

On Reclaiming Church

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

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Reading

“On Going to Church” (Excerpt) - by the Rev. A. Powell Davies

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. It is not enough that I should think about the world and its problems at the level of a newspaper report or a magazine discussion. I must have my conscience sharpened—sharpened until it goads me to the most thorough and responsible thinking of which I am capable.

I need to be reminded that there are things I must do in the world— unselfish things, things undertaken at the level of idealism. Workaday enthusiasms are not enough. They wear out too soon. I want to experience human nature at its best—and be reminded of its highest possibilities, and this happens to me in church.

In a congregation we share each other’s spiritual needs and reinforce each other. In some ways, the soul is never lonelier than in a church service. That is certainly true of a pulpit, for a pulpit is the most intimately lonely place in the world—yet it is a loneliness that has strength in it. Perhaps this is because the innermost solitude of the human heart is in some paradoxical way a thing that can be shared—that must be shared—if the spirit of God is to find a full entrance into it.

We meet each other as friends and neighbors anywhere and everywhere, but we seldom do so in the consciousness of our souls’ deepest yearnings. But in church we do—in a way that protects us from all that is intrusive, yet leaves us knowing that we all have the same yearning, the same spiritual loneliness, the same need of assurance and faith and hope. We are not merely an audience, we are a congregation.

I doubt whether I could stand the thought of the cruelty and misery of the present world unless I could know, through an experience that renewed itself over and over again, that at the heart of life there is assurance, that I can hold an ultimate belief that all is well. And this happens in church.

Life must have its sacred moments and its holy places. The soul will always seek its nurture. For religious experience—which is life at its most intense, life at its best—is something we cannot do without.

Sermon Reflection

This morning we celebrated what is in my view, one of the most sacred rituals in the life of our fellowship – the welcoming, the “ingathering” of new members into the church. Each time we have the privilege of this ritual, I find myself inspired to reflect on the meaning of what it is we do here...what it means to be and do “church.” Now I recognize that the very word “church” continues to be problematic for some of us. And as many of you know, I consider it an integral part of my mission

here to help us together reframe and reclaim traditional religious language, or “language of reverence” as it’s often referred to.

So on your behalf I found myself down an etymological rabbit hole this week researching the origins of the word “church.” I managed to climb out...with no small amount of difficulty – you know how carried away I can get with words – but I want to share with you this nutshell of what I learned: The word “church” is of Saxon/pagan origins; from *cirice* (*keer-ee-ke*) meaning *circle*. And I hope this makes you as happy as it did me - the word “circus” comes from the same root. This origin of the word church is even older than the Greek *ecclesia*.

But rather than present further evidence as to why and how we should all be more comfortable with the word itself – because in truth, I care far less what we call it than that we understand to our very bones what it means - I would rather focus this morning on *why this all matters*. So I bring you now a slightly edited (for length) version of a sermon written in 2005 by the Rev. Nancy McDonald Ladd that provides one of the best articulations on why this all matters that I have ever read; it’s a message that resonates strongly with my own heart.

[...]

For the purpose of the sermon I am sharing this morning, I’m defining the word “church,” as a specific religious community bound together by common religious purpose, and I believe that a church like ours can and does to do more than just get us in its doors. I say this because I have seen people, including myself and so many of you, be profoundly changed by the opportunity to live a deeply religious life within Unitarian Universalism.

Religion matters in the world. Our church matters, has mattered so profoundly to so many. Precisely because we wouldn’t impose our faith on anyone, precisely because we refuse to place our institution overtop of our morality, **our church matters**. Organized religion as we often understand it has been guilty of placing its institutions overtop of its morality in ways that often frighten us and **hold us back from self-identifying as a religious movement**. We look at the crimes and the hatred that arise because of the religious impulse, and we wonder if we even want to be included in the mess of “religion” in the first place. We try to dissociate ourselves, to say, “I’m not really all that religious. I’m a Unitarian Universalist,” and because of this it has been said that ours are institutions full of anti-institutionalists and religious groups that distrust religion.

It ain’t easy being us, an irreligious religion, a society of prophetic passion which sometimes rejects its right to speak prophetically. As a minister and a Unitarian Universalist, I see that distancing, that self-imposed separation from other religious groups whose evangelical aims we do not support, that distancing from the rest of “religion” as we understand it, as a complicated process. It simultaneously provides us with unity and requires us to forge a disconnection from our past and a hesitancy to acknowledge the nature of the enterprise we are engaged in. The fact is, for all our anti-institutionalism and distrust of organized religion, **we are here this Sunday morning in a building all our own which exists for the purpose of our shared worship**, here in a place that is nothing more and nothing less than a church, doing and being and singing out loud together as nothing more and nothing less than a congregation.

