

Who Are We (and Why Are We Here)?
Lay Sunday Homily by Li Yu
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All Souls Church, New York City

The title of my homily today consists of two questions — who are we, and why are we here? I thought this offers more value than the two alternatives I was considering — *Who's on first* and *Dude, where is my car* — since those contain only one question each.

Now, all joking aside, here at All Souls we rightfully pride ourselves in the diversity of our backgrounds and the variety of our beliefs. This is not new — one of our early members, the novelist Catherine Sedgwick, described All Souls in the 1830s as a place where one can find:

“strangers from inland and outland, English radicals and daughters of Erin, Germans and Hollanders, philosophic gentiles and unbelieving Jews.”

And, just so that we don't miss the point, Ms. Sedgwick goes on to note that “[in] our association, there is at least one of every sort.”

We also celebrate the fact that, despite these differences, we all discovered Unitarian Universalism and chose it as our faith. *But* my thesis today is that it is not enough just to focus on our journeys to becoming UUs. Beyond that, we also need to think seriously, and honestly, about what it means to be part of this community and what it means to live up to the principles we espouse as UUs.

I believe asking these two questions — and especially asking them in the plural, rather than the singular, form, that is, asking who are *we*, instead of who *am I*; and why are *we* here, instead of why *am I* here — will help us move past a narrow focus on our paths toward Unitarian Universalism.

Of course, I don't mean how we came to be UUs is not important. The classic UU spiritual journey, which we hear often in the opening words on Sunday mornings, is a compelling narrative. It can be transformative to recognize that we don't have to live by some set of pre-ordained and often arbitrary rules prescribed by some religious authority, by or given community, or perhaps even by our own family. It is powerful to realize that the point of life, to borrow a phrase from Forrest Church, is to be who you are, and not who others want you to be.

But what happens after we make that choice? Is it like in the fairy tales — and then all the UUs lived happily ever after ... *the end*? We know it is not that simple. After all, the book of *Exodus* does not stop right when Moses leads the Israelites out of Egypt. Instead, there were still years of wandering in the desert; and, as Mel Brooks fans know, Moses had to go up Mount Sinai to receive three clay tablets from God with the 15 commandments written on them.

So too with us, having decided to be part of this religious community, we have to figure out who we are as a community, including how we relate to one another here at All Souls. In more concrete terms, I believe we need to ask ourselves questions like:

- *How well do we actually know each other in this community?*
- *Do we consistently make the effort to care for each other in times of distress?*

- *How well do we, as a community, provide spiritual and moral education to our children and youth so that they too will be able to lead lives that honor our values and principles?*

If we are honest with ourselves, we may see there is room for improvement in our response to one or more of these questions.

Similarly, by asking ourselves why we were here at All Souls, we are required to think seriously, and honestly, about what we mean when we say we subscribe to principles that call on us to respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person and ask us to practice justice, equity and compassion. At this moment, when it feels like so much is at stake in the world, we need to challenge ourselves on issues of responsibility, empathy, and moral courage.

Of course, it is not simple to figure out who we are or why we are here, and there probably isn't a single right answer to either question. But I believe confronting these questions is critical because, unless we do so, we cannot find coherence as a community. That, in turn, will limit what we can accomplish either within these walls or beyond our doors.

As I was preparing this homily, I kept on thinking about Forrest's famous three-part mantra: *to want what you have, to do what you can, and to be who you are*. When I first heard that, it sounded like a comforting message about knowing one's limitations, a reminder to not try to overreach.

Yet, the more I think about it, the more I hear this mantra as an injunction against complacency. "Be who you are" demands that we not shrink from seeing ourselves in an honest light, and "do what you can" calls on us not to strive for less than what we are capable of.

It is in this spirit that I submit that we should be asking ourselves, who are we and why are we here? I hope that wrestling with these questions will help us become a stronger community as well as a more effective instrument for justice, equity and compassion in the world.

To paraphrase my good friend and our beloved former assistant minister, the Rev. Cheryl M. Walker, the best proof we can offer for the wisdom and power of our UU principles is not by how often or how loudly we talk about them. Instead, it is by showing the world how, despite being a community of diverse opinions and diverse backgrounds, we are able to worship together, work together, and change the world together. I hope that we will continue to challenge ourselves so that we will try to fulfill that possibility.

Amen, and blessed be.