

A Single Step

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

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It is an honor to be here this morning. I have dreamed about today not only since last April when I was here as a candidate, but going back even further. I have been fantasizing about this ingathering since last winter when I first read the congregational packet the Search Committee sent me. What might it be like, I wondered, to preach to a congregation that is two to three times larger than what I was accustomed to in Omaha? Actually today it is probably closer to four or five times larger than that number. What might it be like to have this beautiful organ in your sanctuary? Or to do ministry alongside a trusted colleague? Back in those bleak, cold January days in Nebraska I wondered, “What might it be like to be in Wilmington Delaware?” This morning I know.

But if I have been waiting a long time for this Ingathering morning, I can only imagine how long some of you have been waiting! Two years is considered a long time to have interim ministry. Three years is extraordinarily long. Interim years are difficult ones. This is not to say that they are not necessary, nor do I wish to imply anything

less that sincere gratitude toward my colleagues who have served this congregation so ably for the past three years. Indeed, I have deep respect for each of them, and am very appreciative of all the ministry they did here. But interim years are hard. It is no fun being betwixt and between for so long. Part of today's celebration is in no small part a recognition that these transitional years are over. You have grown, learned, and are now ready.

I know this because of the reception I get whenever I meet folks from church. Whether it is here in this building or in the store at Target, the response is warm and enthusiastic. In fact being the newly settled Senior Minister of a church that has had three years of interim ministry reminds me of a TV show that was on a couple of years ago. Don't worry if you never saw it or don't remember it; it wasn't on for very long. I think I only caught one or two episodes myself. This was an improv show. It was one of those comedies where a troop of actors would perform a scene in front of a live audience without a script. They would just make things up on the spot and try to be funny. But there were a few twists to this particular show. All of the actors were unknown with the exception of their star guest for the week. This was someone very recognizable; like Jason Alexander from Seinfeld. Someone you know is funny. But the twist was that the guest was the only actor who didn't know what the scene was. The rest of them would start, and then this famous person would make a dramatic entrance and

try to play along as best they could. The only thing he or she knew about what was going to happen was what they might guess from their costume, and they knew the first line that would be spoken to them when they arrived on stage; because it was also the name of the show. When they entered a scene that they didn't know or understand, someone would turn to them and say, "Thank God you're here!"

I have thought about this show a lot in the last month and a half. What a perfect metaphor for a new Senior Minister! I know some of the situations I get into, but not all of the details or all of the history. I know some of the people, but not all of them and certainly not as well as I would like. I definitely get to wear a costume! But let me tell you, three years of interim ministry is enough to make even the most rational atheist proclaim to me, "Thank God you're here!" Albeit perhaps in hushed tones. Rest assured that I too share this sentiment.

Hopefully I have not been too befuddled in these situations. Seeing Jason Alexander stumble around the stage trying to figure out what to say next is half the fun of "Thank God You're Here!" But it isn't exactly a very ministerial response. Fortunately for me, when confusion sets in, I turn to one of my spiritual centers: Lao Tzu. Lao Tzu is the mythical author of the Tao Te Ching; the classic of the Chinese religion of Taoism.

Chapter 64 of the Tao Te Ching, which was our reading for today, starts off very logical. For the Tao Te Ching, it is surprisingly logical! “What lies still is easy to grasp; What lies far off is easy to anticipate; What is brittle is easy to shatter; What is small is easy to disperse.” For Lao Tzu, this is refreshingly straightforward. The world is as it appears to be. For now. Lao Tzu continues, “Yet a tree broader than a man can embrace is born of a tiny shoot; A dam greater than a river can overflow starts with a clod of earth; A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” It is notable that in ancient China, terms like “a thousand miles” didn’t mean to them exactly what it means to us. To us, a thousand miles is an exact, finite distance that has meaning separate from 999 miles or 1001 miles. Lao Tzu means here a journey that is “really long, but of an indefinite length.” Although he wrote a thousand miles, he doesn’t really know how long the journey is.

At any rate, the point is that great things have humble beginnings. An old tree with a large trunk begins as a small sapling. The river is overflowed by a dam that started off as a clod of earth. A long unknown journey begins with a single step. A ministry begins with a single Sunday together. Who really knows how tall the sapling will grow, how far the river will overflow, how long the journey will be, or what will come into being when a new minister comes to a new congregation? Lao Tzu tells us that no one knows these things. Their potential is infinite. But there has to be a beginning somewhere, so don’t sell short

the beginning just because it starts off small and humble. Great things are possible from such beginnings.

How do we bring out this potential? How do we make it actual? I think there are two ingredients needed to make our infinite potential as human beings actual in this world. The first is vision. We have to first be able to see or dream or imagine what the tree looks like that could emerge from that small sapling. It could be a tree larger than what a man could embrace. Secondly we need to have some hope. Hope is usually thought of as a passive thing, a sort of forlorn wishing for the world to be other than it is. This is not what I mean by the word. By hope I mean an active practice of trying to make that vision of the world that we find so compelling to come into being. Hope is the daily watering and feeding of that sapling because we really want to see it grow into a mighty tree. Hope moves us to do something about our vision, our dreams. Hope is active.

