

What hearty folks – who made it here in such weather! And you don't even have the pains of hell making you come. In my Catholic faith of origin, not going to church on Sunday was a venial sin worthy of a trip to the confessional. I suppose that's why I'm here in our Unitarian Universalist faith. It was hard to believe in a God that would punish you for sleeping in on a day of rest!

In retrospect, I can see why the church created such a rule – showing up, week after week, is what creates community. It strengthens the muscles we need to do those things we don't really want to do, but which are good for us in the big picture. Religions exist to offer us humans a way to make meaning out of this seemingly random and confusing experience of being alive. They do it in many different ways, colored by their time and location and ours is no different. We have our own unique history with distinctive gifts and challenges.

Our reading today came from a paper written over 15 years ago by David Loerher who argued that Unitarian Universalism was not thriving because it wasn't a *real* religion. In the 1960's and 70's, as most supernatural aspects of liberal religion we're being discarded, he contended that folks adopted political commitments rather than theological ones within our religious institutions. He says leaders at the time took the easy way out, rather than developing strong theological statements, they polled people and used what folks in the pews said to create our seven guiding principles.

Religion by committee. His point was that a polled religious identity might not have the teeth needed to help us make meaning out of the challenges and mysteries of life. Loerher suggests that liberal religion is dying all across the country – and not just in UU churches – because of the lack of robust theology. We've traded in the internal hard work of figuring out what is real – what pulls us forward, why we exist at all – for the external work of making ourselves feel good in the moment.

Is this true? Maybe, maybe not. But it got me thinking. What is the theological center of our faith?

First let me confess that when I conceived of this this sermon, it was a way to support my desire to make changes in the church building – specifically getting new chairs for this room. The beautification committee has been working since last April and has done some good work: they've come up with a list of needed repairs that are already being worked on. You'll see new them in the next month or so. All the light bulbs in the front of the church now have the same color signature now - not daylight in one fixture and soft white in another. It looks much nicer.

But there's been no forward motion on the one thing I really hoped to get done by our anniversary celebration next fall: more comfortable, functional chairs. I had believed that if created the space to do healing work around the failed attempt at new chairs, we might be able to move ahead with I thought an important project. But even though we've had good conversations since last April, there is still resistance, so I thought I'd give a sermon on why it was theologically imperative that we get new chairs.

Yeah – but when I sat down to write, it dawned on me how silly that would be. Upon prayer and more reflection, I realized, this is my issue. For me, it's about safety – many fingers get pinched when we push them back and haul them out for events. It's about welcome – having sat a few times during services led by other people, I find them pretty uncomfortable for my arthritic hips. And it's about esthetics. This room is just so brown. I love wood but wish we could get some more color & texture to bring this space into the 21st century. But in writing, I realized these are all my issues. They don't seem to be yours. No one has taken on championing new chairs and quite a few are actively resistant. So I tossed that sermon. I'm just the minister and I serve you. If you don't want new chairs – this is me talking to myself – then just let it go.

But even with that bracing self-talk I realize there's still something bugging me. To use a phrase coined singer/songwriter, David Wilcox, I realized it bugs me on a metaphorical level. It's not the chairs – it's what keeping old chairs or getting new ones represents to me on a meta level.

Two of my core values are hospitality and truth. Providing warm welcome to people and being authentic in word and deed. And I feel like we say we want to welcome new people, but also want everything to stay the same. That frustrates me because it feels antithetical to what I hold as sacred in Unitarian Universalism. I love that we say we are willing to reexamine our faith and always seek to find the deepest truth in a situation and then let go of things that no longer serve as intended. I love that each of us can search and find and wrestle and come up with a story, a belief system, a theology that fits our own experience of life. I love that we don't stay locked in outmoded ways of being in the world – but embrace new knowledge and understandings.

But there's a downside - where it can fail people in our pews (or chairs.) Because we are not a prescriptive religion, finding this church can sometimes be the end of the work. We celebrate finding like-minded people and leaving behind prescriptive religion – without necessarily doing the work of figuring out what our new or real theological commitments will be. Unitarian Universalism offers space, but we don't demand that our members do the hard work of pounding out their own theological identities. Sometimes we fail to say that being human is really hard work, and that to do it well, takes focus and participation and wrestling. That faith can't be an afterthought or a byproduct.

Loehers says this is *the* missing ingredient in Unitarian Universalism that prevents it from being a real and sustainable faith. And my observation for many UU congregations is that because they have shed outmoded theologies without replacing them, folks end up centering the physical space in which they meet. The building – or aspects of the building – become a really important aspect of their faith home – maybe second only to the friends and community.

