



The Unitarian Church in Westport

SUNDAY SERMON:

Believing, Belonging and Being

By The Rev. Dr. John Morehouse, Senior Minister

Sunday, October 3, 2021

“So you’re a preacher” he said. It was late, about 9:30, in Chicago and it was cold, the January wind tearing at my jacket. I was standing on a train platform waiting for my two-hour commute back to northern Indiana where I lived. I told him that I was a seminary student and yes, I was a “preacher.” “How about that” he said, “a man of God.” I didn’t have the heart to clarify just what kind of God he thought I might be a man of. But then again, it didn’t matter. “Just great, just great” he said, “I’ve always admired a man of the cloth.” He continued, “Just found Jesus myself” he said. I shifted, not sure if my discomfort was with the wind or where this conversation was going. My new-found friend went on in great detail: he was a bricklayer, was on his third wife, had six children and was finally in AA. As he explained his conversion, I couldn’t help but notice the sound of contentment in his voice, it was almost contagious. That was a difficult year for me: I was struggling over my new identity, with the death of a close friend and with this expansive faith of ours which required such a broad knowledge. I yearned, I admit, for a simple faith, perhaps the comfort of Jesus.

As we boarded the train together, he naturally sat down, right next to me. He pulled out a well-worn copy of the bible and recited his favorite passage from the Gospel of John 14:6, “No one shall come unto the Father but through me.” I knew that for him this meant that he was already in the arms of a loving God. That in the end, with all his troubles, he would be all right.

I have come in the many years since this encounter to feel and know what it is about a simple faith in Jesus that is so refreshing and comforting: If you believe you are saved then there is nothing this world can do to you to hurt you more than for a moment. This kind of faith is not about reason, it’s about feelings. Some of us don’t understand this allure.

But this man understood. He was quite sure of his own salvation. And equally worried about his sister’s soul. She was a Muslim. “What about you, Reverend? What church do you belong to?” he asked. “I’m a Unitarian Universalist” I replied, trying to let the 10 syllables fall out of my mouth slowly. He was quiet for a moment trying to recall where he

had heard that before. Then the gleam of recognition, “Oh yeah, I got a friend who is into the Unity stuff – real spiritual.” Alas, we fell again to the arrows of misrecognition. I started to explain the difference, but his stop had arrived, and he thanked me and got off.

Perhaps just as well. I would rather have him leave with that warmth. Many days have passed since that cold night. Many more sermons, deaths, births and doubts and I am still before you, a humble servant of the spirit, searching as you are for that faith which will sustain us; the faith of a community like ours with so many different beliefs. I have thought often of his description of us as “real spiritual.” For most of our 500-year history, we wouldn’t be accused of that. Although all of that is changing fast.

Many of us have struggled with how to reconcile our beliefs with the rest of society. Poll after poll has shown that a vast majority of the US population would vote for a Mormon, a Jew and even a Muslim for President but never an atheist. This on top of the fact that the fastest growing religious identity in America today is None of the Above. Some of you are uncomfortable with any religious language including the word worship. And more and more of us are at best curious and at worst worried that we can’t quite define what we believe in in terms of a higher power. Joining the ranks with me as Enchanted Agnostics.

First let me say, as our UUA President Susan Frederick Gray has said many times, “ours is no casual faith,” despite the sometimes erroneous description of us as a religion in which you can believe whatever you want. That is not quite true. While we lack dogma and creed, we do draw ourselves together in the community we assent to, this congregation; we are covenantal in our faith. Our beliefs our varied but we are united most in how we believe; and the actions we take because of what we believe: justice, service, compassion.

More importantly, what we believe, as varied as that is, finds its common purpose in how to belong. It is the belonging to one another, here and in our countless communities, that is as our covenant says: “Love is the Spirit of this Church and Service its Law.” We belong together in common cause sometimes despite the fact that we believe differently. Our faith is in the relationships we keep.

Let me give you an example: the majority of our congregation believes that vaccines are the best answer to ending this pandemic. But there is a significant minority who do not believe that they should take the vaccine. I can tell you that, for the most part, they believe this not for political reasons or, necessarily conspiratorial reasons, but rather because they believe that injecting a manufactured anti-pathogen is more harmful to their body than the disease itself. Because of this I and others in leadership have decided to not require vaccines to attend services. We are telling people we expect them to be vaccinated and if not vaccinated to take the necessary precautions to protect those who

are our most vulnerable, notably our elders and our children. We ask them to refrain from coming to services and joining us instead on ZOOM or if they need to be here to be sure they are always masked and regularly tested. This is how different beliefs find a spiritual home to belong to at the same time. And I know that those who aren't vaccinated are abiding by that request.

