

“Strong is What We Make Each Other”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

February 23, 2025

The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.

Reading “Safety Net” by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer¹

...It felt so clear,
all those invisible ties
interwoven like silken threads
strong enough to make a mesh
that for thousands of years
has been woven and rewoven
to catch us all...

Sermon

One hundred sixty years ago, this church began a significant era in its history when the Rev. Charles Adams Allen was ordained and installed as its first minister. This was March 1, 1865. Rev. Allen had just arrived the previous fall to bring a Unitarian message to the growing town and to see if there might be enthusiasm for a liberal Christian religious community.

The town of Montpelier had been chartered and settled for about seventy years. It was a growing industrial town with mills up and down its river banks. There was a hopefulness for progress present. And, at the same time, the young nation had been at war for nearly four years. They probably didn't know it when Rev. Allen was installed as minister, but the Civil War would soon be coming to an end. The war had engaged nearly ten percent of the population in combat many of whom suffered injury, sickness, and death.

¹ <https://ahundredfallingveils.com/2021/06/24/safety-net/>

As our forebears plotted their future including breaking ground on this building, thousands of Civil War soldiers were being treated up the hill at the Sloan Hospital which operated from June through December of 1865.

This church was born in a time of upheaval and potential peril for the young nation. It was born in a time of optimism for the newly founded town, despite the uncertainty of the nation's future. And, this church was born from a claim on religious freedom and the hope of uniting liberal-minded religious people into a covenanted community

Imagine with me what it must have been like for them, a group of no more than twenty or thirty people at the time grieving their losses, facing an uncertain future for the country, caring for one another, and dreaming about what this religious community could become.

Our early founders committed to growing this church as a community institution. A place of gathering and a congregation active in the affairs of the broader Montpelier community. A congregation that would stick around for generations to come, that would be here for us.

We have benefited from the vision and sustained care of this congregation as an institution.

In the historian Timothy Snyder's list of twenty ways to resist tyranny, he names "defend institutions" as number two. He says it is one of the most important lessons of his "On Tyranny" pamphlet. Institutions, Snyder says, don't just magically exist or automatically defend our rights or assert our values.

He says, "Institutions are the work of human beings. An institution is the effect of careful and planned human labor."²

Another way to say this is, institutions are what we make them.

Institutions, be it a court, city government, a college or university, or a church, can sometimes be thought of as stuck in their ways and barriers to change. Some institutions become more about maintaining the status quo than evolving to meet the times. But, institutions are also an expression and result of our human intent and our human labor.

² Timothy Snyder, "Lesson 2: Defend Institutions," https://youtu.be/BtS3M_paWhI?feature=shared.

Right now, we need institutions that are willing to take risks, that are willing to speak the truth, that nurture compassion and wise action. We need institutions that are free to speak the truth and to act from their conscience. We need institutions like this congregation.

Our ability to freely associate into a religious institution like ours is something we might take for granted. Our religious ancestors, however, insisted on their right to freely choose a religious path, and they came together in community to support one another's freedom of individual belief.

The claim to this freedom goes back to the Protestant Reformation and the primary assertion of that movement that there was no mediator for an individual to know God. No king or priest or doctrine could act as a gatekeeper to the truth found in scripture or a relationship to the Divine.

The Unitarian Universalist minister, Rev. Brent Smith writes: "The purpose of religious association in churches and fellowships that claim a lineage to the spirit and principles of the Reformation is to institutionalize religious freedom. The mission of churches and fellowships in this tradition is to liberate and cultivate the human spirit; to help each and every person become a fully functioning, free individual. They are communities for the free spirit. The paradox of fulfilling a purpose and mission that yields individual religious liberty, is that it must be done in community."³

The founders of this church created a congregation in the free church tradition to liberate and cultivate the human spirit and to safeguard religious freedom. This church has done just that for one hundred sixty years. At its founding, this church was and now remains independent.

Our independence is our strength in this moment. As a religious institution in the free church tradition that does not receive government funding or any funding from an entity that places restrictions on what we do, we are free to speak and act our conscience and our values. I don't think the value of this independence can be understated in this moment of growing authoritarianism.

What we say and what we do as a people of faith and conscience matters deeply.

³ Brent A. Smith, "The Free Church: Revolution and Experiment," <https://files.meadville.edu/files/resources/v2n1-smith-the-free-church-revolution-and-experime.p>.

