker wrote these words:

“Your gifts
whatever you discover them to be—
can be used to bless or curse the world.

The mind’s power,
The strength of the hands,
The reaches of the heart,
Any of these gifts can serve to...
Bind up wounds,
Welcome the stranger,
Praise what is sacred,...
Or offer love.

Any of these gifts can...
Abandon the poor,
Obscure what is holy,
Comply with injustice,
Or withhold love.

You must answer this question: What will you do with your gifts?

Choose to bless the world.

The choice to bless the world...
will draw you into community,
The endeavor shared,
The heritage passed on,
The companionship of struggle,
The importance of keeping faith,
The life of ritual and praise,
The comfort of human friendship,...

The chorus of life welcoming you.

None of us alone can save the world.
Together—that is another possibility waiting.”

Reading: “A Prayer in Spring” by Robert Frost

Oh, give us pleasure in the flowers today;
And give us not to think so far away
As the uncertain harvest; keep us here
All simply in the springing of the year.

Oh, give us pleasure in the orchard white,
Like nothing else by day, like ghosts by night;
And make us happy in the happy bees,
The swarm dilating round the perfect trees.

And make us happy in the darting bird
That suddenly above the bees is heard,
The meteor that thrusts in with needle bill,
And off a blossom in mid air stands still.

For this is love and nothing else is love,
The which it is reserved for God above
To sanctify to what far ends He will,
But which it only needs that we fulfill.

“A Prayer in Spring” by Robert Frost from *Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays*. © The Library of America, 1995.

Sermon: “A Month of Sundays”

“None of us alone can save the world.
Together—that is another possibility waiting.”

The worship theme I chose for this month is “Teachers.” Anyone and anything can be our teacher, as long as we are open to learning: good experiences and bad ones, kind people and cruel people, beauty and disappointment.

Of course it is a lot more fun to learn from joyful, beautiful experiences but it does sometimes seem like we learn MORE from the frustrating, negative experiences.

So that's why I'm going to make this sermon as boring and annoying as possible....just kidding....I hope.

I want to start with a little survey of hands.

How many of you were raised Unitarian Universalist?

How many of you were raised with no religion at all?

How many of you were raised in a religious tradition that is not UU?

I was raised Unitarian Universalist, but the vast majority of people in our congregations were raised in other faith traditions, or none at all. Even most UU ministers came to Unitarian Universalism after a long journey.

Many people find Unitarian Universalism after being let down by other religions. Their journey to find a new religious home starts because they have been disillusioned, disappointed; their heart has been broken; they may even have been abused and treated cruelly because they asked the wrong questions, or loved the wrong person, or believed the wrong thing. Or maybe they were just bored, or their former faith didn't move their spirit.

So often very new UUs are full of excitement.

"For this is love and nothing else is love!"

Here we are, a religion based on universal love. We have a covenant, rather than a creed. We embrace science and reason, and emotion and faith. Questions are encouraged. We strive for freedom and creativity, respect and compassion. We believe that what each of us know about God is a piece of the truth, and we don't have to do it alone.

I love this faith and its people, it has been my guiding light and foundation rock and it has given me my life's calling and my purpose.

So you might be surprised at the question I often ask new Unitarian Universalists who want to become ministers. I am the co-chair of one of the panels that interviews prospective UU ministers, usually students just starting off their first or second year of Divinity school. (It's called the Sub-Committee on Candidacy.) We try to assess their aptitude for ministry and give feedback about how they can learn and grow.

Whenever I meet a new UU—someone who has been a Unitarian for maybe a year or three, and decided right away that this religion was so great they just had to be a minister in it, I ask them this question:

“What disappoints you about Unitarian Universalism?”

I ask that because Unitarian Universalism, which I love with all my heart, is just as flawed as any other religion. Yes we have high ideals and beloved principles and a long and meaningful history. And like every other religion, UUism is made up of humans. Humans can't create anything perfectly.

So, just like any other human-created institution, there are many times where Unitarian Universalism and its people have failed to live up to our ideals and forgotten about our principles and ignored the lessons of our history. Even the most excited seminarian will one day find their chosen faith has broken their heart in some way. And then the bigger work begins: being a part of something that can be understood and embraced as the messy, human, imperfect, hopeful work-in-progress that it really is.

I spent seven years serving First Parish in Lincoln; it has been a year and a day after the Sunday you called me as your minister, and I actually started here in August. So now I have been serving here at Follen for not yet a year—just about a month of Sundays—and I am just like those new UU seminarians still in my absolute first blush of honeymoon love with all of you.

I have had colleagues ask me a version of the disappointment question “So...how's it going? Hard?”

...And all I can give them is a string of praise about this place and its people. It's embarrassing because I am honestly starry-eyed—you guys are even better than I thought you'd be.

I cannot rave about the staff enough: Thomas, Debra, what a team of kind, smart, dedicated, and soulful people we have. And our lay leaders—so incredibly engaged and brilliant and friendly, hardworking, thoughtful. I feel supported and appreciated, and blessed to be here.

So I say all this to my colleagues who have asked me how things are going. And after I finish talking about how in love I am with this congregation and this ministry, my colleagues who have been in ministry for decades do me the kindness of not rolling their eyes at me.

Because they know that the time will come when we will disappoint each other. And it will be then that the bigger work begins: the messy, human, hopeful work-in-progress that is congregational life.

