

“The Power of We”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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Reading The Task of the Religious Community, Mark Morrison-Reed

The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice. It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.

Sermon

While I was a student at my Catholic elementary and middle school, I sang in the school choir. There were about a dozen of us under the direction of Sister Claire. Sister Claire was also my piano teacher. She was kind but not overly encouraging. Every year, just as the Christmas season was beginning, we would begin preparing our carols. For one day of the school year, we were able to enjoy the special treat of leaving school for a couple of hours to go caroling at local businesses in the neighborhood.

We would walk over to the Chicago Brauhaus, a German establishment serving bratwurst, homemade head cheese, and beer in a boot, and be welcomed warmly as we sang “Joy to the World” and “Silent Night.” We would make a stop at the plaza to sing more carols before a small crowd of neighbors and shoppers, and we would make a final stop at the McDonald’s on the corner closest to the school. The workers behind the counter would always give us a big round of applause.

Being a part of that choir and this annual tradition was one of my first glimpses of what it meant to belong to something bigger than myself with other people - to share a sense of purpose with others.

From my childhood into teenage and college years and on into adulthood, a collective sense of belonging - the feeling of belonging that comes from being part of something bigger than my individual self - has been a persistently important one in my life.

There are times when I have felt completely a part of the “we,” that all of me belonged, and also times when I have not felt a full sense of belonging, times when I have instead felt on the outside of “we” that I longed to be part of.

This search for a sense of belonging is what led me to Unitarian Universalism and to the calling of ministry. I know now what a gift it is to feel a sense of belonging in a religious community where I can bring my whole self and join with others in shared purpose even with all of our individual differences.

I invite you to reflect for a moment on the bigger “we” that you have longed to be a part of in your own life. When have you felt fully a part of that “we”? And, when have you yearned for greater inclusion in that “we”? How has this place, this community been a part of your journey of belonging?

This church was founded during a time of tumult just as the Civil War was drawing to a close. It was also a time of changing norms and beliefs within Protestant Christianity which gave rise to Unitarianism and Universalism. The founders of this church were seeking a religious community to which they could feel a full sense of belonging - especially where their unorthodox view of Christianity would be accepted. They founded this covenantal community in the hopes that others would also feel a sense of belonging within this liberal religion.

Over its now one hundred and fifty-five year history, this religious community has consistently changed. We are no longer called the Church of the Messiah. The people who have worshipped here has changed with multiple generations having come and gone. The building itself has changed with renovations, additions, or major repairs in almost every ministry. The church’s sense of purpose has changed as well - we are no longer a community gathered explicitly as followers of the teachings of Jesus, though some of us may identify this way.

At the same time, much has remained the same. I was recently reading through some of our church records and one thread that was apparent throughout was the optimism and hopefulness that our predecessors held about the future of the church. Even during times of great challenge, like the time of the first World War, or the Great Flood, or the Depression years, the church held a sense of forward momentum and a shared belief in itself and its purpose.

To belong to this religious community is to belong to its history and its traditions. To belong to this religious community is also to belong to its present and the shaping of its future.

When this building was dedicated in 1866, the Rev. Frederic Frothingham offered words of dedication saying, "The only dedication we can make is that which consecrates ourselves to the holy work, through them so auspiciously begun. Begun, I say: "begun" not "finished," is the word for this hour."

We join with the generations that have preceded us in taking up the "holy work" of this church.

Melody Walker Brook, an Elnu Abenaki activist and educator who I mentioned last week, makes the point in her teaching that when native people refer to the "seven generations" in considering the impact of a decision, it is not the seven generations to come. It is actually generations that have come before, your own generation, and future generations. There is a recognition that our ancestors and those generations yet to be born are part of our community of belonging and shape our decisions in the present time.

I love thinking about the seven generations that we are part of in this church community - the three generations that came before us and the three generations that will inherit the community and the building that we leave behind.

Envisioning ourselves in this continuous line of generations makes clear that we have been the benefactors of the care, diligence, and investment of resources that preceded us and that we are shaping right now what others will inherit as their place of spiritual belonging. The "holy work" came before us; it is ours to do; and we will pass it on to those who come after us.

In this community, we create together as we do this “holy work.” We recognize that belonging to a community means being fed and nurtured and cared for when we are in need, and it also means being an active participant in the community’s creative process and service. This process of creation doesn’t happen in isolation but in dialogue with the greater context we find ourselves in.

And, right now, we find ourselves in a time of shifting forces and currents. The religious landscape has certainly changed dramatically since 1864 and continues to change. A new survey by the Pew Research Center demonstrates that the number of people who identify as religious unaffiliated as well as those who say they do not attend church regularly continues to go up.¹ Vermont continues to be the first or second most secular, that is religiously unaffiliated, state in the country. In some ways, then, the growth in membership and Sunday attendance that this congregation has experienced over the last decade and more contrasts with the trends of the decline in religious, especially mainline Christian, affiliation.

I don’t intend to go into all of the reasons this might be the case today. What I think is important for us to see is that we can still be a relevant spiritual home for people even when larger societal forces are moving the needle in a different direction. The most important factor in staying relevant is staying “on purpose” - staying in conversation with one another about what matters to us and how we want to show up for one another and in the world.

Besides living in a changing religious context, we are also living in a time when our societal institutions and the environment are undergoing rapid changes with potentially dire outcomes. Democracy is under threat, not just here in the United States but all over the world, and we are facing a climate emergency that requires immediate and bold changes to our economy and our consumption habits.

