

The Middle of Our Mission

A sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz

Sunday, March 5, 2022

Unity Church – Unitarian; Saint Paul, MN

Where did we come from? What are we? Where are we going? These essential questions are ones woven in and among and throughout our lives.

Where did we come from? What formed our bones – our personalities – our values? What are we? Are we human beings having a spiritual experience? Or spiritual beings discovering what it means to be human? And where are we going? On the one hand – we know we are all know our final destinations, but there are so many paths we can take; so many highways and byways; many detours, dangers, toils and snares. Discovering, discussing, articulating and responding to these questions is the purpose of religious community. It's likely one of the reasons why you are here today. Whether this is the first time you stepped into a church - or the several hundredth time – these are the questions which peel through our lives as surely as our Klingel bell calls us to gather. Where did we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

These are the questions that I have been asking as your interim senior minister. Today's sermon will respond to these questions from my vantage point as both an outsider to your church system; and intimately involved in the inner workings of the church, on a near daily basis for the past 6 months. I want to acknowledge right up front, that what you're about to hear is one story out of the many stories I've heard. It's the story that I am creating as I listen deeply and attentively to the stories YOU are telling. And it's my job to help interpret those stories--to seek a deeper understanding of what they might mean. I don't anticipate that we will come away from this sermon – or this interim time – with a single narrative about Unity's history and identity; but what I do expect, is to broaden and complexify the nuances of those stories – to go beyond what we call the good/bad binary; and to embrace the whole of Unity Church with both heart and mind as we move forward.

As a professional interim minister, I come into every church with five lenses. You've heard me talk about them before: I explore your history,

your identity, your leadership structure, your relationship to the denomination and help prepare you for your next settled ministry. I began this process last October, when I hosted a Wellspring Wednesday conversation about Interim Ministry. In that gathering, I asked those attending to write down three things that they hoped the interim would address. I looked for those suggestions that appeared more than once. Although all of the suggestions are worthy of deeper consideration, the ones that rose to the service the most were these: a review of your current worship services; (in fact, two people wondered if they could be less serious and formal and more joy-filled) and the second one, which received by far the most comments could be summarized this way: *“address the rift revealed at the congregational meeting in May; and develop a process for truth telling and reconciliation.”*

For those of you are may be brand new to Unity or not familiar with its most recent history, let me bring you up to speed. Between 2021 – Spring 2022, Unity Church launched a search for its new settled Senior Minister position, following the retirement of a twenty-one year co-ministry with the Revs. Rob and Janne Eller-Isaacs. In our system, known as congregational polity, it is the congregation as a whole that gets to vote on its called minister. A minister who is called enters a congregation with something like a tenured position in academia. A Search Team is nominated and affirmed and then they embark upon the process of preparing for, interviewing and selecting a candidate to present to the congregation for a vote.

Our current by-laws require a 75% affirmative vote; but most candidates will not accept a vote less than 90% affirmative. Our congregational vote for the candidate presented last spring came in at less than 75% - below the threshold for the congregation or the candidate to accept the call. The Congregational meeting at was three hours long and involved people speaking about why they were or were not going to vote for the candidate. Although people believe they were speaking their truth at the congregational meeting, some of the comments made were experienced by some as deeply hurtful and divisive. Members who are, or were, friends and even spouses, found themselves on either side of the vote. By the time I arrived in August, the feelings of shock,

disappointment, pain, betrayal, were all still there. For some, this was a crisis of faith. Some left the congregation, wondering how this could happen to an otherwise wonderful, loving, kind and compassionate congregation. Many more stayed – but some were on the fence; wondering “can I stay here? Is this still my beloved community?”

No one can answer that question except for you. But what I have been saying since I arrived here is that while Unity Church is a unique congregation in our faith tradition – you are not special. You are unique in so many ways – such as the creation of your Double Helix Model and its intertwining of spiritual practices with anti-racist, anti-oppressive work. Your governance system is also a form of institutional spiritual practice. The quality of your community and the overall health of your congregational life stands out for me in all my experiences serving eight congregations during my career. So I say this with great love and affection for you - you’re unique – but you’re not special.

You’re not special because you are not the first or the only congregation that has experienced conflict, disagreement, grief and loss. I know you know this – because you have weathered other conflicts before - but I would be negligent in my job as your interim if I didn’t help you to see the bigger picture – the one that I see – the one that will illuminate the path forward.