Oh, I have pleasure in the flowers today;
And I also think not so far away
towards the uncertain harvest....

Earlier this year I read a great memoir by a Lutheran minister named Nadia Bolz-Weber, titled *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner and Saint*.

She has gotten a lot of press recently because she isn't your average Lutheran minister: she's covered in tattoos, sober after years of drug and alcohol addiction, and uses language that isn't always...pastoral. One person said Nadia Bolz-Weber is what you would get if you mixed the DNA of Louis C.K., Joey Ramone, and St. Paul.

Nadia started a church in Colorado and it is named "The House For all Sinners and Saints." When people find it, they get excited, in a way that sort of reminded me of people finding Unitarian Universalism: they have found a place where they are accepted and loved for who they are, whatever their orientation, gender expression, past traumas, and current struggles. (This would be one of the more liberal Lutheran churches I have ever heard of!)

At their quarterly newcomer gatherings, Nadia listens to new members talk about how excited they are to find her church community. And then, she tells them this:

"I tell them that I love hearing all of that and that I, too, love being in a spiritual community where I don't have to add to or take away from my own story to be accepted. But I have learned something by belonging to [several] polar-opposite [religious] communities—and I wanted them to hear me:

"This community will disappoint them. It's a matter of when, not if. We will let them down or I'll say something stupid and hurt their feelings.

"I then invite them on this side of their inevitable disappointment to decide if they'll stick around after it happens. If they choose to leave when we don't meet their expectations, they won't get to see how the grace of God can come in and fill the holes left by our community's failure, and that's just too beautiful and too real to miss.

*Welcome to House for All Sinners and Saints. We will disappoint you.”*¹

For this is love and nothing else is love,
The which it is reserved for God above...

Welcome to Unitarian Universalism: it will disappoint you. Welcome to Follen: we will disappoint you. Hello, I am Claire, and I will disappoint you. Feels strange to say! But strangely liberating as well. (Our new members might be feeling some buyers' remorse right now...)

My retired colleague Richard Gilbert, speaking at the installation service of a new minister, described this inevitable disappointment.

“Today,” he says, “I am eloquent in the pulpit
and brilliant in the church school,
and you are spiritually intoxicated with my wisdom;
next week I stumble and bumble through my uncertainty and need your
forgiveness.”

“Today I am a great rock of comfort in a weary land;
tomorrow I am blown about as the sands of the desert
and I need the oasis of your strength.”

“Today I dazzle you with my [perceptiveness];
tomorrow I forget our [lunch] appointment.”

He continues:
“Blessed be the task of the minister.
Blessed be the task of the congregation –
for ultimately, we are one and the same.”

¹ - See more at: <http://www.pastrix.com/excerpts/Pastrix-Excerpt-3-Thanks-ELCA.html#sthash.eqTmJoYj.dpuf> and in her book, pg

In a few minutes we will have our Flower Communion, a ritual created in 1923 by Norbert Capek, a Unitarian minister in Prague. Capek was leading a small new Unitarian start-up community.

These new Unitarians were excited and delighted to have found companions in a faith journey that embraced reason, openness, and hope. They rejected many of the traditions that had disappointed and hurt them. They rejected the cross as a symbol of bloodshed. They rejected bread and wine communion as well.

They wanted new symbols, new rituals. And so Capek created the Flower Celebration, and this is what he said about it:

“Each of us is choosing a different flower that speaks for us. The vase (*or baskets for us here today*) is again a symbol for us. For us in our Unitarian brotherhood the vase is our church organization. We need it to help us share the beauties but also the responsibilities of communal life.

“In the proper community
by giving the best that is in us
for the common good,
we grow up
and are able to do
what no single person
is able to do.
Each of us needs to receive
in order to grow up,
but each of us needs to give something away
for the same reason.”²

When we are disappointed, we give something away. We give away perfectionism. We give away our illusions. We are asked to give away our arrogance, sense of entitlement, snobbery. We give away what we *want* and start trying to fulfill other people's *needs*. And we receive perspective; humility; and the chance to begin again in love.

For this is love and nothing else is love...

The Flower Communion is an expression of beauty through diversity, a celebration of the new, the fresh, the beautiful.

² *Norbert Capek: A Spiritual Journey* by Richard Henry, pg 145

And is a ritual that lasts past Sunday. Because as we take our flowers home with us, the ritual continues. Our flowers go to their new homes. And we can watch their fresh fleeting beauty fade away.

Newness and freshness doesn't last. The beauty of a meaningful, diverse, open, loving spiritual community is something that we have to create, and create again and again, each year, each day, by bringing ourselves to the table.

Gardeners know how much work it takes for a single bloom. The harvest is uncertain. Each flower is a miracle, and each time we face disappointment and decide to stick around after it, that is a miracle too. They are both "too beautiful and too real to miss."

Oh, give us pleasure in the flowers today;
And give us not to think so far away
As the uncertain harvest; keep us here
All simply in the springing of the year.

For this is love and nothing else is love,
The which it is reserved for God above
To sanctify to what far ends She will,
But which it only needs that we fulfill.

"None of us alone can save the world.
Together—that is another possibility waiting."³

Amen, and may we make it so.

³ Rebecca Parker—quoted from *Call to Worship*