

## **The Intentional Act of Going to Church**

- a sermon reflection compiled and presented by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister

Sunday, January 21, 2018

### ***Reading***

“Let me tell you why I come to church...”

- by A. Powell Davies

Let me tell you why I come to church. I come to church—and would whether I was a preacher or not—because I fall below my own standards and need to be constantly brought back to them. I am afraid of becoming selfish and indulgent, and my church—my church of the free spirit—brings me back to what I want to be. I could easily despair; doubt and dismay could overwhelm me. My church renews my courage and my hope. It is not enough that I should think about the world and its problems at the level of a newspaper report or magazine discussion. It could too soon become too low a level. I must have my conscience sharpened—sharpened until it goads me to the most thorough and responsible thinking of which I am capable. I must feel again the love I owe to others. I must not only hear about it but feel it. In church, I do. I am brought toward my best, in every way toward my best.

### ***Sermon Reflection***

A bit of welcome serendipity led me to our message for this morning – a message that follows and supports the community-building work done at our annual all-congregation retreat held just yesterday in this space. I came upon this message while doing research for the retreat – it comes from the worship archive of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta...though oddly enough, it was posted without an attribution to its author. I am so grateful to this unnamed writer for a message that resonates deeply with me and reflects beautifully the meaning to be found in the intentional act of going to church. I have adapted it somewhat for our purposes here this morning. It is simply titled “Get Me to the Church”:

The author Kingsley Amis writes of one of his characters, “He was of the faith chiefly in the sense that the church he currently did not attend was Catholic.” Many are of the Unitarian Universalist faith in that same sense– that the church they currently do not attend is Unitarian Universalist.

Sometimes, when I’m out and about, doing the things, surprisingly, that ordinary people, non-ministers, do – shopping, eating out, [going to] movies – I often feel like a truant officer. I encounter a member [or friend] of our congregation and just about the first thing he or she will say to me will have something to do with his or her not attending church. People feel I’m owed an explanation. I am the vice-principal for religious attendance.

These encounters stir up several feelings. I’m sorry, first of all, that my presence instills guilt, that so many people meet me with embarrassment – as if they’d been caught playing hooky. But I also find it interesting that so many people, on meeting me outside the [fellowship], have that sense that they “ought” to have been in church, even if they hardly ever attend. It occurs to me – to put a positive spin on these encounters – that that fleeting sense of guilt the “almost attended” experience means that,

on some level, **people know that being in church is important**. Perhaps I should console myself that I am not, after all, merely the truant officer one failed to avoid, but a reminder that there is an important experience one is missing and ought not to be.

You might be wondering, by the way, why I'm talking about not going to church with people sitting here who, obviously, do go to church. It's called "preaching to the choir," isn't it? I want to articulate the value of why we are here. I want to strengthen your resolve – **your intention** - to be here regularly. And I want to provide you with some responses to those you know who don't join us on Sundays and who give you all sorts of reasons why they don't.

So, let's talk about why people stay away.

Here's a story in which is embedded the reason we liberals like to give for why so many of us don't go to church:

An "old time" minister of a traditional church was very concerned that a once-faithful member was now mostly absent on Sunday mornings. Finally determined to do something about him, the minister went to his house and found him sitting by his fire. Surprised to see the pastor, the man nevertheless hastily pulled up a chair for him by the fire and waited for the rebuke to come. But the minister was silent. Then, without a word, he took the tongs, drew a glowing coal from the midst of the blazing fire and laid it on the hearthstone before his parishioner. He stayed, in silence, until the blaze died out, then left still not uttering a word. The parishioner, of course, got the point of the blazing coal illustration, and was at church every Sunday every after.

That's an assumption we Unitarian Universalists are fond of, that so many traditional Christians go to church because *they* are afraid of hell– and, well, we're *not*, so we *don't*. Let me dispel that annoying little myth about other church people. I wasn't always a Unitarian Universalist. I have had a wide and rich experience with people of other very traditional faiths. And I have never known one of those faithful people who went to church regularly because they were afraid not to. Watch the services of the gospel churches on television. Look at those folks singing, praising, and dancing. See if they look as if they're there because they are afraid not to be. They are there because they *love* being there.

It does not empower our own **often uncertain faith** to underestimate the faith of others.

[And] I make no judgment on this: it simply is the case – that some people do not attend church services regularly because, for them, **the Sunday morning experience is not related the rest of the life of the congregation**: that is, for them, the Sunday service is not the practice of a worshipping *community*. It is, rather, an isolated [event] or program, much like a concert or a play. So, they can attend or not attend as they would attend or not attend a concert or a play. [...] For some, the Sunday Service is a kind of entertainment – enlightening entertainment, perhaps, but, **divorced from community**, only entertainment.

I state that as a simple fact. It's not a terrible thing. I don't argue with anyone's reason for being here. Who knows when or how the spirit of the casual observer will be touched and moved and one might be transformed from one who *goes to church* [occasionally] to one who *belongs with [is part of]* the community.

