



The Unitarian Church in Westport

SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

Religion Reimagined

By the Rev. Dr. John Morehouse

Sunday, January 10, 2021

Every Unitarian Universalist minister must go before the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, which is the equivalent of a licensing body within our faith. The MFC is comprised of other ministers and active lay people who gather several times a year to interview candidates for our ministry who have completed the Masters of Divinity degree, served in internships, such as our own intern minister Kim Warman is doing now and have had chaplaincy training in a clinical setting such as a hospital. All of the 17 ministers this church has fostered have been before this body.

The MFC is as close as we come to a trial by fire. Not a literal fire of course but an emotional, intellectual and spiritual firing to be sure. The candidate is expected to have read over forty different books beyond their graduate education and needs to be competent in seven areas of ministry, ranging from pastoral care to community service. The MFC interviews the candidate for about an hour. The first 10 minutes are taken up with a short sermon the ministerial candidate preaches to the committee and then a series of questions from the members of the panel. The first question asked is the one the candidate supplies. It is a grueling ordeal. After the candidate is done with the interview they are asked to wait outside of the room while the committee deliberates not just on the interview, but the hundreds of pages of portfolio the candidate has provided including supervisors' reviews, psychological testing, essays and self-reflection. The candidate is then invited back into the room and is given a grade from 1 to 5; 1 is a passing grade with hearty congratulations, 2 is a passing provided the candidate completes some extra work, but does not require a second interview, 3 means the candidate must do the extra work and return for another interview, 4 means you can do extra work and return for another interview but you are likely not a suitable candidate for our ministry and 5 means you cannot return and should consider a different kind of work. It is very rare for a candidate to get a five. There is so much done leading up that moment that the candidate usually decides to do something else long before being seen by the committee. Fours are also rare but they do happen. Threes happen in about 20% of the time and usually means there is some unresolved issue that needs work. Twos and ones are common, especially for the candidates that come through our church because of our stature in the denomination as a flagship church and the rigorous background I and the seminary require of a candidate.

I tell you all this not to impress you but for all of you, especially those visiting us today, to know that we are not some New Age cult. We are a 500-year tradition that requires of its

ministers and its congregations to have both a solid foundation of faith and the flexibility to serve a radically changing world.

When I went to see the MFC decades ago, I walked in as a young man entirely too sure of myself. I shook all hands, delivered my short sermon, which I came across recently and it was just awful, and answered their questions. I was asked about the Cambridge Platform of 1648, the Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau, how I would deal with a conflict in my congregation, and what my vision of our faith was. These and many more questions I answered as competently as I could. Finally, the psychologist on the committee who sat to my immediate right, he had been going through my portfolio and had landed on my psychological evaluation. He was the one who ask me the last question: "John, it seems you have a very hard time accepting and expressing your authority. There are concerns about your anger in relation to these issues of authority." I remember looking straight at him and answering "says who?" There was a stunned silence at my arrogance and then, the rest of the committee started laughing. The psychologist was not laughing.

After I was escorted out of the room and was waiting for my grade, I realized what a fool I had been. What was I thinking? The committee took over 30 minutes to deliberate; a very long time. I could hear voices being raised. The next candidate waiting was sweating bullets. Finally, they called me back in. The chair said "We are giving you a 1 based on your impressive record and your answers but we would suggest you learn how to temper your humor."

Let's face it, religion has a spotty record. Ours is no exception. Done well, most religions provide people with comfort and a faith that can sustain them in terrible times such as these. Religions do a lot of good in the world, we are no exception. But religions can also do a great deal of harm; religions have been the cause of many wars and millions of deaths. And authority is often at the center of this mixed review. If a religion stands for an authoritarian God and a patriarchy that dishes out more punishment than salvation, then many, perhaps most of you here today, would feel not only left out but unjustly condemned.

