

Follen Church
March 26, 2023

Call to Worship - Claire –

As I promised last week, we'll hear a song this morning from the musical *Beetlejuice*, inspired by the 80s movie of the same name. If you remember the movie, you might be surprised at how rich and deep the musical is—while also keeping the spirit of irreverence and silliness. We'll hear Lexi and others sing a version of the song “Dead Mom” from *Beetlejuice*, which is from the perspective of the teenage character Lydia, who is grieving and wondering how to live in and grow up in a world without her mom. We will hear a classic Joni Mitchell song about the circle of life, called “Circle Game.” And I swear I didn't plan it this way, but these two anthems in our service are two of my kids' favorite songs.

We can dream about the endless possibility of the multiverse, and then we wake up to this one universe and life we are given. Our music and our service today reflect on time, mortality, rites of passage and why it all matters. To call us into worship I offer this simple Credo from Unitarian Universalist Laila Ibrahim:

It's a blessing each of us was born.
It matters what we do with our lives.
What each of us knows about God is a piece of the truth.
We don't have to do it alone.

And the seasons, they go round and round
And the painted ponies go up and down
We're captive on the carousel of time
We can't return, we can only look
Behind, from where we came
And go round and round and round, in the circle game

Reading - "The God Who Loves You" by Carl Dennis

It must be troubling for the god who loves you
To ponder how much happier you'd be today
Had you been able to glimpse your many futures.
It must be painful for him to watch you on Friday evenings
Driving home from the office, content with your week—
Three fine houses sold to deserving families—
Knowing as he does exactly what would have happened
Had you gone to your second choice for college,
Knowing the roommate you'd have been allotted
Whose ardent opinions on painting and music
Would have kindled in you a lifelong passion.
A life thirty points above the life you're living
On any scale of satisfaction. And every point
A thorn in the side of the god who loves you.
You don't want that, a large-souled man like you
Who tries to withhold from your wife the day's disappointments
So she can save her empathy for the children.
And would you want this god to compare your wife
With the woman you were destined to meet on the other campus?
It hurts you to think of him ranking the conversation

You'd have enjoyed over there higher in insight
Than the conversation you're used to.
And think how this loving god would feel
Knowing that the man next in line for your wife
Would have pleased her more than you ever will
Even on your best days, when you really try.
Can you sleep at night believing a god like that
Is pacing his cloudy bedroom, harassed by alternatives
You're spared by ignorance? The difference between what is
And what could have been will remain alive for him
Even after you cease existing, after you catch a chill
Running out in the snow for the morning paper,
Losing eleven years that the god who loves you
Will feel compelled to imagine scene by scene
Unless you come to the rescue by imagining him
No wiser than you are, no god at all, only a friend
No closer than the actual friend you made at college,
The one you haven't written in months. Sit down tonight
And write him about the life you can talk about
With a claim to authority, the life you've witnessed,
Which for all you know is the life you've chosen.

Sermon - Rev. Claire “Who Moved My Multiverse?”

The poet said:

It must be troubling for the god who loves you
To ponder how much happier you’d be today
Had you been able to glimpse your many futures.

It was on the second watching of *Everything Everywhere All At Once*
that I really understood what story *I* was seeing.
The blockbuster, Academy Award winning movie
Everything Everywhere All At Once
is an elegant, chaotic mindblowing adventure
about a woman, Evelyn, played by Michelle Yeoh.
Evelyn has a dissatisfying life running a laundry
and she’s in the middle of a tax audit.
Her elderly father is judgmental
and her young adult daughter named Joy is disappointing.
Then suddenly her husband starts acting strange, not like himself.
He tells her that the multiverse exists
and tells her how to access it.
He tells her she is the key to saving all the universes
from a terrible villain named Jobu Tupaki.

There are ridiculous stunts,
Jamie Lee Curtis looking terrible,
hot dog fingers, fabulous outfits,
and an Everything Bagel that is about to end
everything, everywhere, all at once.

So that's the premise.
But when I watched it for a second time,
I realized the story *I* was watching
was a story about a daughter
searching all the universes that ever existed,
every corner of the multiverse,
just to find a version of her mom that loved her.

The multiverse is such a delicious fantasy—
it contains everything we have ever wanted.
Evelyn can connect to every other Evelyn there is
and instantly download everything they've learned in their lifetime.
She clicks into an Evelyn in another multiverse
and she immediately has all the skills and knowledge
of a chef, a maid, a singer, a sign-spinner.
In an instant she knows kung fu.
Who needs the Matrix when you have the Multiverse?
That great infinite world where anything is possible,
and somewhere out there
there is a version of ourselves that is perfect, wise, powerful
and above all, truly loving, and deeply loved;
loved the way we always wanted to be loved.

As the poet imagined,
How much happier we might be today
Had we been able to glimpse and choose from our many futures.

Follen has been practicing in recent years
what it means to live into our covenant,
the promises we have made to each other
about how we treat each other in this one universe we get to live in.

Our Covenant of Right Relations asks us to pledge that
“we acknowledge and accept
that all of us have limitations:
 limitations of role,
 responsibility,
 ability,
 understanding,
 and time.”

And even beyond that list, if we are being honest,
we have other limitations:
We have limited energy,
 enthusiasm,
 patience,
 skills,
 capacity and more!

There are no limitations on the many ways we can be limited.
And no limitless, infinite multiverse to bail us out.
How do we choose the lives we want,
the relationships we need,
the purposes that will guide us forward?
And then how do we make our peace with all the things

we have to let go?

