

One More for the Road

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It's funny when you are in the midst of saying good-bye to people, all you can see is good-byes. So it was particularly poignant for me when one of my favorite comedians, David Letterman, went off the air almost exactly one month ago. For me at least it was impossible to say good-bye to Dave without remembering that classic moment in TV history when his mentor Jonny Carson said good-bye to the nation. I will never forget that moment. It was May 1992 and Bette Midler, Jonny's last guest, came out and sang to him. She sand a song that feels very appropriate to this morning: "Make it one for my baby, and one more for the road!"

All these years of serving as your minister I may not have told you that I am a huge Frank Sinatra fan. This being my last

sermon to you, and it being the last sermon before the summer schedule officially begins, there is a different sort of vibe to this Sunday. “It’s a quarter to three. No one’s in the place except you and me. So set ‘em up Joe, I got a little story I think you should know.”

When a minister leaves a congregation there is a lot good-byes that need to happen. I think we have done a pretty good job of saying good-bye to each other over the past few months especially. I have spoken my peace, said what I needed to say about our time together as congregation and minister. And you have as well. The farewell of two weeks ago was heartfelt and genuine. That is good because it will allow you to embrace your new minister and me to embrace my new congregation. But you know there is more to our relationship than just us. The covenant between minister and congregation is a three-way arrangement. Acutally all covenants are three-way arrangements. Contracts are between two parties. A covenant is between the minister, the congregation, and the Holy itself. We have talked about me, we have talked about you, today I want to talk about the Holy.

Here is one more Star Wars reference for the road. There is a moment in Empire Strikes Back where Luke has seen that his friends are in trouble. He decides to temporarily halt his training to fly off and help them. Yoda and Obiwan beg him not to go. Finally they realize that Luke is leaving anyway; it's going to happen. And as Luke's spaceship roars off, Yoda yells at him, "Mind what you've learned! Save you it can!" That kind of urgency captures how I feel about this morning's last sermon. Rather than talking about us, I want to leave you with one last word about what Unitarian Universalism is, the core of our faith. I will not be saying anything new or anything you haven't heard from me before. Just one last reminder. One more "Mind what you've learned, save you it can!" from Rev. Josh. Just to take care of that third party to our covenant.

The first teaching is of course about the covenant itself. A covenant is a relationship. It is made up of a series of promises we make to each other. Those promises define the covenant – how we will be in relationship with each other. This is, I believe, something that makes Unitarian Universalism and other free church traditions unique among Western religions. Most

churches are obsessed with what you believe. If you believe in the same things the rest of us believe in then you can be in relationship with us. Our relationship is contingent on a set of beliefs and getting them all correct. This is known as creedalism, and the set of beliefs one must adhere to are called “creeds.” Unitarian Universalism, and some others, rejected creeds as a litmus test for being in relationship with other people. If you think about it, creedalism is a very coercive and a rather shallow way to define a relationship. You would not expect this of your spouse for example. The first time you disagree with them over something, the first whiff of a fight brewing, and you are already divorced. We don’t think alike therefore we cannot love alike, to rephrase a famous saying from Francis David. Besides, people are always thinking new thoughts, having new ideas, innovating as time and circumstances change. We can either cling to the beliefs statements of the past or develop new and compelling visions for the future. That is why covenants, rather than creeds, support the liberal way of religion.

You see one of the key features of a covenant is that it is voluntary. You enter into it because you choose to. This is Forest

Church's point, and one of the main themes, of the book A Chosen Faith. When we disagree over theology or politics or anything in this church, that does not end our relationship. The covenant is strong enough to hold that disagreement, because we promise to listen deeply to the other. Differing viewpoints might reveal the truth to us in a way that parroting our predetermined ideas never would. It is how we grow in spiritual maturity.

You know I was a pew sitter a long time before I actually joined a UU church for the first time. It may have been nearly a year from when I first attended the Unitarian Universalist Church in Ann Arbor Michigan until I signed the membership book. I remember the day I made up my mind to do so. A religion professor of mine asked, in a sort of back handed sort of way, what religion I was. I told him "Unitarian Universalist" since I had been attending that church a good while. It was the first time I proclaimed myself UU. Then that Sunday was New Member Recognition Sunday – very similar to what we do here twice a year. As I watched people file up to the front to be recognized as new members, I saw people who had started coming after I had! I had met some of them and showed them around. What was I

waiting for? The next Sunday, I took the minister aside and signed the membership book; officially entering into the covenant.

