

“Time’s A Wastin’: A Sermon about Our Shared Calling”

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The Unitarian Universalist Church of Little Rock

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“If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.” Mother Teresa

Opening Words

“Stand by This Faith,” from Singing the Living Tradition, #569 by Olympia Brown.

Chalice Lighting

“We are here to awaken from our illusion of separateness.”— Thich Nhat Hanh

Meditation by Thich Nhat Hanh

Reading

The Church Where Everything Goes Wrong by Elea Kemler

“Six weeks into the church year, I have realized that I am the minister of a church where things usually go wrong. This morning the copy machine jams repeatedly. The bulletin describing the order of worship has been copied with the second page first and also upside down. No one has remembered to turn on the lights in the sanctuary before the service, so it is dark because it is raining outside. The microphone is buzzing and every so often lets out a painful, high-pitched squeal that makes people wince.

“We have just started the service when someone runs up with a bunch of flowers for the altar, just as someone else runs in with one of the silk arrangements we keep for the mornings when no one brings real flowers. There is laughter as the two flower bearers meet at the altar. They decide on the real flowers, and things settle down for a while until one of the babies starts crying, which sets off another baby crying. I try to speak over the wailing as their fathers hustle them down the aisle and try to distract them in the back. Usually, I love watching the tall, gentle fathers who bounce their babies in backpacks at the rear of the sanctuary, but today I am annoyed because I want it to be quiet and holy and lovely and things are definitely not shaping up that way.

“The woman who is helping with worship gets up and, instead of giving the announcements, introduces the candle-lighting time, which comes later. People call out, “Not yet!” More laughter. The organist starts playing the wrong hymn and a couple of choir members yell over the din for him to stop; a few minutes later, during the period for prayerful silence, he accidentally falls onto the keyboard, causing the organ to emit horrible, gassy noises. Shrieks and snorts of laughter. All pretense of Sunday morning decorum is lost, and something inside me, some furious, bossy desire to have “my worship service” go according to my plan, finally slides free and I laugh with them.

“This will be the first of many times that I laugh at Sunday morning details gone awry. It is also the first of many times that I imagine God is watching, looking up or down or over or out at us from wherever God sits on Sunday mornings, slightly amazed and maybe at a loss for words

because we, God's people, are so funny and wonderful and odd all at the same time. In moments like these I imagine God as a sturdy old woman with her hands on her hips, or perhaps as a rabbi pulling on his long, white beard. I imagine a God shaking his or her head and saying, "What in the world are they doing over there? This is what they call church? What were they thinking? But I also imagine a God who is touched and maybe a little honored by our efforts, however halting, to worship and give praise. I imagine a God who is moved by our attempts to care for one another and to name the things we know as holy. There is a warmth in this congregation that is new to me, a simple friendliness that shines through the "fumbblings and failures, a love that makes the ragged edges smooth. I have always wanted to believe, really believe, that our mistakes aren't the most important parts of us. I have always wanted to believe that kindness and compassion matter more than anything. I sense that I can learn this here. "

Sermon

If you are new around here, I should tell you right up front that today's sermon is a little different. Today may seem more like a kitchen table conversation, one of those times after company has gone home when everybody gathers round and the folks in the family talk about "what is," even if "what is" is hard to talk about. So if you are new here, some of what I will say today may not seem to be for you, but you are free to listen in. You might learn a little more about who we are here at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Little Rock, and who we are striving to become.

So, I ask: who are we and why are we here? Who is this group of people who gather together and call ourselves the Unitarian Universalist Church of Little Rock? Why do we come here? Why do we do all the work of keeping alive this church community? What is our purpose? All of these are questions of vocation, or calling.