When I was in college, I remember a Dean telling me that often in sophomore year students experienced an existential crisis: And the reason was, sophomore year we had to pick a major. But when you pick a major, you are saying “No” to all the other options... all the other things you could learn, all the other things you could do. I remember the Dean saying that choice made college sophomores face their mortality for the first time. And if you really refused to pick just one major, if you decided you *could* double major in both Physics and Philosophy there was another realization waiting— that choice led to very little free time to spend with friends or doing hobbies or just resting and relaxing. No matter what, saying yes to one choice meant saying no to another. Refusing to choose just meant some choices were made for you. A life lesson in mortality, right there at the registrar’s office.

Matthew Haig is the author of the recent bestseller novel *The Midnight Library*, which is also kind of a multiverse fantasy. *The Midnight Library* is about a sad depressed woman named Nora who feels like her life has no meaning. She’s lost her job, her cat died, she’s had fights with her best friend and her brother that has left her not speaking to either of them,

And she feels like a big disappointment.
She's lonely and alone,
feeling too awkward and worthless to try to make amends
or even to try to keep living.
After attempting to end her life,
Nora wakes up inside a magical library,
containing the infinite lives that Nora could have lived,
Nora is able to visit any life she wishes,
And see what might have happened if,
at key decision points in her life
she had made different choices.

The midnight library lets Nora live the life
where she marries her fiancé Dan
instead of calling off the wedding.
At first it seems pretty blissful,
but he turns out to be a mean, cheating alcoholic.

In another life, instead of quitting swimming as a teen,
Nora becomes an Olympic swimmer,
but her parents end up divorced.
Then Nora tries a life where she devoted herself to music,
and she becomes a celebrity musician,
but backstage she learns her brother died of an overdose.
Nora becomes a scientist,
and almost gets eaten by a polar bear.

In each life, though some things have changed for the better,

other things have changed for the worse,
and some people she cares about are completely missing.
One thing Nora discovers is that no matter what she does
in every iteration of her life,
her beloved pet cat is going to die,
no matter how well she takes care of it.

Nora contemplates whether she should stay
in one of these multiverse lives or return to her root life,
and make changes there instead.
She realizes what had gone wrong in her root life:
“She had loved no one, and no one had loved her back.”
That old sad life now seems full of hope to Nora:
the possibility of repairing relationships,
of offering love, of receiving love.

Nora muses:

“It is quite a revelation to discover that the place
you wanted to escape to
is the exact same place you escaped from.
That the prison wasn’t the place, but the perspective.”

The multiverse fantasy is like our imaginings of the afterlife.
We imagine there is some perfect life out there,
where everything feels just right, no conflict, no grief.
If we don’t have to make choices,
if we have no limitations, than we have no mortality;
if everything is possible,
than death has no hold over us.

And then...the movie or the book ends
and here we are,
not capable of everything, everywhere, all at once,
but here in our one single universe,
able to do some things, in some places, sometimes.
Here where every choice does matter, whether we want them to or not.

And that is why it matters every time a new person
chooses to belong to this community,
And it matters when we say yes, you do belong here,
We welcome you!
Our sanctuary is your sanctuary now too,
Mi casa es su casa.

There is power in the choice
to stay in longterm, proximate, regular relationship
with a bunch of people you aren't related to,
for no other reason than the spiritual yearnings of your soul.

Being a member of a church these days is a counter-cultural choice.
We're not the PTA or a local gym
or an alumni association or a social justice non-profit.
Our mission here is to feed our souls, to connect with the Holy,
and to find courage and shared energy to live our values in the world.

The real Beloved Community is not like our fantasies of the afterlife,
There is conflict, there is grief.
There is conflict because we are humans,

and we all have different ways of looking at the world.
In a safe space, a brave space, there is room for our differences,
room to sort out our conflicts and repair relationships.

As I've said on many Membership Sundays,
We will disappoint you!
I will disappoint you.
And it is after that happens,
and you stick around anyway,
that community is born.
Evelyn and Joy find that even through
their disappointment in each other,
they love each other enough to stick around and keep trying.

A few weeks ago, we had a Q&A sessions
after church about how our community
hopes to use the Marshman Center in the future,
and there were a lot of differences of opinions in the room.
One longtime member stood up and said
she was moved by the way we were making space
for difference of opinions
and that made her remember once again
why she loved Follen.

And a newer member said she felt like that conversation
was her "Coming of Age" with Follen!
I might be extrapolizing too much,
but I took that to mean that,

through the hard conversations,
she was able to see that her relationships here
held both the opportunity for joyful fun
and for friction, repair, and the acceptance of imperfection.
In that old Unitarian motto,
“We need not think alike, to love alike.”

All of us have limitations, and our community has limitations:
limitations of role,
 responsibility,
 ability,
 understanding,
 and time.

And what a gift it is to be limited, together.
To know that here we can love, and be loved back.
Here we can be imperfect and confused and disappointed
We even to be both annoyed and annoying,
And with all of that, to still be loved, still belong,
and to still offer that to all others here with us.
I think it is amazing to have that for 10 years, 20, 30, 40, even 50 years.
To be seen, really seen, as we live and move and have our being in this
community.

You aren't allowed to stay in the PTA that long,
they do kick you out when your kids graduate.
Not here!
Here at Follen Church, we go back almost 200 years.
And if we care for each other well,

the future is, well...
Limitless.

And the seasons, they go round and round;
It is good to be here on this carousel with you.

The god who loves you is here,
And in you she is well pleased.
Amen.