



The Unitarian Church in Westport

## SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

### *Whose Are We? To Whom Do We Belong?*

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

Sunday, September 25, 2022

In the story Tico and the Golden Wings, the famed children’s author Leo Lonini tells of Tico, a bird born without wings. As is true of so many who are different, Tico was considered an outsider but also worthy of pity. The flock brought Tico food to her nest on the ground. One night as Tico wished for wings, a golden bird flew into the nest. “I will give you wings of gold” and with that golden wings appeared on her back. Tico took flight and soared over the land, the rivers like ribbons, the forests like green carpet. When she landed near her flock, so proud of her wings, her flock said, “hmmm, nice wings but they make you too proud. You are not like us.” And they flew away. Tico was crest fallen. She flew to the village and there saw a farmer crying. “Why are you crying?” she said. Surprised to hear a talking bird, the farmer said, “my child is ill and I cannot afford the medicine”. “I can help” said Tico and she pulled off one of her golden feathers and gave it to the farmer. The farmer was so happy. “But now you have one less feather. How will you fly?” “Well” said Tico, “I was without wings before, I will make do” and then suddenly a real wing, shiny and black grew in place of the golden feather. She flew on, finding many who needed her help; a fisherwoman who needed a compass, a family hungry, a horse for an older couple. Her golden feathers one by one brought much help and happiness. And in place of each golden feather given, a real feather grew in its place. She was now just like all the other birds, except in one important way; while she belonged to the flock, she had learned the lesson of belonging by giving.

This story has, of course, many dimensions of meaning; being without wings, the flock still cared for her until she was given golden wings and then they were jealous. Even our most beloved communities can let us down when we are too different right? Tico found a way to belong to even the human community by giving up all she had. Her restoration to being regular bird came with a lesson; sometimes we have to find ourselves truly on the outside in order to find our way into the inside.

Who do we belong to?

We first belong to ourselves. Each of us has to be assigned worth—it does not come automatically--and taught to behave with dignity because, as Sartre once said, “If it were not for the petty rules of bourgeois society, we humans would destroy each other in an instant.”

Perhaps that is true. What I do know that is our first principle has as much to do with how we value ourselves, how we belong to ourselves. We have to start with this first principle if we are ever to cross the bridges of difference which divides us. Can you hear me?

I accept the challenge that inherent worth is hard to accept as innate, but I still consider it innate because the alternative is much worse. If human being are not inherently worthy and worth is “assigned” by virtuous deeds in a society, who then is to decide what virtue is? The clergy, politicians? We saw this relative assignment of worth in the torture by Americans in Guantanamo, were the designation “enemy combatant” (a designation of relative worth based on actions) led to a stripping of basic human rights, not the least of which is the right to legal defense. No, I cannot accept that inherency is relative.

One of the most challenging in accepting inherent worth are criminal acts and specifically are the very painful cases of sexual child abuse committed by several Catholic priests many years ago. Father Rob Jascot, is a Roman Catholic priest I knew many years ago. We served together on a local cable talk show I hosted on Faith issues in our community. We talked openly about this problem on the show. I have to say here I admire Father Jascot a great deal. It takes courage to face this question squarely and talk about it. In our discussion, we brought out the very basic fact that pedophilia, in fact any form of abuse, is an evil and heinous act. It feels all the more evil when it is done by a clergy person because of the sacred trust that is violated and even more so by a Catholic priest because of the hypocrisy associated with vows of celibacy. Father Jascot responded bravely: Yes, sexual abuse, like alcoholism before it, was the church’s secret for years. But as we break any cycle of abuse we had to bring it into the light. Priests are now required to undergo psychological testing, sexuality awareness training and criminal background checks (all of which Unitarians were doing 20 years ago).

“It is a tragedy” said Father Jascot “for the children, for their parents, for the priest, for the church and for America, which sees this as one more reason why they shouldn’t trust religion.”

Of course, very few of us have done something so evil and yet we feel that sense of shame. Whether it is abuse of others, ourselves, through substance or behavior, we all know that sense of not being ever quite good enough is real. Can you hear me? We long for acceptance but feel trapped in our own being. “The prison of the soul is far darker than any dungeon” wrote John Donne. This is one reason why I feel so strongly that our first principle is so foundational to who we are as free church. If we can’t separate harmful actions from human worth then who will.

Beyond this we belong to each other in ever widening circles of concern. So, let me ask you: to whom do you belong? Let’s turn to our neighbor and ask that question.  
(solicit answers)

The philosopher Martha Nussbaum talks about concentric circles of concern (Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice, 2015) “.... by which men and women who begin in self-interest

and ingrained prejudice can build a society in which what she calls 'public emotions' operate to enlarge the individual's 'circle of concern'... Those who would extend the sympathy individuals feel to include fellow citizens of whatever views, ethnicity, ability or disability must 'create stable structures of concern that extend compassion broadly.' Those structures cannot be exclusively rational and philosophical...but must, says Nussbaum, be political in the sense that they find expression in the visible machinery of public life...(including this church) (Stanley Fish, The New York Times, 10/13/2013)

It is aspirational for us as a congregation to stretch these circles of concern; to be moved by public emotions. It's halting and messy. We can open our doors to some who are different but not too different. We took some early steps in reaching out to transgender folks but we have yet to reconfigure our restrooms. We have a lift for those differently abled but it doesn't always work. Or personally, I hand out money to one person who asks it but not to everyone. Its not easy to live up to the aspiration to extend our sense of belonging is it?