For these past September Sundays, we've explored the idea that each of us in this life has a vocation, or a call. Our callings, we've heard, arise from who we are, at our core, and the values we most cherish. It is in listening for our callings, wisdom teaches, that we can find, and know, our purpose in life. No true calling is easy to follow; there are always hard days and hard times in life. Listening for, and following, our calling, though, is how we thrive. The way I see it, no congregation, no faith community of whatever tradition, and no religious institution can stay alive and thrive unless its people know, deep in their bones, who they are together as a community and why they come together to do what they do. We, here in this gathered community, need to hear and to know our shared calling.

So who are we? We are not, just for the record, the church Elea Kemler names *The Church Where Everything Goes Wrong*. Now in this, our second year of ministry together, I can honestly say that never have I experienced such a Sunday here among all of you. Yes, things sometimes don't go as we'd planned but you all work hard to make Sunday mornings happen – and indeed, you all give your all to keeping this place running seven days a week, and to each of you I say, "thank you." Thank you for giving of yourselves to help create something larger than any one of us – this community where love is our teaching.

Even though love is our teaching, and even though we work darned hard around here to tend the life of this church, and even though we are not the church where everything goes wrong, the truth is some things do go wrong around here. Stuff happens. Stuff has happened around here in years past, and from what I hear, it's

been painful and it's left some scars. Folks have disagreed. Some folks have gotten downright mad. Some folks have left, some to return when the next minister arrived, and some never to return. This can be hard to talk about, and it can bring up painful memories, but I want you to know this: when stuff happens, it's nothing to be ashamed of. Stuff happens in life, and it's no different in church life.

Get any group of people together and before you know it, despite the best of intentions, the mistakes will start flying through the air – sometimes in church life even hitting a few innocent bystanders, usually newcomers caught unaware, or maybe long-time members who may leave both angry and hurt. We all make mistakes.

It's only human to make mistakes but we humans can have a hard time dealing with mistakes. We can have a hard time forgiving one another. We can have an even harder time forgiving ourselves. And we can have an especially hard time forgiving our church. We expect our church to be perfect – an impossible expectation, for the church is nothing more than a group of imperfect beings gathered together in an imperfect world to do the hardest work known to humankind – the building of a community that strives to make this complex and broken world more just and more loving for all beings.

Church work is just plain hard work and it's never perfect or without mistakes, but know this: nothing that has happened here during the past six and a half decades of our history can keep us from living our shared calling. No mistake, no imperfection, and certainly nothing in our history, can hold us back. We are more than our mistakes and missteps.

Our mistakes and imperfections are not who we are; this is true for us as humans and for the groups of humans that are our churches. “. . . (Ou)r mistakes aren't the most important parts of us,” Elea Kemler reminds us. And our “imperfections,” says Brene Brown, a popular Ted Talk speaker, “are not inadequacies; our imperfections” (she says) “remind us that we are all in this together.” How true – we are all human – flawed, limited, finite beings, each of us, whether we admit it or not, dependent upon both one another and the web of life to hold us as we make our way. We are all in need of kindness and compassion, and “. . . kindness and compassion,” Elea Kemler wisely suggests, “matter more than anything.” That's part of who we are here at this church and also a part of what we do – we are here to learn together how to live with more kindness and more compassion, both for others and for ourselves. There aren't many other places in this transactional world where we get to learn and practice spiritual skills like kindness and compassion, love and peace. It takes a gathering of souls, a spiritual community like this one where folks choose to do the sometimes hard work of honoring fellow beings, where we both teach and learn together what it means to be human. This is part of who we are – and also a part of what we do here at this church. And what helps us to learn and practice the spiritual skills it takes to be fully human is something we call “covenant.” We'll explore the idea of covenant as a part of our worship theme in the month of June, but for now, let me say just a bit about the meaning of “covenant.” A “covenant” is a promise, but it's more than an everyday promise, and far more than an ordinary contract. A covenant is a solemn promise, a promise to which you give your heart and soul. Marriage vows are not a contract, but a covenant. The vows a minister and a congregation say to one another at the beginning of a new ministry are not a contract, but a covenant. We as a congregation say together our covenant, our promises of how we aspire to live and to be in this world, when we say the words both of our Affirmation and those words that close our worship – words that begin, “Love is the doctrine of this church . . . and end, “Honor All Beings.” And a half dozen years ago, you all did the good work of creating another covenant, a commitment to peacemaking called “At Peace Among Ourselves,” which affirms our values of compassion and forgiveness, respect and loving kindness. It's worth reading again and again; copies are everywhere around here and that is good.