Great Unitarian preacher and theologian A. Powell Davies understood the power of doing and being a church community. In fact, it was his church that acted as the vehicle for every bit of social change he

helped to create, and he said that throughout his life, he came to believe with increasing clarity that only at the level of religion, honest, believable religion, could any of the problems that oppressed his age be brought towards solution. **That's a strong statement, that religion is necessary for social change.** But Davies meant to make a strong statement because in all of his experience leading and advocating for justice, he saw that churches, more than any other institutions, are uniquely suited to changing the world.

History is most changed by religion claiming its power to bend this world toward justice, by religious people claiming the vitality of their faith as it prods them on toward right action. Religion, honest, believable, challenging religion, is a necessary component of social change.

Of course, I would venture to say that many among us just simply don't agree. Religion, to some Unitarian Universalists, is valuable because it offers us community, but it is not necessary for the work that we do in the world. For some among us, our churches are only the places where the free thinkers can come together over ideas and coffee, where liberals can find other liberals. Under this system, religion is a handy framework for the practical relationships among persons that make social change possible. **But to Davies, and to me, religion itself is a vehicle for that change we seek, and perhaps it is the most powerful vehicle of all.**

The concept of religion, the history of it, the institution of it, the valuing of it that has so often proven problematic, all of this combines to form something unlike any other human creation, for only in religion and in art can we speak in symbol and metaphor, imagining what we hope to be and what our souls cry out for, without apology for our lack of precision, and only in religion can we do that together. It is in the context of this thing called religion that we human beings can confront the mystery enough to admit that we are frightened or that we are inspired. **It is in our religious expression that we are invited to let go of our egos and our intellects long enough to feel the presence of the sacred and to act on the urgings of the spirit.**

The religious experience, the experience of being totally present to the sacred, is not under the sole ownership of conservative Christians. It is not under the sole ownership of monks who sit atop isolated mountains praying for peace. It is not under the sole ownership of yogis who meditate five hours a day. The religious impulse is ours, totally ours, if only we have the courage to claim it as our own, to contradict the common assumption made both by others and by we ourselves **that what we do here doesn't really count as religion.**

I came to liberal religion because I believe that it is the truest expression of the religious impulse I have ever encountered. I didn't become "less religious" when I left the Catholic and Christian faith of my childhood. In my mind, I became more fully and honestly religious. Far from being diametrically opposed, **liberalism (of the ideological and not purely political variety) and religion are in fact the perfect complements to each other.** Religious institutions offer sustenance to the outwardly moving tide of socially responsible living while open-minded liberal engagement in the world around us sows the seeds for true religious inquiry better than any dogmatic test of faith. There is such power in religious conviction, such life-changing inquiry and answer that happens when we worship together. I mourn the thought that we liberals could ever let their churches become anything short of religious institutions and in so doing willingly sacrifice a great deal of our power to be effective agents of change in this world.

[...]As a religious professional and as a person of faith, I do firmly believe that religious community is not only important but necessary in our culture. **The immensity of pain and isolation is too great for the vast majority of human beings including myself to tackle without a sacred community,** and religious ritual that connects us to more than our rational minds is *salvational* in the most personal sense of the word. It doesn't save us from damnation or the devil or just punishment. Rather, a religion like ours, well-lived, has the power to save us from self-obsession and invites us to be in service to something larger than our own egos. My enduring bias, like that of Davies, is the idea that we should be proud to admit that we are doing religion in our churches. I believe we are a church, and not only are we a church, we are a great and storied church with theology and history to spare.

Without a place and a time for meaning-making, the bravest of souls grows weary. Without a place where a person can go to doubt and to question and confront themselves, the best-intentioned moral battles hit the rocks of isolation and eventually we find that they can no longer hold back the oppressive weight of meaninglessness. Religious institutions are places for meaning making.

And so I believe that we are a liberal religious institution. I believe it to my core. This is my religion, not my pastime, not my social club, but my religion. This Unitarian Universalism, this creedlessness, this holy mystery, this is my religion.

Now all of this, since the first words I've spoken this morning, has been positively begging for a working definition of the word religion, and that definition has nothing to do with God. It has nothing to do with doctrine or holy books. Rather, a religion, as I am defining it, is a community of persons who share a common message, are grounded in their particular theological and cultural history and who turn to spiritual as well as intellectual resources as they engage in active living together. Common message. Common history. Common lives. Sounds OK, but the big question is, do we have a common message? The common message of a religious group may also be understood as that group's "good news," the wisdom that they particularly have to share with the wider world, and since I believe we are a religion, you might guess that I believe we do have our own good news.