I think that is all right. The flock in our story didn't accept Tico when she had golden wings but did manage to care for her when she had no wings at all.

We do matter, we do belong, we are each other's; not perfectly but by enough of a measure to make this life worth living. We can and should reclaim our worth. But how? How can we move beyond a sense of shame to self-acceptance, how do we even move beyond guilt towards forgiveness.

The greatest irony of the story of Adam and Eve is that they were condemned by a Creator who supposedly made them in love. Or were they condemned? Let us look again: And God said ".in work shall you till the ground, thorns and thistles it shall bring forth and you shall eat the plants of the field and woman shall in pain bring forth children." Our free will made us human and mortal and then left us with a challenge; to bring forth life. Isn't this the very nature of human creation? If it was all given to you, well then so what? But if we can overcome adversity and create something from "thorns and thistles" and "in pain bring forth" new life, isn't that what living is all about? Perhaps as Rabbi Harold Kushner observes, we didn't so much get thrown out of paradise but outgrew paradise. Didn't we move beyond having it given to us and feeling ourselves dependent on God, to finding what we valued ourselves and depending on each other? We can claim our worthiness, my friends, precisely because we suffer. We matter because we must find a way to make more out of less, we matter because we have the power to create. Our ability to create is our salvation. Free will, sexual passion, hard work, love and mortality these are the gifts we take from the garden of Eden and these are the gifts which makes us human belonging to each other. These are the gifts to moving beyond feeling bad about being human to feeling bad about what we did and then onto forgiveness. (Harold Kushner How Good Do We Have to Be? Little, Brown and Co., 1996)

Think back to that one act that still lurks in the dark corner of your soul. It is usually that which keeps us from belonging starting with ourselves. Or if you are clueless about that, think of some obsession you have, because chances are your obsessions are clues to some old shame. I used to be obsessed about having my day all in order. Five kids and ministry cured me of that but anyway that was my obsession. I thought I could never have it together enough. Who knows where this came from, that really isn't as important as what I was going to do about it. Over time, I realized that this was my prison. I would blow up if plans changed, people didn't follow through, or even if it rained!

The way out of this cycle is to be creative. Creative is doing something new. A couple struggling with age old pains takes piano lessons together. A parent and child read to one another every night (with all the voices), Another couple listen to each other's dreams each morning over coffee. Creativity wherever you can find it, cracks the door on helping any of us towards feeling worthy. But creativity alone is not enough, because shame and guilt require forgiveness. And forgiveness is often hard to find. Not forgiving another, as Rabbi Kushner observes "gives us a kind of power over another". (ibid, Kushner)

Communities like this should never be places that tell you that you are not good enough. We should strive to be places of acceptance for who you are. Sanctuaries where God's light heals and doesn't condemn. Places which while we cannot accept behavior that is harmful can accept those of us who have harmed and been harmed. We are not perfect, we weren't made to be. I don't believe in the God that condemned Adam and Eve. My God knows our suffering and wants us to help one another become whole again.

As we approach the high holiday, Rosh Hosanna tonight followed soon after by Yom Kippur the day of atonement. I want all of us to consider how we can belong better to one another than apart. To stop trying to get your way, and perhaps get out of the way in a real effort to be with one another.

Tico was only able to fly because of her gift, which she subsequently gave away. I will have much more to say about giving away what we have as a way to belong to whom we need. Even after she gave it away, she chose to return to the same flock that had once shunned her. Why? Because at the end of the day, its better to belong with one another than to stand away on principle.

We are imperfect. I am imperfect as some of you remind me often. But I, we, choose to belong. Churches like this one are full of losers. People who have lost loved ones, lost love, lost acceptance, lost their way. But they are also full of people who have also lost their fear to join together with others, many of whom are not at all alike, in the common hope that we shall break out of our soulful prisons. People like you and I how know why we matter. We matter because we are not alone.

Whose are we? We belong to each other but only in the present. Sometimes we can belong to a place or a person who has been lost to us, but even that in time will fade. We belong to one another in the here and now. That realization brings us the greatest happiness.

We are each other's but you have to make the effort to be in that relationship. What was it Woody Allen said "Eighty percent of success is showing up". Show up and be a part of us.

Whose are we? I think we belong to the communities, this country, this planet, and the cosmos. But we often don't act that way when faced with where to put our loyalties, we tend to belong to those closest to us. Still we like to think globally but act locally. It's the point where the answer to our question "what matters most?" meets the answer to the question "whose are we?" What matters most to the ones I love?

Whose are we? We are part of the divine in ways we can't always see. We belong to each other in ways we can't always see, in a connectedness that goes beyond the rational. We belong to each other and the cosmos. The point is to let life live through us, to let love live through. This for me is the essence of faith. It's how we let life live through us and how we make a life worth living. Whose are we? There are many answers to that. But ultimately, we belong to the cosmos. We belong to the earth. We belong to life. We belong to each other. We may not feel that ever widening sense of belonging today, but it is there. You are loved and you are not alone. Amen.