“What are we now, after the search ended without a call?” That was the question that was hanging in the air as we began a new year this past Fall. In response, the Board and I hosted a second conversation on November 5th; called “Forward Together: Next Steps.” I reminded the congregation of the five developmental tasks of interim ministry with an additional focus on healing the the hurt that was caused by the Congregational meeting and the subsequent inability to call a candidate. As a result of that gathering, the Board collected read, and collated comments from everyone who wanted to communicate your thoughts, cares and concerns to them both in-person and on-line. Again, I am highlighting the comments that appeared more than once: one person wrote: “*The conflict is still a mystery which I hope...to know more about...*” and another: “*I am still mystified about what*

happened...” Others were generally positive about the conversation we had in November, writing: “*I greatly appreciate the BOT learning what went wrong and being brave enough to face it, name it, and propose a plan to move on from it. I am happy to hear about important questions being asked and many working on creating a path forward. Good transparency .. It is not what happened but how you react to what happened that is most important...*”

That statement is true in our own lives as well, isn’t it? Life happens to all of us; we don’t have a choice about that. We do have a choice about how we react. Do we react in anger, assuming ill intent? Do we withdraw, hurt and alone, hoping someone will reach out to us? Do we barrel on forward, insisting on the rightness of our position? I suspect we do all of these things and more. But what’s different, and maybe unique, about how we move forward together from a traumatic experience within a religious and spiritual community is this:

Based on what we have learned here, and who we have met here, we have confidence that there is a way to respond from the place of spiritual practice.

Many years ago I heard a spiritual teacher tell me about how they framed their spiritual life – and it’s likely that you heard the same or similar from this pulpit in the past: A spiritual life consists of daily practice; weekly worship; monthly service; annual retreat; and life-time pilgrimage. And weaving in and amongst and beyond these five parts is an on-going commitment to decentering whiteness and working to create an anti-racist, anti-oppressive world. I must tell you that as I have done this deep dive into Unity’s history and identity; I see all six of these in your congregational life. Rev. Roy Phillips spoke and wrote about creating intentional spiritual communities; but he was less interested in the ways our commitment to social action and justice intersects with our spiritual lives. Rev.’s Rob and Janne Eller-Isaacs made spiritual practice part of their teachings, and I see the embodiment of in so many aspects of Unity’s life – from the intimacy of Chalice Circles to the ways in which you show up for worship and deeply appreciate the rites and rituals which make up our shared practice of worshipping together.

Many of our congregations talk about spirituality – although there are still some hesitant to use that language at all– but there are few that I’ve encountered that have as rich and as deep an understanding of what a community of spiritual practice in our faith tradition looks and feels like. It’s a disciplined practice of challenging our own self-centeredness and ego. It’s the practice of generosity – both in terms of financially giving to the church – and in offering hospitality to one another, to visitors and guests. It is offering weekly opportunities for practices: whether that is sitting in zazen; deep listening and reflection in Chalice Circles; teaching in Religious Education, or serving as a Coming of Age Mentor. Unity is by no means the only UU community or liberal church that offers all these kinds of opportunities. But it isn’t just the length of the list of programs and practices that you see on the church calendar that makes a community of spiritual practice. It is the quality of being present with and for one another that makes the difference. Unity Church has worked on this quality of being present to one another for a long time, across many ministries.

So, I expect that some of you will come away from this sermon today asking “if we’re such a spiritual community, why did the vote on May 22nd turn out the way it did? Not only with an inability to support calling a new minister, but with the surprise and hurt we felt by the different opinions and feelings that surrounded us afterwards. What could we have done differently?”

Here’s the thing that’s the hardest for confident, capable, and yes, mostly white and privileged, human beings to wrap our minds around. There are some things beyond our control. Despite watching every step we take, we still fall on the ice. Despite making plans far in advance, our flights are cancelled. Despite wearing a mask everywhere, we still get Covid. Despite all the energy and effort put forth, the perfect storm landed at Unity Church’s doorstep, and we – you and I – Rev. Karen and Rev. KP; Barbara Hubbard and the staff are still sorting through what was left behind in its wake.

Where did we come from? That’s one of the question from this morning’s round. As the new year got underway, on February 3-4, Rev. Karen Gustafson and I led two sessions about the

important milestone events in the history of this congregation and of your relationship to that history. Those who are brand new members were encouraged to participate as well – because you are now part of Unity’s history. A timeline was created – and those in attendance were asked to jot down memorable moments in your relationship to Unity Church. The timeline was filled with post-it notes, which Rev. Karen and I put into six categories: Worship, Religious Education & Faith Development; Spiritual Practice; Shared Ministry; Rites of Passage and Social Justice/Community Action. These post-it notes formed a tapestry of faithful witness to the power of religious community.

The timeline is on display outside the Center Room – but I had to take the post it notes down in order to document them. The stories those notes told were profound! Janne Eller-Isaacs sermons came up many times – particularly her Me Too Service and the weeping bowl; Rob’s sermons particularly around Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. And music – mentioned over and over again; the powerful ministry of music of Ruth Palmer and now Ahmed Andulzua and the ways in which music is a spiritual experience. I was surprised to discover how many comments there was about Rev. Gretchen Thompson’s ministry; whether her sermons or her ministry of presence and pastoral care – left a deep impression on members who knew her.