The covenants we make and keep can guide both our lives and the life of our shared community. People know us less by what we say and more by what we do. If the people of a church seem always to be snipping and snapping at one another and spending time spitting and spatting with one another, what does that look like, to folks on the outside looking in? It's okay to disagree; respectful debate is a good thing but it's way better to save our energy for the big questions, questions of calling like, "How shall we serve the wider community?" or "What gifts can we share with our world?" Too often, the energy in congregational life (and this is everywhere, folks) can get diverted to the small stuff – the "bushels" where we Unitarian Universalists tend to hide our light – and then we pick fights, and they are usually what ministers call "fake fights," over stuff like coffee, or décor, or who gets to be the boss. Life's too short for fake fights. "Time's a wastin'" I used to hear folks say, and I now hear both poetry and deep wisdom in those words.

Our time in this life is both limited and short and our time together here in this place is precious. When I answered the call to serve alongside you in this ministry we share, I promised – covenanted – to walk with you in the spirit of love, to speak the truth as I see it and understand it. I am here to be real with you, to laugh with you and to cry with you, and already we have shared both laughter and tears, times of joy and times of sorrow. I told you at the beginning and I say again today: I have no agenda, no master plan for our ministry together. This is not my ministry, my church, my worship service; this is our shared ministry, our church, our worship. Though I bring ministry experience, I will say again that I am in no way a savior, I am not a messiah, but a flesh and blood human being here to companion you on our shared journey, a journey and a ministry to which I have pledged my heart and soul.

I am here to dream with you as we dream together about what might be our future here at our church. Right now, some of us are a little anxious, unsure of what's coming next, and that's okay. That's real life. Right now, some of us are wondering: Where will we worship? When are we moving back to our first sanctuary? Some of us miss that familiar space, that place where for decades folks marked so much of life – a space where you said marriage vows, blessed new babies, mourned the dead. That is grief, and it's both understandable and real, and I honor that. Others are happy we've made this space a place for more to worship, so that our doors are "open wide for all who choose to step inside" while we figure out what is best. I am here to be with you in this time of change, to listen, to ask the hard questions, to imagine with you our future.

What is our future? Who are we? And why are we here together? What is our shared calling? We will find our answers to these questions, together. Here is what I see: I see a world around us that is hurting and hungry. It's been another tough week all across our land. From the heartbreak in Tulsa and Charlotte to the grief in Seattle over still another shooting, to the tenor of debate over the presidential election, we see a nation torn apart and wounded by tensions over race and class and gender, by gun violence – and all the while, despite the national numbers, there are folks all around us who haven't enough even to live lives of dignity. I look out and see a world that needs our voice and our witness, our message of hope and our works of love.

I look out among you right now and I what I see in you is abundant goodness. I'm not new here anymore: I've been among you and at your side for a while now. In you all, I see warmth and friendliness; I see a tenacious and fierce commitment "to stand by this faith," a heartfelt desire to serve the greater good, a good for all, and not just for us. In you all, I sense a deep faith, a faith that, despite our differences, we humans are all one family, here on this earth to look out for one another. Among you all, I have experienced love, "a love," in Elea Kemler's words, "that makes the ragged edges smooth." Our world needs your love.

This is a sermon, a kitchen table conversation that could go on for a long time, but not today; it is one that will continue in sermons to come. For now, I will say that our shared calling, however we may decide to live it, is rooted in our love. We are called to love and we'll spend our lifetimes, you and I, learning how to love and to let ourselves to be loved. I sense that we can learn this here, together.