What is so powerful about Unitarian Universalism is that the authority of faith begins with the individual. One of our most popular curricula is Building Your Own Theology. We start with the premise that you are your own best authority on what holds the most meaning for you. But our faith as UUs does not stop there; we take that authority and apply it collectively to a community. Because the authority for a congregation such as ours rests with the people: I am called as your minister by you the people, we ordain ministers by the authority of the people, we raise our own money from the people, and neither we or I am beholden to a bishop or any other higher authority. Even our belief in a higher authority is subject to the test of our experience; some of us believe in a god, others believe in humanity's better impulses, some find more resonance with Buddhism, and most of us are, like me, enchanted agnostics, on the search for a force in our lives greater than who we are.

What unites us is the authority of our own conscience with the authority of a shared mission within a covenant, a promise, of mutual support and love. We are united in the faith and authority as our principles say in the inherent worth and dignity of each person and the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. By becoming part of this congregation, you are not only claiming your own spiritual authority but you are sharing it and collectively claiming the authority of this beloved community.

This does take some getting used to. We are not here to tell you what to believe, we are here together on a journey of discovery both individually and collectively. Unlike just about every other religion in the world, we don't tell you what to believe; we ask what you believe and then in the sharing of those individual faiths a new collective faith is born. I like to say we are more process than product.

I have given a lot of thought to what we are becoming as a congregation and a progressive faith. Of all the news of last week, the most hopeful was the election of the Rev. Raphael Warnock to the Senate. If an African American preacher who follows in the pulpit of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta could be elected to the U.S. Senate then we are watching the focus of our national authority shift from the tyrannical power of a culture of white supremacy to a new and much more powerful vision of many colors. Still, we as a people of faith have much to do. The invasion of the Capitol by armed insurrectionists shows just how threatened the authority of our white privilege is. And how far we have to come. It escaped no one that these predominantly white rioters were able to breach the Capitol, vandalize our most sacred civic temple and walk out. If that had been a BLM crowd there would be dead bodies everywhere.

Part of our mission as a congregation, is to claim the authority of a higher ground. Part of our mission is to reclaim and re-imagine our religion as the beloved community Dr. King dreamed of. We are on our way my friends but it will take a new way of seeing religion to get there.

Most religion, ours included has been transactional. You come, you give, you get, you go. There has been a great deal of good that has come out of this arrangement. Generations of people have come to this church and have had their lives changed. And we, in our stupendous outreach have changed so many lives for the better.

But what I have been preaching about since I arrived here over five years ago is a different vision of our religion. I imagine us being about the business of transformation, not just transactions. I imagine a religion, our religion, being a religion that truly saves lives. Because lives have been saved here, literally. In his powerful book [The Prophetic Imagination](#), scholar Walter Brueggemann, talks about the accommodation religions make to the Empire of their time. From ancient Judaism and the Romans to the Catholic Church and Hitler to the Conservative Church and Donald Trump, religion has always been tempted to accommodate itself to the needs of the status quo in order to remain in power and be comfortable. Only

when a prophet or circumstances force a change do religions reimagine themselves as agents of transformation.

This is what happened during the Reformation; the selling of dispensations by the Catholic Church and the flagrant abuses of power and hypocrisy of the priesthood led to the Protestant Reformation, a protesting wing of Christianity reclaiming the religious imagination to be for the people and by the people.

I believe we are in such an emergent time right now. Especially now after far-right rioters stormed the temple of our democracy with falsehoods and lies and violence, we, and other progressive religious folks are being called to change the Empire, and to be truly prophetic in the ancient sense of the tradition. The tradition of Moses, leading his people out of slavery, the tradition of Miriam and the women of Judea leading the way through the wilderness, the tradition of Jesus calling out a new Kingdom where the last shall be first. The last who are still with us, the poor, people of color, the elderly, women and children who are dying from this pandemic at alarming rates because the Empire just doesn't care, and they are being sacrificed for the sake of our economy.

