

“The Ground Beneath Us”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

November 9, 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 from *Staying Put: Making Home in a Restless World* by Scott Russell Sanders

“‘The man who is often thinking that it is better to be somewhere else than where he is excommunicates himself’ we are cautioned by Thoreau, that notorious stay-at-home. The metaphor is religious: to withhold yourself from where you are is to be cut off from communion with the source. It has taken me a half a lifetime of searching to realize that the likeliest path to the ultimate ground leads through my local ground. I mean the land itself, with its creeks and rivers, its weather, seasons, stone outcroppings, and all the plants and animals that share it. I cannot have a spiritual center without having a geographical one; I cannot live a grounded life without being grounded in place.”

Sermon

When is the most important time?

Who is the most important one?

What is the right thing to do?

I found myself in an odd situation one morning this fall. I had biked downtown and needed to make a stop at Shaw’s before heading to church. I parked my bike in one of the pick-up parking spots intended for cars because I was picking up an online order. I checked into the Shaw’s app to alert the system, and presumably a human being inside, that I had arrived. I was trying out the online pickup assuming that this would be an efficient way to get the item I needed and then be on my way without much delay. I had the whole work day ahead of me. The seconds and then minutes passed.

As I waited, someone came out of the store pushing a cart which contained their groceries and also their walker. They pulled the walker out of the cart, and I could see that it was not going to be easy to push the walker and the cart full of groceries at the same time. I asked if they needed

help getting to their car, but they said they had walked to the store from their apartment a few blocks away. They weren't sure how they'd get back to their apartment with all their groceries. Since I had my bike and not a car, I wasn't able to give them a ride, but I know about MyRide, so I offered to request the MyRide bus for them. Luckily, a bus was available to pick them up in about twenty minutes. I managed to help them push their cart over to the bus stop. I asked the person their name and told them mine and then wished them a good day before pedaling off down Main St to church.

This kind of story isn't a rare one in our small community where we value neighborliness. Where we are accustomed to seeing many of the same faces many times in a week or even a day. Where there is a good chance you'll see someone you know at the grocery store or the coffee shop. Here we are shaped by familiarity and intimacy.

This past weekend, I was in New York City. A very different place from Montpelier. And, I was reminded that these moments of intimacy are also present in big cities. I witnessed someone coming down the stairs to the subway offer to carry someone else's luggage down the stairs. I passed an early voting polling place on the upper West Side where a campaign volunteer was stationed engaging in conversation with their neighbors. I walked through a farmers market filled with colorful flowers, bushels of apples, and fragrant herbs where farmers greeted shoppers by name.

All of these human exchanges make a place and are shaped by place.

Our relationships to one another, human to human, are also shaped by and shape the rest of the natural world of which we are just one sacred part. Montpelier is a "city of bridges" because of the three rivers that define the contours of our city. The forests around us teach us the lessons of life cycles-death and rebirth-and of mutuality and interdependence. The soil provides a rich foundation for nourishment.

We are people of place.

Being people of place also shapes how we extend our love and care into the world. In the face of global, national, and local crises and suffering, we wonder what we can do. There is the old adage "Think globally, act locally."

When we think globally, we know that the cares and concerns where we are are not isolated from the cares and concerns of someone living on the opposite side of the planet. We know that the impact of our actions do not stop at our borders.

Does our circle of concern include the starving child in Gaza, the fleeing family in Sudan, and the displaced grandmother in Armenia? Absolutely.

And at the same time, it is right where we are, with the people we are with, at this time, that we embody love and enact justice. It is the literal ground beneath us upon which we use our bodies, hearts, and minds to feel compassion and show care.

Some argue that at a time when the planetary issues facing us are so big and overwhelming—climate change, authoritarianism, habitat loss, genocide—focusing on acting locally keeps us from becoming overwhelmed or unable to act. It's a strategic move to hone in on a small sphere of influence because you can actually be effective and see change happen.

Yet, by focusing on the local, we are not only choosing the most strategic social or political or economic path for change.

We are opening our hearts to micro-movements of change that can transform us from the inside out. These micro-movements happen in the face of the very real, flesh and bone, leaf and stalk, material substance in front of us and beside us. We are changed as we encounter, and then respond to, the pain, suffering, and beauty right here, right now. Or, in more contemporary terms, IRL. In real life.

Scott Russell Sanders writes, “The likeliest path to the ultimate ground leads through my local ground.”

