

SERMON - Yours Mine Ours

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This reading is a vision of what our life as a religious community can be. It is a vision of who we are at our best. It is the vision of a religious community, which belongs to all of us where everyone has a place, where everyone is valued. It is the vision of a religious community who knows that their religion does not stop operating when they walk out the doors of their building.

What seems like many years ago when I was still a seminary student, I was a candidate for an internship with a small and, hoping to grow, fellowship. I was full of excitement and anticipation at the prospect of, at last, putting the theories learned in seminary into practice with a live congregation. As part of the interview process, I was invited to lead a Sunday service. I spoke on "Why I Am a Unitarian Universalist." I thought it was a pretty good sermon.

After the service, there was opportunity for the congregation to ask me questions. One man said, "You know, I've been a Unitarian Universalist for many years. I've worked at all kinds of things trying to create change and trying to make things better. But I have to say that I am very discouraged. Things seem to be getting worse and worse, not better and better. I am beginning to feel like "what's the use?" I might as well just take care of myself and forget about everybody else. What's your solution?"

All my theory and all my learning flew out the window. Here I was confronted with real human pain, a real human being's disillusionment about his ability to be of use in the transformation of society.

I knew at that moment that ministry is indeed not for the "faint hearted" and I knew that I did not hold the solution to the problem. This was an early inkling that the work of ministry is not to provide answers, but to draw out authentic responses.

I answered the man's question. I stumbled a bit, I am not exactly sure what I said, but it must have been adequate. Just as I was drawing a breath of relief of getting through a tough situation, I got another question. "What is the purpose of the church?" An even tougher question! Again, I must have said something worthwhile because they invited me to stay.

What an experience! As an aspiring minister, I was faced with two of the toughest questions on my very first day, but those questions stayed with me. I have continued to wrestle with them. And I realize today that those two questions are intertwined. How is it that we hope to transform the world and what is the purpose of the religious community?

Today I am at a point where each of those questions answers the other. I agree with John Beurhens when he says that the work of the church is the transformation of

society. We are not together for the sole purpose of making ourselves feel better. We are here to learn how to live well in the world, to cause transformation by our very being, by carrying the voice for justice into our daily lives.

How do we gain the strength, courage, humor, patience, and love to be agents of transformation? By developing healthy religious communities. Here in this religious community we can enter a safe place where our fears and doubts can be acknowledged. In this religious community, we can learn, in the words of Canadian philosopher and theologian Bernard Lonergan, to "take possession of our full intellectual, moral and spiritual capacities."

He suggests that through our responses to a series of four questions we can become more fully intentional in our living:

1. What attracts my attention, concern and wonder?
2. How can I make sense of my experience?
3. What decisions of meaning and value do I make?
4. What commitments to act responsibly will guide and shape my life?

Our religious community provides us with a place, a structure, experiences, and relationships that help us to reflect on questions like these. In religious community, we can be permitted to ask questions, make mistakes, reveal our vulnerability, develop our skills, share our talents, and grow. Healthy religious communities are essential in the work of transformation. The world needs us. It is our duty and our privilege to share our community and make it a truly welcoming place for those who seek wholeness and personal transformation.

Those who stand outside of this church see it as yours. They may be interested in what happens here, intrigued by the ideas we generate, drawn by the promise of acceptance and freedom. But they cannot be a part of what you have unless you invite them in.

Each of us in our own way may have a sense of ownership about this church. It is mine because I belong here. It is mine because I have responsibility here. It is mine because I am supported here. It is mine because I helped it grow and prosper.

It is mine because it has shaped my life. It is mine because I attend regularly and support it financially. Many of us can truly say, "This church is mine." At the same time, we must say that it could not have become mine if others had not been willing to share. It cannot be mine unless it is truly ours.

There are so many people who need the sense of belonging, so many who need to be welcomed. Today we welcome 19 new members into this religious community. With your warmth and welcoming invitation, you have helped them move from yours to mine. You have given them a place to grow. Together we share the work of transformation, and all of us can say this church is ours.