The late Unitarian minister, Robert Raible – wrote, "Roman Catholics attend Mass wherever they are and no matter who the priest is. Protestants are inclined to attend church where they are attracted by the preaching of a particular minister. Their loyalty is to a person." "There are three categories of loyalty," Raible continues, "the lowest, to a person; a higher one, to an institution; and the highest, to

the ideals for which the institution stands.” The other side of this, of course, is that some people *do not* attend on Sundays because of a person – that is, they don’t attend because the minister, far from commanding their loyalty, is the stumbling block to their participation. The minister may not be the grand orator they expect to hear. Perhaps the minister has views they don’t share – and don’t want to hear about. Perhaps – and this is a common failing of some Unitarian Universalist ministers – perhaps the minister has turned out to be religious [or too spiritual]. Whatever the reason, there are many who can take the church or leave it alone because neither the institution nor the ideals for which it stands are valued highly enough to outweigh the antipathy toward the person – the minister – so they stay away.

Sunday Service attendance always increases for a short time after a minister leaves and a new minister arrives. Those disillusioned by the former minister come back to briefly idolize the shiny new minister, to “breathe the breath of fresh air.” Sadly, sooner or later, the new minister will turn out to also be quite human, breathing the same air as everyone else.

### **Why, then, should we “go to church?” Why be with the faithful on Sunday mornings? Why be part of “the worshipping community?”**

If we are a people of faith, we are called to be with the worshipping community – first because we need the community and its ideals and, secondly, because others need it and they need us to provide and sustain it.

[...] The truth of it is that **we live out our lives in the midst of a culture that has no time for the soul.** We live on a barren terrain that would starve our spirits if we did not alternate life on that terrain with life in religious experience. We gather to save our souls, nurture our spirits, to hear in some snippet of an otherwise pedestrian sermon words that described us, raised up our hurts out of denial, lit up a path of hope and possibility. We come here because, without magic, without smoke or bells, and with scant hope of miracle, we **declare the holy in the midst of dailiness**, we lift up what is sacred to us in a profane existence. We gather to proclaim, for our lives sake, with the confirmation of others in lives like ours, **that indeed there *is* holy, sacred, principle, value, hope, possibility.** That’s what “worship” means: worth-ship. Declaring, imputing worth. It’s always that, regardless of the preacher, the sermon, the trumpet or the troubadour.

Please turn with me in your hymnal to reading #468. Let’s read it, not responsively, but together:

*We need one another when we mourn and would be comforted. We need one another when we are in trouble and afraid. We need one another when we are in despair, in temptation, and need to be recalled to our best selves again. We need one another when we would accomplish some great purpose, and cannot do it alone. We need one another in the hour of success, when we look for someone to share our triumphs. We need one another in the hour of defeat, when with encouragement we might endure, and stand again. We need one another when we come to die, and would have gentle hands prepare us for the journey. All our lives we are in need and others are in need of us.*

That’s the other part of it – that last phrase “**...and others are in need of us.**” We gather here in communal worship because we need it and because others need us to be here. We gather in support of these others even [if we’re not enchanted with the publicized sermon title or whoever the sermon-giver is.] Others are in need of us. Every Sunday, people are waiting for you here. **It makes a difference whether or not you are here.** The theologian Henry Nelson Wieman used the term “The Power of Assembly.” There is power in gathering.

[...] We call upon you to join us each Sunday because you need us. And we call upon you to join us each Sunday – doubts, misgivings, disappointments and all – because *he* needs you; because *she* needs you.

We are also a people for justice [and healing of this world]. We do not gather to grow our spirits only for our own dear sake. When Wieman spoke of “The Power of Assembly” he was speaking of the power to make a difference – not only to make a difference for ourselves, but to make a difference in the lives of others. ***[We witnessed that power just yesterday with the masses of people marching for justice and in protest in cities across this land]***

In Anne Lamott’s book, *Travelling Mercies*, she writes about why she makes her son go to church with her:

*I make him because I can. I outweigh him by nearly seventy-five pounds. But that’s only part of it. The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want – which is to say purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy – are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community, who pray, or practice their faith; they are Buddhists, Jews, Christians – people banding together to work on themselves and for human rights. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful.*

We belong here on Sunday mornings because we are part of a community determined to make a difference in the lives of others. And it is out of the worshipping community that the power to make a difference arises. Whatever else we do in this congregation, **our worship is the center of our community**. This gathering is [a window into the heart of who we are as a people of faith]. Here, week after week is the place and time in which we declare together what is good, and just, and valuable. It is the place and time in which we gather the power – vision, inspiration, courage, enthusiasm – to put that declaration to work...in our lives and in the world.

Faithfully being a Unitarian Universalist – faithfully being a person of liberal religion – **means joining ourselves in religious community**. Claiming to be Unitarian Universalist in isolation from religious community is not really being Unitarian Universalist. It is just not being something else. It is just not believing this, not believing that. I’ve heard people say they are “intellectually” Unitarian Universalist. Well I don’t know what good that does them or anyone else. “Intellectually,” I’m a miracle of athleticism.

If I may presume to quote myself: in a sermon a few years ago I said,

**“Our reaching out is inseparable from our reaching in:** inseparable from our reaching in to know our own hearts, inseparable from our inward heroic spiritual journeys in which we find our power, defeat our monsters, and return to do justice.” It is for this that the religious community gathers in worship, to reach in, gather the strength, the will, and the hope out of which to grow the self and reach out to the world.

Our regular presence with the gathered community is a gift to our own spirit and our declaration of the faith, values, and principles we claim as ours.

May our intention in this be strengthened.

Blessed be and Amen.

**Source material:** <http://www.uuca.org/get-me-to-the-church/>