Rev. Frederick Frothingham also had these words to share with those gathered in January of 1866: “Never was there graver need of noble churches in the land than now.” Apparently, Rev. Frothingham didn’t foresee the predicament we are in now in 2019, because the need is certainly grave today.

¹ <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>

The need is grave for us to show up and to live fully into who we are as a caring and prophetic religious community.

I think the scene on the State House lawn yesterday was a telling illustration of the ways people are choosing to show up in the world and draw attention to what is of value and worth.

On one side of the lawn was the youth-led Climate Encampment which started this past Thursday. People camped out on the lawn and held workshops and demonstrated to continue to call on our elected leaders to take bold action in addressing the climate crisis. Many people from UCM helped out with preparing meals and baking breakfast foods and desserts and were also part of the encampment.

And, on the other side of the lawn yesterday was a tent revival hosted by a group called Awaken the Dawn who for the last two years have organized worship gatherings to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with communities all across the country.

On one level, this was a strange juxtaposition, but it was also beautiful and telling. The presence of both groups illustrate the profound recognition that we all need to awaken in these tumultuous times when so much feels like it's at stake. People of all kinds - climate activists and tent revivalists - are part of calling for this awakening.

In this context of shifting religious affiliation and societal challenge, this church's Building for the Future Project has been a few years in the works. The project grows out of this community's grappling with the questions - Who do we want to be? What difference do we want to make? How do we equip ourselves to be of greatest service?

You all as a congregation took the bold step of writing and approving a vision statement - the 2020 Vision Statement in February of 2016. This statement describes your vision of a church community where we all feel equally at home, including people of all abilities and disabilities; where we engage in thoughtful conversations about our most deeply held beliefs, where spiritual practice and spiritual seeking center our community, where we support one another to make the difficult and urgent personal changes necessary to live sustainably and where we are a part of Montpelier's transition from oil dependency to community resiliency.

It is a great privilege to not be asking ourselves questions of survival (How do we keep the lights on? Or, can we pay our staff this month?). Instead, we are able to ask ourselves how do we make this a thriving institution? Not just for ourselves in this generation but for generations to come. What will we pass on to those who come after us?

The goals of Building for the Future address both immediate needs for the safety and adequate functioning of key spaces in the building and also address our aspirations to have a fossil-free facility, accessibility to all areas of the building, and just and equitable benefits for our staff.

With our support of the climate encampment over the last few days, our kitchen and even the Fireplace Room was overflowing with boxes of bread and salad greens and homemade food being donated. Imagine if we had a fully functional, health code compliant kitchen with room enough for our many volunteers and adequate space to store food and supplies. Right now, you cannot get to the meeting rooms on the second floor without climbing up a set of stairs. Imagine if limited mobility was in no way a barrier to participating in the life of this congregation. And, with the colder days and nights, our oil-burning furnaces have already started kicking on. Imagine if we could say we were no longer contributing emissions due to our use of fossil-fuels to heat this historic building and instead had made a transition to renewable fuel sources.

With the Building for the Future project, we have the opportunity to boldly live out our mission from the inside out. Much of the project, including the fine details of the facilities plan, are being continuously developed, so I encourage you to reach out to anyone on the Building for the Future Steering Committee or one of the work groups to share your questions, feedback and concerns.

Taking on this project would mean big changes here at the church for sure. Some of you, I know, feel that the changes of the past few years have come on rapidly and have been difficult to adjust to.

During this time of change, we have also endured mighty losses in our church community. These losses mean not seeing faces that have grown to be beloved Sunday after Sunday and missing the presence of people who had grown to be

friends, mentors, and important representations of the character and history of this church.

Changes to our church programming - like having two Sunday morning services instead of just one - have also meant loss - loss of a familiar way of gathering and being in community together.

I recognize that change and and loss are difficult and I feel many of these losses, too. And, I know that this church community over its many years has moved with the winds of change. It has adapted its 'holy work' as the times have called for - not disregarding the past but allowing the past to be a part of the present and bringing it into the future.

Through all of this change, the people of this church have stuck together joined in common purpose and belonging.

I want to close with a story. It's a story that U.S. Congressman John Lewis of Georgia shares in his memoir *Walking with the Wind* that speaks to the power of sticking together. Congressman Lewis grew up in Alabama, the son of sharecroppers. One day when he was just four years old, he and his siblings were playing outside at the home of his Uncle Rabbit and Aunt Sevena along with about a dozen cousins. The sky began to cloud over. The wind started to pick up and lightning flashed in the distance. This was no time to be outside, and Aunt Sevena ushered all the children inside the small house. The children were uncharacteristically quiet. The wind began to howl outside and the house began to shake. The children and Aunt Sevena were all scared. But then things got worse. The house started to sway and one corner of the house began to lift off the ground. The storm was pulling the house toward the sky. At this point, Aunt Sevena instructed the children to take one another's hands. She pointed them as a group towards the corner of the house that was rising. They walked from the kitchen to the front of the house. As the wind screamed and rain pounded down on the tin roof, they changed directions and walked hand-in-hand in the other direction as another end of the house began to lift. And so it continued, "fifteen children walking with the wind, holding that trembling house down with the weight of [their] small bodies."²

² John Lewis, "Walking with the Wind," adapted in *The Impossible Will Take A Little While: A Citizen's Guide to Hope in a Time of Fear* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

There are storms that are brewing and many forces that might try to lift us away and tear us down, and yet, we clasp hands. We move with purpose together. We embrace our belonging to one another and all that is possible in our joining together.

May we know ourselves part of the 'holy work' of this gathered community.

May we each find our own sense of purpose that ties us to the greater whole.

May we find guidance from the greater Love that join us with those who have come before and those who are yet to be.