The good news, the good news that our history and our practice tell us again and again, is that we don't have to be dogmatic, judgmental and closed off to be a part of today's richly woven religious tapestry. We know that you don't have to believe in God to be alive with spirit and pulsing with the sacred. We know that you don't have to speak a creed to be united as searchers for a better way of living.

We have religious truths to speak, and even better, we're the ones uniquely suited to speak them. It's our history and **our movement that can join loudly in telling the world that religion is not defined by its restrictions but by its *connections*.**

[...]

In order to positively affect the world beyond our doorsteps, we Unitarian Universalists need to stop apologizing for being a religion. In order to move beyond our rather insulated and not really very diverse field of influence, we need to claim our power and responsibility to do so. And to do that, here's the good news again, we don't have to compromise who we are. We don't have to give up our status as thinking persons, as humanists, as atheists, as believers in an unnamable and un-

personalized God. **All we have to do is tell people that we're here, and that we're doing church a different way, and that liberal religion can and does change lives.**

[...]

To say that we have good news here among us is not to say that we have a monopoly on good news. It's not to say that others do not have it in just as much quantity and richness. **Claiming our own identity as a liberal religious movement and holding it up as worthy and valuable is not dismissive of other religious traditions.** The message here is not that we are somehow better than Buddhism or better than Islam or better than anything else. The message is that, for we who have chosen it, Unitarian Universalism matters. Unitarian Universalism is the religious vehicle that is best suited to our lives and our commitments.

And so, we come back to the beginning, returning to the place where we are tempted to say, "I'm not all that religious. I'm a Unitarian Universalist," but this time we are supported by a new definition of what it means to be in religious community. When we say that we are not particularly religious because we are Unitarian Universalists, we're still buying into the narrow and defeating definition of religion that tells us that you have to think of yourselves as right while everyone else is wrong in order to properly call yourself a church. **What could happen if we, humanists and pagans and theists and atheists alike, stop buying into that definition ourselves and start saying that we don't have to be afraid of being religious anymore?** We don't have to let those who misuse the religious impulse squirrel it away for themselves. We don't have to hand over our power to change the world.

Every Sunday, I get here before most of you. I walk around doing whatever tasks I have to do that morning, and I watch as this place finally comes to life. After a week of waiting for you, sometime around 10:15 on Sunday morning, this latent shell becomes a teeming body of energy and expectation, friendships and faith. There is no other way to describe what this place becomes on Sunday morning except to say that it is a church. **Religion happens here.** It is unmistakable, and it is beautiful. We all have reasons for being here and for sacrificing our time, our money and our energy to make this wonderful place live. We all know that church matters in our own ways. It is, after all, many things to many people. For some of us, it is an opportunity to educate our children in a way that we could not achieve in the home. For others, one tiny moment of worshipful silence is enough to bring a thousand aching memories and joyful occasions to the foreground of our lives. Church is the chance to pray, to daydream, sometimes to leave work and worry behind, sometimes to find new work and new worries. **Church is a place to get agitated, get excited, get inspired.** Church is a place where you know you can cry and nobody will peer over your shoulder in critical awareness, and a church like this is a place where your presence and your perspective, is valued.

There is a special kind of humor and comfort that is found in a group of people attempting to talk about life's greatest questions through the limitless cycles of pot luck dinners, halting sermonic attempts, seemingly endless committee meetings, and sometimes, though this never happens here, off-key singing. Church. **No one can deny that churches are different than other places.** Churches are more infuriating and more engaging than other places. Churches are different, and we need them to be that way. On Sunday mornings, as you all arrive and engage in your separate conversations, set up your tables, get and give your many messages, the point of it all is suddenly made clear. The community of faith makes itself manifest, and it is a spirit of community that does not

happen in a secular organization. It is a kind of humble togetherness that arises nowhere but here, in a church, a religious organization that is as flawed and as finite as it is life giving and ultimately hope-making.

We are a religious community of free searchers, bound together by a history that we cannot run away from, a common message that we speak without being forced, and bonds of relationship that hold each and every one of us responsible for our own well-being and that of those around us. Are we a religious institution? Yes we are, and at our best we are religion at its most challenging, most humble, and most powerful. May we be proud of the liberal church that holds us when we fear we are falling, proud of our heretical and courageous heritage, and proud, today and every day, to speak the good news that is ours to speak.

Shalom and Salaam, Blessed be and Amen.

Sources

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