Martin Heidegger is a complicated philosopher, no less so for his Nazi sympathies. That said, he offers an important insight into the relationship between, belief, belonging and ultimately our own sense of being as souls in this world. Being-in-the-world is a being-with, and with that, the understanding we exist. And being/with is far better than being alone. What Heidegger called Dasein or human reality, is understanding that being with others points to the greater spiritual being some would call God. When I use the term Spirit of Life, I mean it in this sense. What makes life worth living is not that we can plant our being in the soil and declare our fierce individualism as Emerson celebrated – or as Paul Simon sang “I am a rock, I am an island” – but rather that who we are as beings has everything to do with being with one another, with being in relationship.

In other words, beloveds, our strongest beliefs are stronger because we express them in the context of communities like this congregation. Not as some debating society, a panel of us discussing God, but rather HOW we are going to put this belief into action among us. Over and over again, I have found that you can put people of vastly different faiths together working on the same end; building a house, serving food, making peanut and jelly sandwiches, and they will find their common humanity to be their greater faith. Can you hear me on this?

Which is why I ultimately see us not so much believing in the same idea as searching for that spiritual center in the same way. Or as I often tell people who want to define us like any other denomination by what we believe, “we are more process than product.”

What made me yearn for my new friend on the Chicago train's simple faith was not that he believed in a Jesus that would help him bear all his troubles, but rather that his faith had a home not just in his heart but in his community: the community of his AA group, his church, his Bible study group.

We also have that home. We do. Right here. More than you realize. It happens on Sunday morning, it happens at choir practices, it happens in our Soul Matter Sharing Circles, it happens delivering peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Can you hear me?

And yet, it's a complicated world isn't it? It's hard to feel that center if you are a thousand miles away or not able to come to church in person. Still, it is possible if we look at our

being beyond what we alone are getting and seeing our being a part of this congregation as an expression of faith. And we need that sense of belonging, however we find it, to stay sane in this world of brokenness and cosmopolitan necessity.

Feminist Philosopher Martha Nussbaum, makes a compelling argument that in order for us to survive and thrive as human beings, we will have to balance belonging to our smaller groups with the realization that we belong to a larger world that embraces different ideas, much as the Afghan refugees we are supporting today. They come from a different culture and religion to find a home here. And it will be up to us to embrace our cosmopolitan nature and welcome them as fellow beings who have different beliefs. This is, Nussbaum argues, the test of our time. As she writes: "By its very nature, nationalism always excludes some group of people deemed to be the 'other.' On the other hand, cosmopolitanism encapsulates a comprehensive and varied set of beliefs. All cosmopolitans tether themselves to an axiomatic commitment that all human beings, regardless of race, religion, or political orientation, are part of one single universal community comprising the whole of humanity." (from The Cosmopolitan Tradition: A Noble but Flawed Ideal)

I do believe we can hold this tension between the local self and the world self between us. And it is an ideal I believe we can share with those who follow us. It's the ideal we teach our children such as our middle schoolers who are learning by visiting other places of faith, or our youth group that is united behind the cause of climate justice for the entire world. But in the end, all this too will end. As the physicist Brian Greene wrote in his latest work, Till the End of Time, our universe will come to an end. Trillions of years from now our last star will blink out of existence, and billions of years from now our planet will burn up. But will our being end? Greene is not so sure. Is it possible that thought can transcend time and space and matter? Is it possible, as he quotes Emily Dickinson, who penned "Forever – is composed of endless nows" or Thoreau's "eternity in each moment." Ultimately, Brian Greene cannot answer that question, none of us can. But what we can know is that belonging to a community like this one - believing that what we do matters to the world - allows us to rest in the being we share with all life, that came before, that is now and that will follow.

Isn't that enough to live for? Let me close with the Priest, Geologist and French Mystic Tiellard D' Chardin who wrote: "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience, we are spiritual beings having a momentary human experience.... The day will come when, after harnessing space, the winds, the tides, and gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of love. And on that day, for the second time in the history of the world, we shall have discovered fire." ("The Evolution of Chastity," in Toward the Future). Perhaps my friend on the train was right after all: we are 'real spiritual' beings. Amen.