But it was more than any old kind of covenant that I agreed to that day. I joined the beloved community. Again, this is something you have heard me talk about quite a bit in the past. Covenants are relationships, the Beloved Community is a whole congregation. It is a voluntary association to use the term from the great Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams. Basically Adams' point was that Unitarian Universalism is not a series of nice ideas. It is not a philosophy. Unitarian Universalism is something we live out in community with each other. It can be rough and tumble at times. But that is how we grow.

Obviously one of the key features of the Beloved Community is...well love! Certainly that means love in the sense of caring for each other; being there for each other when life is hard. But it also means love of justice, a love that cares for everyone even people who are marginalized or oppressed. It is this love that we express as sorrow and grief when this past week

a gunman killed nine African American people in a church in South Carolina. It is love, it has to be love, that moves us to speak out against such ghastly acts of terror and hatred. Surely there is no justice everywhere so long as there is injustice anywhere, as Dr. King taught us. Love is what makes the Beloved Community look beyond our differences of race, and location, and denomination and cry in sorrow when our brothers and sisters are murdered in these senseless acts.

But you know there is yet another kind of love that is promoted within the beloved community. The love of self. You see sometimes love can become enmeshment; losing your sense of separate identity to the relationship with the beloved. Sometimes people in church expect others to follow them and think the same way they do, simply because they care for each other. This is not love, but co-dependency. My favorite quote about the love of self comes from Teddy Roosevelt in an essay he entitled "The Boxer."

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is

actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”

This brings me to my final lesson, or really a reminder of a lesson, that lies at the core of Unitarian Universalism, and that is Radical Hospitality. The Beloved Community can never be for ourselves alone. Next year, in 2016, First Unitarian Church will celebrate its 150th year of existence. Oh how I wish I could be here to celebrate with you! Yet in another sense that is the point: the institution transcends any single individual. None of us will live to be 150 years old, yet the church we love has done so. In order for that to happen, in order for the Beloved Community to persist

beyond a single generation, then we must practice radical hospitality.

Radical hospitality comes to us primarily through our Universalist ancestors. They believed that the love of God was infinite and it is our job to try and open our hearts as wide as possible to love as near to infinitely as it is humanly possible. This means accepting people just as they are. We say these words every week when we do our welcome: "No matter who you are you are welcomed here." That is a powerful statement of radical hospitality. So many creedal based religions put clauses and preconditions on who you have to be in order to fully participate in the life of the community. The Beloved Community does not do that. We do not demand perfectibility before you come here. None of us would be allowed to join if that were the case! Radical hospitality accepts the full humanity of the other; both good and bad. It accepts their full humanity and says, "You are enough, come and be a part of us!" It meets people where they are as the saying goes.

Now we cannot forget that the church is also called to be prophetic. Yes we accept people as they are, but we also expect

them to grow. We may meet you where you are, but we expect you to grow from there. Our church has a mission and a vision that flows from that mission. While it may get confused at times, lost in the hubbub of day to day institutional life, the mission and vision of the church cannot be forgotten or lost. I am proud of the good work we have done to clarify and align our programs around that mission and vision these past few years. And yet there is a long way to go to fully live into that mission and vision.

That is the power of radical hospitality though. It reminds us that our mission as a church, to strive toward infinite love of the other, applies outside our church walls as surely as it does within. Radical hospitality can only be radical if it has an external focus. Radical hospitality is love for the stranger. It makes the new person primary over our comfort with the way things have always been done.

So here is one more Buddhist reference for the road too. A teacher of mine used to say, "On your first week here, someone put out a cushion for you to sit on. They didn't know it would be you that they welcomed, but they made space for you to be here. The only way you can repay that act of kindness and hospitality

to set a cushion out for someone else whom you have never met.” We may not put cushions out for people, but the spirit of radical hospitality is the same.

Those three interrelated concepts are the core of Unitarian Universalism: *covenant, the beloved community, and radical hospitality*. It is not lost on me that there are three of them, despite our rebellion against trinities! But that is our faith as I see it, and how I have preached it to you for seven years. May the hearing, the doing, and the living out of that good news be blessed by all the powers of holiness and goodness that surround us every day.

You know “you'd never know it but buddy, I'm a kind of poet
And I've had a lot of things to say
And when I'm gloomy, you always listened to me
Till it's all talked away

Well that's how it goes and I know your gettin' pretty anxious to
close

So, thanks for the cheer, I hope you didn't mind my bending your
ear

I could tell you a lot, but you've got to be true to your code

So, make it one for my baby and one more for the road

That long, long road"

Amen Blessed Be