This is what it means to be a UU. To stand for the diversity of people everywhere, to stand for Black and Brown lives, to not be comfortable with the status quo. This is what it means to be a Unitarian, seeing that of the Holy in all people, Universalist, wherein all people are worthy of heaven on earth and beyond.

Friends, I realize that we have many new comers here today. Welcome to you. If you choose to join with us, I hope you do get something from being a part of us. I hope if you come seeking comfort you find it in our music, poetry and worship. I know you will be welcomed into our small groups to do the work of spiritual growth in your own lives, to find a faith home for your family, to find a loving heart and helping hands. I know that this place, this congregation, can do that for you because we do just this every day.

And I hope you will join us in our re-imagined religion as well. To do the work of Racial Justice as we are now doing through over a dozen initiatives. To do the work of empowering girls and women against the heavy burden of patriarchy. To welcome those who are transgender with open arms. To feed the hungry as we do each week. To stand by the broken hearted through our pastoral care program and our Addiction and Recovery Ministry. We are truly re-imagining our religion for the 21st century. And we invite you to become part of our congregation in every way

Besides being a very busy minister, writer and activist, I am also a Spiritual Director. I work with people who are not a part of this congregation in helping them grow in their spiritual identity and depth. Sometimes I work with someone who has no religious background. We will usually explore how to grow spiritually through practices like meditation and prayer, to involvement in good works. But I will always ask them why they aren't a part of a religion. The

usual response is “well, I am not really into organized religion, too much hypocrisy” or “I am just not a joiner.” Perhaps that is how you see yourself here today. But let me tell you a little secret: Without exception being a part of congregation deepens your spiritual life in ways you might not expect. You grow in the presence of others. You grow spiritually not just in a shared practice; after all you can get that at a yoga class at the Y, but in the shared vision of what the world could be. Religion, when it is done honestly and openly like we do ours, deepens your imagination, your commitment, your relationships and therefore your spirit. Not to mention it’s just a whole lot more fun to search for meaning with others. And when tragedy strikes, as it is right now, it is your belonging that can make the difference between life and death. Most people don’t know they need a religious home, until they do; someone dies, you lose a loved one, your career comes crashing down, you are facing homelessness. The list is long and all of those things have happened to our people here and all of us are stronger spiritually because we did not go through that alone. This is a religion re-imagined.

So, if you do decide to join us, get to know us better first. Attend a Starting Point program, join a group, on line now but someday in person, involve your kids in our Faith Formation program and then together let us re-imagine a world that is coming into being. A planet that will survive, generations who will thrive and our interconnection to all life. Join us as we move from Building your own Theology to Creating Theology Together.

My first church after I passed the MFC was the small congregation in South Bend, IN. They were and are a great group of people and very forgiving of a young minister and his sometimes-unruly family learning the meaning of authority with and from them. As I moved on from that congregation to lead a growing congregation in MD, Francis, my wife who became the Director of Religious Education and I as a new minister took a group of 73 adults and 6 kids to a congregation of 350 adults and close to 200 kids and together we built a brand-new building. What we learned then applies now more than ever. It is from the people that our authority arises. And it from the people that a new vision, a religion re-imagined, must also spring, for as it says in the Hebrew Bible, without a vision the people perish. But that vision comes from the people themselves. UUism offers a new vision of reality, a vision where the captives of empire go free and we embrace hope again. A hard hope to be sure, but hope nonetheless. The great African American writer James Baldwin wrote “the interior life is the real life and the intangible dreams of a person has a tangible effect on the world.” This is the imagination I call and invite us to as Jason Reynolds said “History is birthed out of imagination....imagination is so powerful that it could set out 500 years of something wrong , and then set forth 500 years of something right. That’s sort of the beauty of humanity.” (From On Being)

Will you join me; join us as we imagine a new day, a new temple, a new world beyond the ruin of our times? Imagine a new religion; it’s not so hard if we try. Amen.