



The Unitarian Church in Westport

SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

Being With

By Rev. Dr. John T. Morehouse, Senior Minister

Sunday, September 18, 2022

It was our last Sunday in Brighton this summer. We had heard about this church from a new friend. She was a single mom of a teenage daughter who was having a really hard time in school. Bullied, self-harming, the whole deal. She had heard about One Church and her and her daughter decided to go. She said “We were blown away. The place was packed and the topic was on dealing with social anxiety and the band and the choir started singing the song “Teenage Dirt Bag” by the band Wheatus. And everyone knew the chorus. Imagine hundreds of people singing the chorus to I’m a Teenage Dirt Bag in a church! Singing a song about teenage self-affirmation in a church”. So Francis and I walked three miles to the church, an unassuming neo Gothic church on the north end of the city. We walked in and the first thing I noticed was the kids. Running everywhere. And then I noticed the coffee kiosk in the corner. Not just a coffee pot mind you but a whole espresso bar, and they were in business. We took our seats on metal chairs. A trio of guitar, piano and soloist sang songs that welcomed people in. The words were up on the screen above the giant organ which wasn’t being played and hadn’t been in ten years.

The minister Dave Steell looked like a younger me. Beard, no gray, but in shorts and t-shirt. He welcomed us all and the service began. He was talking about the place of music in a service. And he started by asking what your all-time favorite song was. Turn to your neighbor and ask that question. Then he solicited some answers and they ranged from Sinatra to Nirvana. His sermon was given walking around and engaging people in a sort of dialog about the use of music. He even had a little contest. The rest of the service included some prayers (this was a liberal Christian Church), calling up some folks who were moving away. Celebrating a new baby with her picture on the screen. Lots more music, most of it sung and the kids, well they were there for most of the service.

No order of service. No collection which is more a English tradition. And lots of laughter. By the end of the service I was crying. I walked away from that service with Francis and said “I think I have been doing this all wrong”. Ok, maybe not all wrong, but something transformative was happening. Something happened to me that day or as my Pentecostal friend would say, “I was slain with the Holy Spirit!”.

Three days later I sat down with Dave in the sanctuary which during the week is a coffee shop. The place was full of people. Dave said only a few of them come to the church, “the coffee is good and the Wi-Fi is excellent”. Dave explained to me the history of One Church, two dying

congregations that united and turned over the love and resources to this new idea. The entire mission of One Church can be described as Being With to Change Lives. They ran a farm, a garden, a table at the Farmers Market, the café was a training school for baristas. This model of ministry is based on the work of Sam Wells Vicar of St. Martins of the Fields in which he took a dying congregation and married its commercial possibilities to its sacred nature.

Churches like One Church follow a movement called Heart Edge. Taking the Heart to be the community and the edge where the community is reaching out to those in need.

Dave told me that the most important thing we can do is to “Be With” one another, not do for them. Religion should not be performance, it should be about engagement. Not perfection but participation. Can you hear me? That and a mission to help those in need is all you need, all the rest follows.

Five Pillars

1. **Be with people don't do for them.** Connection especially in worship is the glue and the attraction that brings people in the door. Be comfortable to engage in worship with all people. You will see I am already doing this on Sundays; coming out from beyond the pulpit, chairs slightly facing each other. Less concern about staying to the Order of Service and ending “on time”. Ed and I have had some conversations on how we can bring more energy to our music ministry, making it livelier and less performative. One of the reasons our Summer services are so well liked is because they have this more informal air about them.

2. **Mission first, all the rest follows.** There are three legs to the stool in the One Church model, Worship, Mission, Fellowship. (actually, there is a fourth ‘discipleship’ a more Christian concept than we would use). Keep outward focused and people will come in. It's not about driving people to your doors. It's not about having people come to us, it's about us coming to them and letting our works speak. We do some of this already in our Social Justice Ministry. I will be reorganizing Social Justice to put more emphasis on partnering with existing organizations. Have faith they will come.

3. **Embrace the Commercial.** The original proponent of this idea comes from Sam Wells the Rector at St. Martins in the Field off Trafalgar Square in London. Wells wrote several books on how St. Martins decided that the “Benefactor Model” of funding was destined to fail as the bigger givers fall away. (see A Future That's Bigger Than the Past: Towards the Renewal of the Church) I think we have seen this here at TUCW. Our founding generation and their children have moved on leaving us with a huge deficit in giving. Likewise, the organ controversy originated in part with large gifts from wealthy individuals. Wells says this is not only unsustainable as religion declines but disempowering to those who don't have those means. He suggests instead embracing commercial enterprises that do good. Not just using the space for rent but actually running a gift shop, contracting to produce the gifts for sale, publishing books, running cafes, growing and harvesting vegetables geared to both a mass market and higher end restaurants. I can imagine our sanctuary becoming a daytime café, or our lawn a vegetable farm. The point is you can make money while doing good.

4. **Match the person to the need.** Look for those who come to you with a good idea to serve the community and give the idea some fuel so others will join in the idea. Establish a small team to review the ideas and approve them, informing the congregation along the way. I call this “setting free the ministry in you”. One very practical tip Dave had was to sit down with your congregation and solicit commercial ideas that follow our values. Then sift through the brainstorm and look for people who will carry the idea forward. Most importantly, don’t make this a congregational decision. As congregations, he said, we tend towards the negative and it is likely the idea will die in committee so to speak.

5. **Incubate and Experiment.** Projects get tried for a year. Inform people of the project but don’t ask for permission. Create a culture of experimentation and manage people’s expectations that failure is an option and that is ok. Be ready to let go if it fails or let go if it takes flight. I found this last one especially appealing. I took a two-year business school program run through the UUMA on Entrepreneurial Ministry. As Tina Seelig of the Stanford Graduate Business School put it to us “fail fast and frequently”. This sets up a culture of managed expectations and helps to undo our tendency towards perfection. Dave shared several of his colossal failures at One Church and what they learned.

And this is what ministry is: Answering the question of belonging with the affirmative, right here and right now. Being with one another and reaching out to those in need. You know, I occasionally hear through the grapevine that someone is upset with me or this church because they didn’t notice they were gone. I always wonder about that. How do you expect us to remember you by not being here? I mean, I don’t know. There are four hundred or so souls that belong here on a regular basis, that is they show up in one way or another, they send a check, they work for a cause we support, they write on our face book page, they make themselves known and in the knowing they are ours: they belong to us. That is the test. Are you making the effort to belong? If you aren’t here, (anyone not here?), if you aren’t here, then we don’t have a clue what kind of ministry you need or can offer in return. We don’t keep attendance here (although we have been talking about bar codes recently), so occasionally if you aren’t here for a while, someone on our team will notice.

The day before we left Brighton, we stopped in at a sauna on the beach. As we were talking with the folks there, someone mentioned the farm that One Church ran and how she loved to go out and harvest with her young daughter. I asked if she had ever been to the church. “No. What do you mean?” “It’s a church too” I said, she slapped her head and said “well of course it is one church. I haven’t been on Sunday but I will.” Dave Steell would say that is just fine. Coming on Sunday isn’t the point, it’s the benefit. What a matter most is being with one another.