

NOT BY BREAD ALONE
Sermon by Audette Fulbright
Sunday, November 25, 2018
All Souls Unitarian Church, NYC

The Arabs used to say,
When a stranger appears at your door,
feed him for three days
before asking who he is,
where he's come from,
where he's headed.
That way, he'll have strength enough
to answer.
Or, by then you'll be such good friends
you don't care.
Let's go back to that.
Rice? Pine nuts?
Here, take the red brocade pillow.
My child will serve water
to your horse.
No, I was not busy when you came!
I was not preparing to be busy.
That's the armor everyone put on
at the end of the century
to pretend they had a purpose
in the world.
I refuse to be claimed.
Your plate is waiting.
We will snip fresh mint
into your tea.

Naomi Shihab Nye

There are only two true purposes for having a church: sanctuary & mission. Mission is the work we do outside these doors - the living out of our values and principles in such a way as to change the world. Earlier this month, some of you heard me preach about sanctuary: the saving grace-filled community we create together within these walls, the living out of our covenant in relationship with one another and with the holy. Our lives are fulfilled, as Jesus said, not by bread alone.

Sanctuary. "A place of refuge or safety." In a church, it is more than that. It is a place to go to find connection, to explore meaning, to be restored to better live the rest of the week in an often-difficult and confusing world. But coming into a church the first time is a daunting task for most of us. Will we be welcomed? Will we be seen? Will we be invited to find our place without being overwhelmed or ignored? **Is** there a place for us?

There's a familiar metric in church growth circles: if, on a Sunday morning, your pews or seats are more than 80% full, church growth will slow or stop. Newcomers will emotionally feel there

is no room for them, and longtime members will feel as though their presence is not essential, and so are more likely to become regular skippers, rather than regular attenders.

It comes back to a simple concept: there must always be an empty chair. A place at the table. A cup set aside for the one for whom we are waiting.

My original title for this service was “Elijah’s Cup.” Elijah was one of the most fiery of the old testament prophets - literally fiery; he was said to have brought down fire from heaven to make a point. I was thinking of the Jewish tradition of setting out Elijah’s cup at the Seder table. Each Passover, a place is set for Elijah, and his cup is poured, his chair left empty. Then the observant go and open the door to invite Elijah in, and the children rush to the table to watch and see if the wine ripples in Elijah’s cup, confirming his presence among them.

An empty chair. A full cup, ready and waiting. These are the metaphors that should always shape the Beloved Community. In our UU tradition, at Thanksgiving we often begin a service project called “A Guest At Your Table” a service project our All Souls children and families are doing right now. Guest at Your Table (GAYT) is UUSC’s annual intergenerational program to raise support for and awareness about key human rights issues. Since UUSC works in over 25 countries, with over 75 grassroots partners, there are thousands of individuals involved in and who benefit from the work that our members make possible. The program is an opportunity to celebrate grassroots partnership, support human rights, and learn about just four of these individuals – the “guests” in Guest at Your Table.

The 2018-2019 Theme is Justice Across Borders, From the Northern Triangle of Central America, to deserts of Mexico and Arizona, to detention centers in the United States, the road away from danger is paved with injustices. Partnering with grassroots allies along the Central American migration trail, UUSC addresses root causes, supports migrants in transit, and protects the right to seek asylum. In this spirit, in this work, we are invited to remember all the people all over the world who are in need. We include them in spirit and practice by making a metaphorical place for them at our tables, and contributing our daily change or bills or checks to support this missional focus - our work in the world. That’s who we UUs are: our orthodoxy is really always orthopraxy. We don’t sit around “believing” things together - we instead act together.

But let us not be fooled. The “doing” we want to lift us this morning is really cultivating a very intentional state of being as a community: a welcoming community. It is the work of creating sanctuary not just for friends and those we know, but the conscious work of making space and offering welcome each and every week to the one we do not know. It is to hold a place open at the table, to pour the glass and open the door, in anticipation that someone will come in.

If ministry and church is your professional life or you are deeply moved by congregational work as a lay leader, by now you must be deeply aware of the angst and white noise of anxiety that exists out there about churches: generally speaking, church membership is on the decline and increasing numbers of people call themselves “spiritual but not religious.” In a way, that’s good news for us as UUs. What people usually mean when they mouth this Pabulum is that they have faith in something, and that that is important to them. They believe in the value of spiritual practice or discipline, but they think of church as a place that wants to assume authority over their personal experience and understanding, and then tell them what to do, believe, and how to act. They expect a place where their reason and intellect may not be welcomed - a place where they will be judged. As Unitarian Universalist congregations, we offer something different - a place to explore and both find and create meaning in community. A place not to be told what to

believe, but to be encouraged in that exploration. A place to practice relationship in covenant but where diverse viewpoints are essential, not anathema.

We have two basic works as a congregation: to live our mission in the world, and to create sanctuary here within our walls. Part of both is to set the welcome table each and every time we are together. We plan for the guest at our table. We set out Elijah's cup, anticipating the wisdom that will arrive with the newcomer who seeks to drink from it. There is praxis with this - work that we must do. Elijah's cup does not pour itself. The welcome table may be set only for friends. The work of a place at the table is that each and every time we gather, we are looking for someone new to welcome. We are reaching out to invite guests. We are talking to someone we do not know well, instead of sitting comfortably always and only with our good friends. We invoke a spirit of curiosity and wonder in the face of new people and new ideas. We are brave and bold in living our message of beloved community and welcome when we are out in the world. This is the bread of salvation. It is our true north.

Elijah's cup represents two things: the welcome of the stranger, but also the anticipation of the wisdom that will arrive with them. This, too, is why we gather, why we set a place for the guest. Because we recognize that our own growth and discovery of deeper meaning will be blessed by new insight. I want to close with another story - this one called the "Wisdom Tree," about why we want religious communities at all in the first place. We do not survive by bread alone. We need one another. We need a place to gather, to deepen our spiritual practice, and to make connections to the holy.

I just want to underscore again the value of the empty chair, the place for the guest at our table, the blessing of Elijah's cup, poured out and waiting...there are so many who need us, and so many whom we need. Let us be waiting with our whole heart and soul for the next one, and the next one, and the next one. (Story: "The Wisdom Tree," by Meg Barnhouse -- *The Return of Radio-Free Bubba*, pg. 102. Hub City Writer's Project, 2005.)

A Litany of Welcome and Remembrance -- invitation to speak into the silence the names of all we hope may join us, and all we want to remember with gratitude & thanksgiving.