I'm not judging too much because I do understand how important objects can be in sustaining a sense of self. We just put away the Christmas tree and it's always a nostalgic experience. Most all of our ornaments hold a memory. Ornaments from my grandparents – those fragile glass bulbs, one from my mom of a collie with angel wings, ones gifted to me by friends. And of course, the fragile handmade ones from thirty years ago that were gifts from my children.

Holding each one brings back the feeling of a time when life felt alive with possibility – when I was young and strong and full of hope. Even if there were hard things going on – I remember

the joy. It's just a paper ornament – but it represents a story I have of myself – and would be really hard to let go. I'm sure that's why we become attached to the physicality of our buildings - to artwork that was created when we were vibrant and full of hope – to chairs which hold too many memories to recall.

But while my kids ornaments remind me of a particular time and place – a relationship I had with them then, that relationship would no longer serve any of us. My kids are now grown up – smart, funny, creative people who I have a vastly different relationship with now. And it hasn't been easy. We've had to wrestle through some pretty difficult times – times when they didn't talk to me – times when I had to let go of my old conceptions of what it means to be the mom. I eventually got there and came to accept and appreciate them as the unique people they are rather than seeing them as my children. It wasn't easy – but the results have been profoundly gratifying.

I think we need to do some of that wresting in our chosen Unitarian Universalist faith – some letting go of ideas, conceptions, commitments, which no longer serve. What is the heart of our Unitarian Universalist faith that can support us in the face of difficult circumstances?

Loeber's paper was fascinating because I've been struggling with the question of what sustains me in this faith. I found myself searching Buddhist spiritual teachers, looking for something to guide me in the losses I've faced these past few years. Unitarian Universalism offers community – relationship – as the cornerstone answer of what it means to be human – and I do believe that community is essential. But is it enough? Does it push us forward in the world? Does it inspire us to go on when all seems lost? Is there something at the heart of our living tradition strong enough to pull us through the inevitable dark nights of the soul?

A few weeks back a member sent me an article in the University of Chicago Divinity School paper titled "Disruptive Religion."ⁱ It featured a picture of a nativity scene at the United Church of Christ in Claremont, California.



It was controversial with many supporting and others decrying the politization of Christmas.

But some scholars pointed out that the original nativity scene, created by St Francis Assisi in the 13th century was seen as political – even as it was made to remind people who couldn't read that their God had come to earth as the lowest of the low. This non-traditional tableau in California holds an unchanging truth – and disrupts the assumptions of many Christians around the country whose primary commitment is to being comfortable and right.

For me this is a powerful example of a living faith and maybe one we can learn from. In Unitarian Universalism we call our faith a living tradition – one which examines old tenets and finds way to bring timeless truth into this particular place and moment in time. But in some ways, we've been a fair-weather religion since 1961. One that was easy to step into – easy to stay

home from on a stormy Sunday morning. It can be a faith which doesn't demand too much of us - allowing us to hang out with people who see the world like us. But I am afraid that the world is changing and the weather that is coming may be far from fair. To be strong and flexible enough to support folks through the inevitable dark nights of the soul, real faith has to be exercised. It has to be tested and wrestled and forged into something both flexible and durable for the hard times ahead.

If you go back and read the slow side to fascism which happened in Nazi Germany, you'll find too many similarities to current events to count. Or read about the fall of the Roman empire. Or simply read the latest news from the scientific community on our looming Climate crisis. We are not in fair weather right now. We have not had anything like this in the US since WWII. Maybe a lightweight faith seemed okay in the past – community was enough to sustain folks through personal tragedy.

But we will need a faith that has some teeth – that can call us to our best selves and remind us of who we aspire to be even when dark clouds are threatening. Real religion – real living faith – takes time and energy and work and commitment. I think this is why the chair issue here in this church bugs me on a metaphorical level. Focusing on the furniture can displace the real work of spiritual growth and evolution.

We are going to be spending this next year celebrating the 150th anniversary of this church community and I hope we will take that opportunity to do some real work together; to go below the surface and find the power, strength and depth of our chosen faith.

Your homework assignment is to start thinking of your own personal theologies – and how they fit within our Unitarian Universalist faith. How did you come to them? When have they supported you? In the next few weeks we'll be examining the lives of faith-filled people and looking for inspiration and illumination for our own ongoing journeys of faith. We'll be examining how we choose to be in relationship and examining different tenets of faith that can sustain and challenge. We'll be asking if Unitarian Universalism offer us a faith strong enough to carry us through the challenges on the horizon? I believe it can – but I also believe that it will demand we bring our best selves with courage and commitment as we explore what it means to be fully human, fully alive in this particular moment and time. **Amen & Blessed be.**

ⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/09/us/nativity-scene-cages-claremont.html>