

“Covenanted Across Generations”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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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 “On This Rock” A sermon delivered at the dedication of the Church of the Messiah in Montpelier, January 25, 1866 by Rev. Frederic Frothingham

“We meet today to dedicate this Church to the worship of God, and to man’s true service. It is beautiful in our eyes, not only because it is fair to look upon, may adorn the Capital of our State, and may help to refine and cultivate the public taste, but far more because of the zeal, self-devotion, and brotherhood, the sacred memories, the holy hopes which are built into its walls, and without which it could not have been; and most of all, because here our dear and cherished faith, no longer a wanderer and a stranger, has a centre and a home...

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. Our glad, simple faith has builded for itself here a home; now for its benignant and growing work! A stranger and alone here, this church must be a missionary church. To her, friends and enemies alike will look, for the illustration of her Faith. Around her lies the world’s broad field. Though many noble laborers of other names are in it, how vast a portion is yet untilled! It waits, as we believe, for the life which our Faith has to give...Never was there graver need of noble churches in the land than now. Great is their power.”

Sermon

Today marks the culmination of the 160th anniversary of the founding of this church, and we celebrate it with a service honoring the completion and dedication of this building. One hundred sixty years is a long time in the life of a congregation, long enough for generations to come and go, for beliefs to evolve, for walls to be built and rebuilt, and for a community to be shaped again and again by the times it inhabits.

When this church was founded in 1866, it was a volatile period in our nation's history. Our young nation had been at war within itself. The Civil War had ended only a year earlier, but the violence, grief, and trauma of that conflict were far from resolved. Communities were divided over who would be included in the liberty our country's founders purported this nation was founded upon. It was a time of reckoning over the vision of democracy that, as Unitarian minister Theodore Parker defined it in 1850, is "a government of all the people, by all the people, for all the people." That vision was far from realized, and the struggle over its meaning was fierce and ongoing.

It was in that moment that our church founders came together, insisting upon religious freedom and expanding the idea of who could be considered Christian. This church was a Christian church at its founding, though with unorthodox beliefs for the time. They emphasized the humanity of Jesus over his divinity and believed in universal salvation. These ideas placed them outside the mainstream of American Christianity in the mid-19th century, and yet they persisted, guided by conscience, reason, and a deep faith in love's expansiveness.

From the beginning, this church was not only a place of worship, but also a place of meeting. It was a space where people gathered to wrestle with the moral questions of their day, to support one another, and to imagine a more just and humane world. Over the years, that role has continued, even as the theology and language of the congregation have shifted.

The original covenant, or founding mission statement, of the church has also evolved. We no longer name ourselves solely as followers of Jesus, nor do we require a faith in Jesus Christ for membership in this religious community. What continues, though, is an unstated covenant: a promise to continue evolving as a religious community to meet the moment that we are in and the challenges before us, just as our founders did and all the generations who have come after them.

As many of you know, I was just recently in Minneapolis. I was there with colleagues from Vermont who are part of Vermont Interfaith Action, supporting a sibling organization in Minnesota called ISALAH. ISALAH was a primary organizer of Friday's Ice Out of MN: A Day of Truth & Freedom. Being there made it unmistakably clear that we are living in a moment of cruel brutality—and also a moment of love-centered resistance.

In this moment, Christian churches, Unitarian Universalist and Jewish congregations, Muslim and Buddhist communities, and many other people of faith are playing a role. In a big way in Minneapolis, these religious communities are anchoring the resistance. They are opening their doors for community meetings. They are at the heart of mutual aid networks. Churches and synagogues and mosques are collection points for food, medicine, and essential supplies, which are then organized and distributed by people who take them to their neighbors—neighbors who will not leave their homes for work or school or medical appointments for fear of being detained or worse.

This is what it looks like when religious communities live into their deepest values. This is what it means to be a place of worship and a place of meeting in a time of moral crisis.

In 1866, Rev. Frederic Frothingham preached from this church's pulpit, "Never was there graver need of noble churches in the land than now." Those words certainly echo today. They echo in moments when democracy feels fragile, when human dignity is under threat, when fear is used as a tool of control, and when love must be practiced not just as a feeling, but as a disciplined and courageous commitment.

So on the 160th anniversary of this church, we can ask ourselves: Who are we in this moment? How will we be in covenant with our religious ancestors and with those yet to come?

As the current stewards and shapers of this congregation—of its vision as well as its house of worship and gathering—we determine how we live into our covenant today. This is something I do in partnership with you, but I want to be clear: you, the members of this congregation, are the most important participants and decision-makers in how this congregation lives into that covenant. What we choose to prioritize, what risks we are willing to take, what love calls us to do—these are collective decisions.

Right now, the Board is working on a vision statement for UCM, drawing on ideas gathered from the congregation over the last several months. This statement of who we aspire to be will guide us in the years to come. At the same time, the Climate Resilience Study Group has concluded its work of researching options for climate-resilient facilities that will endure for many years. Soon, the Board will be sharing what comes next in our collective discernment, inviting us once again into thoughtful, values-based decision-making.

One hundred sixty years ago, this church was built upon a site that had been laden with debris. The tavern that once served as a gathering place had burned to the ground. What was built here—this church—transformed that site, giving the community a hopeful vision of what could be made in place of ruin.

And so we continue today. We build upon what is being torn down in our own time. We renew our promise to put love at the center. We join with our ancestors and with generations yet to come, carrying forward a fire of commitment—to this faith, to one another, and to the work of shaping a world more worthy of our shared humanity.