The strength of our independence as a collective body also hinges upon the strength of our interdependence as individuals who freely choose to join the ministry of this church and to support it with our time, our energy, and our resources. What each of you does to defend this institution, to keep it going is essential.

And, when religious communities bring their resources together and choose to show up when it's needed, they can do a lot of good.

We saw this when our congregation pooled resources in the fall to provide two hundred and thirty-four nights of shelter to eighteen vulnerable neighbors who otherwise would have not had a place to sleep.

We see this as members of this congregation join volunteers from across the community to provide life-saving shelter right here in our church vestry during this cold winter season.

We see this in our denomination, the Unitarian Universalist Association, joining with twenty-six other religious bodies to sue the Department of Homeland Security for violating religious freedom with its changes to immigration enforcement policies.

We are strong when we come together. We create a net of safety, love, and resilience. We are all a part of it.

The poet writes:

*This morning I woke
thinking of all the people I love
and all the people they love
and how big the net
of lovers. It felt so clear,
all those invisible ties
interwoven like silken threads
strong enough to make a mesh
that for thousands of years
has been woven and rewoven*

to catch us all.

Here in this congregation we weave and reweave this net so that it is strong enough to catch us all.

Every time you show up to worship you are weaving that net.

Every time you sit with others in a committee meeting and do the work of the church you are weaving that net.

Every time you show up to hand out orders of service, to make the coffee, to rehearse music, to teach out children, to put away the dishes, to lend a listening ear, to share from your heart, to chop the vegetables, to count the money, you are weaving that net.

What makes a net strong are the points of connection. Linked together the strands of a net can hold a lot of weight. By themselves, like those single popsicle sticks, the strands are more fragile and vulnerable to breaking.

We become stronger together as we weave a net of love and safety.

Our hearts and spirits become stronger as we witness one another's truths as we did two Sundays ago in our One Wild and Precious Life service.

Our love becomes stronger as we pledge ourselves to the care and nurture of our children.

Our hope becomes stronger as we advocate for policies to address climate change and homelessness and show up in support of asylum seekers and migrant workers.

We make one another stronger through our presence and our witness and through our acts of kindness, generosity, and commitment.

This is the time of year when we focus our attention as a community on what we are building for the year to come and how we can draw our financial resources together to create a strong and steady foundation for our ministry.

This coming church year, we will continue in the work of understanding our options for a climate resilient future as a congregation. We will continue to develop resources and programming to support parents, children, and families in cultivating empathy, community responsibility, and self-love. We will continue showing up for one another and for our community to insist on human dignity, to protect our rights and liberties, and to safeguard what we can of our democracy.

And, we will continue to offer spaces of refuge and grounding for the spirit in Sunday morning worship and in small group gatherings for reflection, contemplation, and rest.

To continue fulfilling our mission, our congregation needs financial resources. Pledged contributions make up about eighty percent of our income. In this current church year, two hundred and eleven of you are making pledged donations to support our ministry. I am grateful that you continue to be committed stewards of this congregation with your financial giving and that so many give generously to sustain this church.

With uncertainty abounding in so many parts of our lives and society, the financial resiliency of this congregation is essential for our continued ministry. The Stewardship Committee has worked hard to be able to provide you with important information about the congregation's financial resiliency, and I encourage you to dedicate time and attention to learning more.

As your minister and also as a parent of a child being raised in this congregation, I take to heart the importance of this institution. I believe that it matters that we are here doing what we do. My spouse and I make a pledge to UCM every year. For next year's budget, the Stewardship Committee has a goal of raising 3.5 percent more in pledges than this current year, and Jared and I will be raising our pledge 3.5 percent to a total pledge for the year of \$5,477.

We make this pledge in support of this loving community who helps us to nurture and guide our son to have an open mind, loving heart, and helping hands. We make this pledge for all the ways this congregation is a beacon of love, compassion, and hope in our community.

I hope that you will make a pledge to give from your own financial capacity and in alignment with your commitment to all that we are and that we strive to be.

From our beginnings one hundred sixty years ago, this religious community has faced times of challenge and uncertainty with steadfast faith.

May we continue on that path today strengthening one another's spirits and resolve and weaving together a net so mighty it can catch us all.

So may it be.