



The Unitarian Church in Westport

SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

Beloved Community as Spiritual Practice

By the Rev. Dr. John Morehouse

Sunday, February 21, 2021

My first foray into the American Baptist church came as an invitation from a good friend of mine. I was 28, in the middle of a messy divorce and I was spending more nights than I should at the bar. My friend Bob, who was in active recovery, invited me to his church one Sunday. “Oh, no” I said, “I really don’t do religion anymore” recalling my fiery exit from the Unitarianism of my youth. He promised me that they would not try to convert me. “Just come and meet some of the folks, meet the Pastor” he said.

I reluctantly agreed and joined him on a bright spring morning. I had steeled myself to be accosted by bible thumping fundamentalists but what I found instead was, well, pleasant. The church, painted bright white with red carpeting, was noisy and full of life. People were hugging one another and talking excitedly. Bob introduced me to the pastor, a middle-aged man with sandy hair and twinkling eyes. “Hi John nice to meet you. I am Pastor Will, let me know if you have any questions. We’re glad you are here.”

Then came the service. No fire and damnation. No guilt. A sermon on the Good Samaritan if I remember correctly. Pastor Will’s message was “your neighbor isn’t always the person you know or agree with, show them respect and God’s love”. The offering plate went around and Bob pulled out a crisp \$100 bill, a lot of money in those days and for someone working as a roofer, and smiled, “something extra today” he said, “enough for both of us.”

After the service, coffee, Bundt cake and sandwiches for the homeless who were welcomed no matter if they came to the service at all. As I left, I thanked the pastor. He held both my hands and looked right into my eyes. “Your friend Bob tells me you are going through a hard time. I will pray for you John. Please do come back.”

And come back I did. Every Sunday for months. No pressure, just love. And boy, did I need some love and acceptance. It was a very broken time in my life. I found there in that Baptist church the practice of Beloved Community. Acceptance and living out of a faith that I didn’t believe existed. I learned other practices as well. I learned to pray. To ask with my inner voice for strength and courage to face the days ahead. I did address the prayer to God, more like a ‘to whom it may concern’. I met with Pastor Will more than once. I told him of my struggle with religion. Of how when my close friend died of cancer in high school, I stopped believing in God. Pastor Will said “Don’t worry about the God stuff. Half the people in this church are probably agnostic. Experience God’s love instead. Start there.”

Start there. I did start there. I learned to pray. I learned to accept love. I learned to give generously. I learned to trust in people.

Several weeks ago, I introduced to you the idea of Beloved Community, the community with the spiritual center and the civic circumference. This week I want to introduce to you how the community itself is a home to spiritual practice.

Nate did a fantastic job explaining spiritual practice. A spiritual practice need not be found in a religion. Although I do believe it's easier to do from within a religion. It is that practice that gives your life its greatest meaning, the grace that feeds your soul.

Practice can include prayer, meditation, singing, music, walking, mindful eating, cooking, tai chi, chi gong, yoga, laughing, and enjoying the arts. It can include reading, learning or just watching the snow fall. Whenever we can get our worries out of the way, we are practicing spiritually and when we do it together, as we are this morning, we are creating beloved community as a spiritual practice itself.

Now I do know that it's been hard to feel that deeper connection with this pandemic. It is not easy to feel that sense of interconnection over a screen. So, in some ways what we are doing here in this virtual worship and in our many meetings is holding the place for the deeper spiritual work to come. And it will come again.

Remarkably we have been growing not only in numbers but in participation and depth. In fact, for some, this virtual reality has given people a chance to be more spiritual than before, especially when distance and mobility challenges made it so hard to come to church. Good news! We will continue to stream live even when we come back together in person in the Fall. We can do both.

What is your spiritual practice and how does it relate to this congregation? Some of you have been meditating in our group practice which happens on line on zoom at 9 am on Sunday. Some of you have been hiking each week, silent steps across a winter landscape, often with no words spoken between hikers. Some sing in our small choir groups. Some play music for our services. Some have joined our youth ice skating, and at bonfires, or all together singing Christmas Carols in the parking lot. And some have thrown themselves into our faith in action, our social justice work, making lunches, working on Black Lives Matter efforts, Gender Equity, Women's rights, our partnership with the Beardsley School in Bridgeport, helping out single moms at the Mercy Learning Center and advocating for migrants and refugees. Social justice work is a spiritual practice. It is more active but a practice nonetheless. And it brings to life our values and faith as UUs. It moves the spiritual center we have in worth, dignity, beauty and compassion out to our civic circumference. It helps us to transform as a community.

About two weeks ago I spoke of the importance of moving our religious lives from transaction to transformation. I said that while at first you need to see being a part of this community as a

transaction; you give your time and money, we give you greater meaning and comfort. But as time goes on, we need to shift from seeing church as transactional to becoming transformational; realizing that you belong here and you give because this community not only gives your life greater meaning, you are a part of us. Transformation is the point of our being here.

