

Journey in Faith
Rev. Tracy Sprowls
March 20, 2022

Hurrah, we have returned to our sanctuary. I am so glad to be with you here in this cherished sanctuary this morning and on zoom. We are back and we pause to renew, rejoice, reconnect, and reach out. It is so great to see you! As we return, we find ourselves in this strange time between what was before the pandemic and what might be, a future fairly unknown.

Only one thing can be of assurance now and that is to keep moving forward, to keep moving forward together because the only thing that kept this congregation going through these last two years of Pandemic hardship was you. You kept us going and you kept us together even when we were apart, even when the last minister left and a new, albeit temporary one, came in. You held this congregation together through your energy, your effort, your showing up on zoom and in even more ways for each other that only you know about. You kept this community going through your hopes and dreams and love and maybe even a few prayers. You refused to give up even with obstacles, even when there was not agreement. You stayed in community in transition and loss, in isolation and loneliness, in tiredness and frustration. You trusted in each other and in each other's love and care. You kept this community going.

We live in a liminal time, this space between what was and what will be. And we also live in an uncertain time, although, in truth, each generation can acknowledge a level of uncertainty or crisis in their own lifetimes. Indeed, each decade in our American history has brought uncertainty in one way or another. And beyond this country, times of crisis, ambiguity, and uncertainty reach back even further into history.

But today seems different, doesn't it? In part, it is because we just lived through a two-year pandemic that changed everything to what extent we do not yet even know or can imagine. In part it is because we are watching a war that is far beyond unjust, where a theater used to shelter women and children was intentionally bombed not once but twice and where even people waiting in a bread line were shot at by Russian soldiers. It is the utter disregard for human life and human rights. It is the callous disregard for the Ukrainian people and for the truth. It is just not that one country has invaded another, it is the threat of authoritarianism everywhere, including here. And, it definitely has something to do with the fact that today we are witness, like no other generation has been, to a global environmental crisis that is and will continue to devastate life on this planet.

In response to the tragic events of 9/11 21 years ago, Professor Sharon Thornton of Andover Newton, suggested that we Americans found ourselves "separated from everything we have known and taken for granted." She called this separation a kind of exile similar to that which the Hebrew people experienced after the destruction of the temple. In 587 BCE, the Babylonian king invaded the country, destroyed the temple and removed the Hebrew people from their homeland to Babylonia where they lived for

generations. The Hebrew people had to learn a new way of life in the uncertainty of their exile. She suggested that the social dislocation that many of us felt after 9/11 was similar in depth, intensity, massiveness and urgency as that of the exiled Hebrew people.

Before continuing, let's just acknowledge that there are those in our country who have always felt exiled by this country because of the color of their skin or their immigration status. Or because their ancestors were from here and the land was torn away from them. Or by their poverty or their mental illness or disability. At the same time, we know that just as the events of 9/11 separated us from everything we have known and taken for granted and thus placed us in a certain kind of exile, the pandemic, the rise of authoritarianism and the attack on democracy and the ever present environmental degradation has many of us feeling exiled, uncertain, and anxious. The social dislocation many of us find ourselves in is indeed a profound exile that has our souls lamenting as if on the shores of Babylon.

If we are in a kind of exile, then we must dry our tears and begin the work of looking at the world in a new way. Our previous way of living and being no longer suffices. Exile invites us to examine new options, new ideas, new perspectives. It asks of us to develop new habits of the heart, a phrase coined by Alexis de Tocqueville. Like the Hebrew exiles, we must learn to develop a kind of community that draws us back into a deeply ingrained understanding of who we are in this world as it, at the same time, prepares us for the journey into the unknown.

At its most basic, community is a geographical place where people gather. But on a deeper and quite bigger level, community is a feeling, a "touch" of others in our lives. Starhawk, the activist, author and pagan priestess, elaborates community is the place where a circle of hands will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter, voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power. Community means strength to do the work that needs to be done. Arms to hold us when we falter. A circle of healing. A circle of friends. Someplace where we can be free.