During the life review, we also looked for the stories that weren’t told. It’s understandable that many of the notes would be about the last 21 years of the Eller-Isaacs ministry; but I was surprised to notice that Rev. Roy Phillips, who served Unity Church for 28 years was only mentioned twice. One post it note said: “Roy dedicated my daughter in 1977.” The other wrote: *“What’s missing? Details and stories about Rev. Roy Phillips various forms of abuse of congregants, staff and board members. The extramarital affairs started as early as 1975. The really hurtful stuff is too hard to reveal.”*

The ending of Rev. Roy Phillips ministry was known to members who served on the Board at the time, but its likely that most members had not experienced that side of Roy’s behavior. Roy’s

extra marital affairs were suspected by a small group of leaders, but it wasn't until 2006, when he was invited back to preach at Unity church, that the depth of his misconduct was revealed. That event prompted some members of Unity Church to tell Revs. Rob and Janne firmly "No. We do not want him in our pulpit." Rob and Janne rescinded the offer, and then brought in a professional church consultant on Clergy Misconduct to address the wounds created by his behavior. What we know now about dealing with abuse in our own personal lives or misconduct in a congregation is that people and congregations can and do heal from it, but it takes time and work. And sometimes after the memory fades into the background it can be re-activated by stress. This congregation has had a fair amount of stress since 2020. This is one of the reasons why Rev. Karen Gustafson is offering a series of opportunities to tell stories about Unity Church, one of them happening after today's service, from noon to 2 pm in Robbins Parlor. on Wednesday, March 15 and 22, at 7:00 in the Gannet Room as part of our Wellspring Program. Some stories bear repeating and reexamination.

The purpose of the Congregational Life Review was to identify and name the intersections of events in the world, in Minnesota, in Saint Paul, in Unity Church and in YOUR life – all of this IS your life. Your history is filled with glorious successes and grave mistakes; of some spectacular ministries and some that were just "eh," great surging moments of solidarity and times of individuals feeling isolated and uncertain about the church. Post it note after post it note of your children being dedicated, as we did earlier this morning, in this ancient ritual of welcome. Perhaps the most poignant, touching stories are the ones where brokenness was healed and hope was found. *End of marriage, being held here. Remarried here to a new partner. I was broken, then I was blessed. Tolling of the bells reminded me of the fragility of life. Leon Dunkley reminding us "You are already loved." And, in 1981 – Quit smoking, joined church! Never looked back.*

And these notes don't even count the many experiences of bearing witness to injustice; whether riding the bus to the Women's March in Washington DC, or the Love Bus to marry same sex couples; or the Selma 70; The faith float on Rondo

Days Parade or the many trips to New Orleans after Katrina or the partnerships created by pilgrimages to Transylvania, to India to Boliva. The list goes on and on. This is the way we build a life – a love and a community of faith that withstands the hard times. It is one of the ways we build capacity to enlarge our faithful response to an often chaotic world.

Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? These past six months I've explored your history to understand what formed your bones. I've looked at your identity, not through a single lens, but more like a phoropter – which is the machine the optometrist uses while checking your eyes. "Is it clearer now? Or now? Is this better? Or worse?" Sometimes it's hard to know which is better, so you make an educated guess. Sometimes the decision is so close that it doesn't really matter. What does matter is how you interpret your mission and the ministry that leads you towards. That's why I used Unity's current ENDS statement; or values in action statements as this morning's responsive reading. These are the promises we make to ourselves – to one another and to the Holy; however we interpret the Holy. They point to the heart of all that we do – we strive to live lives of meaning and purpose through acts of integrity, service and joy. In the middle of Unity Church's missional values – we find "service". "Service" is not only this month's theme, but it is the binding agent of this and all sacred communities. This means that we serve one another when we engage in holy conversations; when we don't avoid hard truths, but rather embrace them with curiosity not condemnation.

Where are we going? Unity Church is going into the Search Process this year and I can imagine that that decision may cause some anxiety. What if happens again? What if we don't get somebody? What if we have conflict again? Look, you and I both know we can't predict the future. We can only be faithful to one another in the process. Instead of holding tight – we breathe – we pray – we trust – we hope – and we work to hold the Middle of Our Mission close at hand and in our hearts.

The poet Naomi Shihab Nye spells out the middle of our mission very clearly when she reminds us of what it takes to live in this world. She reminds us that we should be wearing jackets

that say Fragile and Handle with Care, because we so often forget we are all sensitive cargo. We must draw close enough to one another to hear each other's breathing. We must know that if you are too weary to carry your child, I will. We will. Because we are not going to be able to live in this world if we're not willing to do what that man is doing for the boy; what we are willing to do with and for one another. Service – even when our arms and hearts ache. Service – knowing that the rain will fall and we will get wet and we must cross a dangerous road – knowing that the road will only be wide and the rain will never stop falling.

Unity Church – I believe in you. I believe in your ability to launch another search process. I believe in your capacity to handle conflict constructively, grounded in your spiritual practice. I believe in your ability to deepen as faith partners in this journey which has lasted now over 150 years. I believe this because I also believe we have no choice but to love one another and serve one another---because we are all just walking each other home. May it be so.