What I didn't explain is that there is a middle step "translation". Transaction to translation to transformation. Spiritual practices are necessary to translate the ordinary to the liminal. The ordinary in time and space is that which we do in order to maintain life and our relationships; jobs, marriages, kids, parents, friends, money and, yes, this pandemic. What a beloved community like ours does is to translate ordinary acts of love – attending services, singing, serving in leadership, teaching our kids, caring for one another and social action – into sacred acts of meaning.

Mercia Eliade who for decades taught comparative religion at the University of Chicago, once said that the membrane between the sacred and the profane, the ordinary, was very thin. He would recall in his lectures that the Celts were masters at travelling between the sacred world of fairies and animal spirits to the daily world of farms and hunting. They called them thin places. I would argue that we have many thin places here in our congregation. Moments when we are opened to the healing power of love and caring in the delivery of a meal, a phone call, a card, a song, a poem, a bagged lunch. Many times I have watched as people arrive into our midst for this first time on a Sunday and they cry. They can't stop crying. Sometimes for Sundays on end. What is happening is that we are opening up to the spirit. It happens when someone starts praying at the end of a life. Tears.

As Han F. de Wit wrote "In these early stages of transformation, when awareness and response are so crucial to what happens next, guidance plays an important role. Having a person or teachings to help us understand that this open space, which appears so groundless, is actually inhabitable can make all the difference. A good guide will reassure us that if we allow ourselves to become more familiar with this openness, then our faith and trust in its being inhabitable will become stronger. We actually begin to develop genuine trust or faith through familiarity." ([The Great Within: The Transformative Power and Psychology of the Spiritual Path](#))

Spiritual practice translates our ordinary experiences into transformational ones. Walking can be as mundane as going through the grocery store or as sacred as walking a labyrinth. When we apply a spiritual focus to our lives and our practices, contemplative and active both, we translate the transactional to the transformative.

The fact is that those communities like ours who encourage a variety of spiritual practices, tend to be more dynamic and much more resilient. as the religious writer Jim Lockard put it: "Resiliency is the capacity to handle setbacks, loss, and other challenges. This is a key element of spiritual community in general, and of The Beloved Community in particular. To be resilient

is to realize that you have much to call upon when difficulties arise—both individually and collectively.” (Creating the Beloved Community: A Handbook for Spiritual Leadership) Our pastoral care ministry is a great example of this. The chaplains begin each of their meetings with a guided meditation and an extended personal check in. It takes half the meeting. Only after this is done do they go through training and problem solving. That devotional practice is what makes us better chaplains, leaders and members. We put the caring at the center and in so doing, we translate the ordinary into the sacred and we have the strength to face our struggles.

I am convinced this is the reason we have been able to survive, strive and thrive in this pandemic. Our spiritual center holds. Can you hear me on this?

And then? Then transformation happens. Amazement becomes more common. People feel the center and are strengthened to push outward into our world. “Amazement is tied to the consciousness of healing, mutual support, and possibility, thus bringing the community forward to a greater capacity for compassion and love. The essence of The Beloved Community is just those things, and all the qualities that make us deeper more reflective people.” (Lockart)

It was Emerson who wrote: “Don’t be pushed by your problems. Be led by your dreams.” The Beloved Community, grounded in its various spiritual practices helps us led with our better selves, by our dreams, by our vision on the future.

Even if you consider your spiritual practice to be deeply personal, the fact that you are part of us at all pays witness to that practice. We are, at the very least, the context by which you pursue the Holy.

A spiritual practice, like the community we are creating is never complete, but nor is meant to be.

As the Christian mystic Ken Utner writes:

“Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us...
This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water the seeds already planted knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities...
We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.”

The day finally came. I knew it would happen eventually. I had been attending the Baptist Church for three months, every Sunday. I had come forward for communion. I had prayed aloud. I read the scripture reading. I knew that eventually I would be invited to be baptized. Pastor Will came to me on a Saturday. "We are baptizing tomorrow. Do you feel you are ready to accept Jesus as your savior?" I looked into those smiling eyes. "I am honored Pastor Will. I really am. But I think you know I am a Unitarian. And as much as I love your community, I cannot leave my tribe. That faith is my home. I must decline." He smiled every wider. "I kinda figured that would be your answer. But I thought I should ask. You are still welcome here, you will always be welcome here." I thanked him for his kindness, for his congregation showing me what the best of Christian love looks like. As we parted, he put his hand on my shoulder and said "I hope you find your way home soon. I will pray that you do."

Two weeks later I packed up what was left of my life in that little town and drove back to New York. It would be several years later that I met Francis and we realized we were both UUs. When our first child was born we rejoined a UU congregation. I had found my way home.

For all that is our life, we give thanks. For there are many paths to the Divine, many of them through here, and all of them straight through the center of the human heart, we say Amen.