Rev. Kimberley Debus says of community, at its best, religious community is a shelter from the storm. It is a space set apart where we can release our *weltschmerz* (world weariness) and breathe into the present moment. And yet it isn't a place that simply holds the holy for us; rather, it helps us integrate our faith into the rhythm of our daily lives. It makes space for restoring loving and intimate connections with each other. It is the small rituals and gestures we undertake with each other in this sacred space that give everyday life its value and meaning, that comfort us, make us feel at home, rooted and generous. It is the safe space for learning and discussion that prepares us lovingly for the hard work of justice and compassion ahead. It is the ever-present invitation to stop, be still, and give thanks.

Community does not simply happen. It takes an intentional desire to actually be a community. Not unlike a personal relationship, community requires attention, participation, flexibility and commitment. Community, like a personal relationship,

takes a certain devotion to the creating of something bigger and better out of what at first might have been a thin connection, an attraction that simply seemed right.

Community must be expanded to embrace everyone. Not just those we are comfortable with, not just those who look, act, or think like us. When the Hindu sage Ramana Maharishi was asked “How are we to treat others?” he responded, “there are no others.” So, community helps us know and practice that all are welcome here.

Community also helps with give and take. It helps us hold the tension of different ideas and practices. It gives us space to work through these things and come out on the other side a bit stronger. Community develops dependability and responsibility. Friendship and fellowship. High expectations and courage. Forgiveness and resiliency. Bishop Tutu says, “There is no future without forgiveness.” Without forgiveness our future is dominated by our past and a healthy, vital community cannot survive living in the past.

Community also means supporting this congregation financially. Rev. Karen G. Johnston, the minister in East Brunswick, New Jersey suggests pledging at the needful level. What is the needful?

The needful requires generosity that does not fit neatly into our secular economic system, with its demand of knowing what we are getting when we pay for a thing.

The needful relieves you of some of the dollars in your bank account or your wallet yet does not make you poorer. In fact, it makes you wealthier.

The needful is not pledging just what you can, but what you can PLUS a little more ~ because the needful isn't comfortable.

Pledging at the needful level considers that there are some members who cannot afford to pledge as much as others, and that collectively, we carry each other in many ways: sometimes we are the one who carries, sometimes we are the one carried.

Pledging at the needful level isn't based on whether you like the minister or don't; whether you like the sermon or not; whether you like the music or not.

Pledging at the needful level never assesses how much to give based on what you get, as if congregational life were a fee-for-service situation or gig economy thing. Though, it is true, that the more you put into shared congregational life, the more you get out of it.

On a related note, if you don't show up for this place, it will, eventually, stop showing up for you. It is a circle of connection and if we want this place here for future generations we need to keep showing up now- physically, financially, in good and bad times.

If the pandemic showed us anything, it showed us that we indeed are stronger together.

Together, even in an exiled state, we need to know deep in our souls that exile does not equal powerlessness. In uncertain times our strength is in our connection, in our community. As a community we can engage the world and be a place where peace and justice are nurtured. We can engage the world in a community of support and a

community of hope. We can be the place where the broken can find healing and where all are empowered to do that healing.

(pause)

We find ourselves in liminal time- we cannot go back to the way it was and before us lies a path untraveled and unclear. We are exiles separated from all we have known and taken for granted. And yet, and yet, we find ourselves on this journey together. We move forward from a place of stability that you and the other ancestors built. We are guided by the light each of us carries and that guides our way. We are sustained and maintained by your resources, your commitment, and your love.

So let us prepare for this journey in faith together. It is a journey in faith because we know not what lies ahead, except, except this community. In front us is a new world emerging, with new challenges, and new possibilities. It is an anxious time but one thing I know, you got this community this far and you will bring it into this unknown future, you will carry UUFCC through this next thing and build for today and for the coming generations.

Let us not be dissuaded by those who say religion is dead or it does not matter or that there is only one true religion. What we believe does matter. How we live in the world does matter. How we act to each does matter. That this place is here matters. It matters profoundly.

The liberal church has a role in today's world. The liberal church has a mission of justice-making that is necessary and essential today. In the words of Rev. Bill Schulz, former President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, our mission in the world is no less than "to teach the fragile art of hospitality; to revere both the critical mind and the generous heart; to prove that diversity need not mean divisiveness; and to witness to all that we must hold the whole world in our hands."

And so, journey forward, in faith and confidence, in unity and love. Amen.