Lao Tzu captures this in his uniquely subtle way toward the end of the chapter. He writes, “[The sage] returns to the places that people have forgotten.” Like so many lines in this mystical book, there are a number of interpretations as to what this means. It might mean that when someone becomes a wise sage, then they remove themselves from civilization and retreat into nature. They find some sacred space, some holy ground, and live there like a hermit. They understand some places to be sacred that other people overlook or miss or ignore. This is the

interpretation that probably has the most historical evidence behind it. But it's not my favorite one. It's probably not wrong, but let me propose an alternate interpretation of this line. "The sage returns to the places that people have forgotten," could be less about a physical space and more of an interior one. That there are places within themselves that people have forgotten, but the sage recognizes them as sacred and returns there.

It's like the newly decorated foyer in a way. I am sure many of you walked through there into the sanctuary this morning. It is hard to say that one of the most frequently used rooms in the church, particularly on Sunday morning could be called a "forgotten place," but it was in a way. But then one Sunday last spring Gina Small and Scott Ward got to thinking about that space. What could this be? Where is the tree so large that a man cannot embrace it, here in this sapling we see before us? What is our vision of the world as it could be? How do we return to a forgotten place? They had a vision and they applied some hope to it. Pete Small, Steve and Cindy Cohen, Paul and Nancy Pinson, joined them in working on that vision. Hope began to spread, and this hope was of the active variety. I would drive by the church on Saturdays and see people working furiously on a gorgeous summer weekend on that foyer. Because hope is a contagious thing, and the more you do it, the clearer that vision becomes. Pretty soon everyone has a hand in it, plays a part, they participate in that dream. They return to the places

that have been forgotten. Terry Walls was recruited to help. Glen Barbaras and Rev. Barbara hung some of their original art in the space only enhancing its appeal. But it doesn't stop there. Vendors start giving discounts or just donating things. Items that are no longer even made by the company get found on the internet. The pieces are falling into place. Hope is spreading even beyond the walls of the congregation. The whole project comes in under budget but its not about dollars and cents any more. It's about something new coming into being. Great things emerge from humble beginnings.

For the past month people come into the church, they stop by the office, and they talk about that foyer. Some have even said that the pictures that used to be there, that now hang in a hallway in the RE wing, are more visible now. I see those pictures every time I go to a meeting. They say when you come to church now it feels so good to walk up to those impressive doors with the words of Channing and Jefferson engraved on them, and pull them open and step into a sacred space that people have forgotten, but some sages brought back. Their vision becomes our vision, their hope becomes our hope when we enter that room. People say, have you seen what we can do together when we have a little vision, we expend a little hope, get a little dirty, but we get excited about the potential we see here and how we can bring it to life. I see things like that foyer all over the place. Sacred spaces, places, committees, people, programs that ache with potential. All they need is

some vision and a little bit of that hope that moves us toward a better day.

Now you could say that the foyer was a forgotten place made sacred by its renovation. That is one interpretation. It is probably the most historically accurate one. But I prefer another way of looking at it. That the forgotten place that we return to is not the actual physical space of the foyer or any other part of the building. Rather it is that feeling within ourselves that yearns for a new day. For some fresh new vision of what our church could be, what our community could be, what each of us as individuals could be. That spark, that energy, that little burst of excitement that is so palpable on Ingathering Sunday; that is the place the sage returns to that the people so often forget. It is the essence of our life. And so as your newly minted Senior Minister I make my first request of you: let's not forget it! Let's come back to this forgotten spot again and again. Let us seek to find those things within ourselves that move us to act with passion in life. Let us be bold and innovative in dreaming of a church or better yet a world that corresponds to those deep passions; that gives them space and room to grow.

My friends, ministry is about finding those deep passions within yourself and living them each day. That is what I mean when I talk about a ministry. Ministry is a journey. A congregation and a minister, and in our case ministers, walk together in a covenanted relationship. The Cambridge Platform that defines the way we govern ourselves as

Unitarian Universalists actually uses this metaphor of a walk together. The journey of ministry is a thousand miles long. It begins with a single step. It is a step we take together.

Oh how I wish that I could stand before you all and promise you that our journey of ministry together will be one without difficulty, travail, or disagreement. I wish I could tell you that now that I have found all of you as a congregation and you have found me as your Senior Minister that all will be well, we can ride off into the sunset of eternal bliss. Part of me truly does want to say that to you and believe it. But I have been a minister too long to know that life just doesn't work that way. I am sure that your experiences of ministry at First Unitarian Church have taught you that human beings occupy this office of the Senior Minister; not Supermen or Superwomen. There will be times along our journey when I will disappoint you. Hopefully not everyone all at once! There might be times when I too am disappointed. But whatever the ups or downs that path ahead of us holds in store as we walk together as minister and congregation, as ministerial colleague to ministerial colleague, know that I am ready to take one more single step together. Because the journey is not really a thousand miles long. It is of an indefinite length, with lots of unknown twists and turns along the way. Ours is a relationship that requires work, and is not always easy. But then again how much do you value that which comes easiest to you?

Today that journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Let it be a bold step forward, unafraid of the future. Let it be a step we take together as we dream our dreams of tomorrow that will one day become our reality. Thank God, it's good to be here! Amen Blessed Be.