It is a practice to pay attention to particularity, to our local ground. Some of us do this quite naturally or out of necessity. Farmers must work with the soil to nurture its potential for healthy growth. Many of you are attuned to the activities of your neighborhood beavers and groundhogs or have watched carefully over the weeks as the maple outside your window has turned red slowly then suddenly and then dropped all its leaves. The other night I was startled by the calls of our neighborhood foxes who can make some very alarming sounds. They have become an integral part of our neighborhood landscape.

When one is new to a place, it can take time to get rooted. It doesn't usually happen immediately. Being intentional in becoming familiar with the local ground you now find yourself in can help. This might include discovering where you like to go for a walk or a run or a bike ride; paying attention to the trees in your new neighborhood and learning their names; going out bird watching or pulling out your bird identification app to learn which avian creatures you are now sharing a home with. Becoming part of a place can mean checking out a local church or faith community as some of you have done, or the local library or the coffee shop, the new town square.

This familiarity with the ground beneath you, the place around you, lays claim to a piece of your heart, to your circle of concern and care. You might find yourself in a new city or town and you can still feel the presence of places that have shaped you during your lifetime.

I also want to acknowledge that sometimes we are not in the right place for us. There are dangers where we are or our soul knows we haven't yet found home or the right place for that moment or chapter of our lives. And not all of us have a choice of where to root ourselves. Instead, we make do wherever we are.

And yet, wherever we are, we are being shaped by the real-life conditions of the present place and the present time. Wherever we are, we ask those three questions:

When is the most important time?
Who is the most important one?
What is the right thing to do?

We ask these questions as a congregation as well.

Gil Rendle is a retired Methodist minister and church consultant who makes the case for the counter-cultural possibility of church, and I would add of any faith community, through a focus on the neighborhood. He writes:

"The neighborhood is real space, it is real people, it is not conceptual. It is here, not out there... The neighborhood is specific and requires actual relationships. The neighborhood is local, and local is where the cultural change oscillating toward 'WE' will first happen." He continues: "The

most fertile soil for change is no longer in the hands of the large agents; it is now in the hands of the small at the local level. For the congregation, it is found in the neighborhood.”¹

Rev. Traci Blackmon is a United Church of Christ pastor. She served in Ferguson, Missouri a decade ago. She talks about how she was serving a small congregation of about 25 members, only about a dozen of whom attending church services. Most of the members had moved out of the neighborhood and into the outskirts of the city or the suburbs.

One Sunday, Rev. Blackmon led them in a conversation about the neighborhood and they realized how much had changed over the years. People no longer owned homes. They were renters. The neighborhood was now filled with pawn shops and liquor stores.

And then they wondered together what would happen if the church opened its doors and if people came who didn’t look like the mostly white, suburban members. If people came who couldn’t pay the expenses of the church.

They decided they would open the building. They opened it for use at no charge to people who needed the space. They invited in community organizations who were just getting started. They became a seven-days-a-week church.

There was so much violence in the neighborhood that they began hosting funerals free of charge. The year before Michael Brown was murdered, Rev. Blackmon presided over the funeral of a young woman who had been killed in a drive-by shooting. The young woman’s best friend came to the funeral.

The day Michael Brown was killed that young woman and her children happened upon Brown’s body as he laid in the street. She called Rev. Blackmon and told her she needed the church.

What does it mean for us as a congregation, this spiritual community, to be a good neighbor?

It has meant saying yes to hosting the community fridge when it needed a new home. It means allowing people without regular access to an electrical outlet of their own to sit on the steps and charge a phone.

¹ Gil Rendle, *Countercultural: Subversive Resistance and the Neighborhood Congregation* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2023), 114-115.

It means wondering what to do about the invasive knotweed on our river bank and tending to the trees and flowers and lawn around the church building.

It means learning the names of the people we eat lunch with and serve on Mondays and who find rest in our vestry on a cold winter night.

This focus on the people and beings right around us draws us into the larger “we” of this community and this neighborhood. And building a stronger “we” is part of resisting the forces that seek to limit us to a technocratic, violence-enforcing, plutocracy devoid of the real, fleshy, embodied, messy and beautiful life in community that is what feeds our souls.

Being a good neighbor means staying open to how our hearts will be changed in the days to come as we harvest and glean the last of the fall crop, as we touch the soil, deliver the food, keep watch for immigration agents, greet a neighbor hello, set up the cots, and listen to the fox.

When is the most important time?

Who is the most important one?

What is the right thing to do?

The turtle teaches the child: There is only one important time, and that time is now. The most important one is always the one you are with. And the most important thing is to do good for the one who is standing at your side.

May we live the lessons of the turtle.

So may it be.