

“Why Church?”

Sermon by Betty Jeanne Rueters-Ward

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All Souls Church, New York City

Good morning! It is a joy to worship with you again. Let me start by thanking the many people who make today's service, and all our services possible: our ministers and worship associates, our musicians and music staff, our greeters and ushers and Welcome Coordinator, our incredible facilities team, and many more.

Now, before I go further and share some of my experience, I invite all of you to reflect for a moment on yours. Take just a minute to think about whatever it is that brought you here today, or whatever it is that brings you to church in general...

As Carol mentioned, my name is Betty Jeanne, and I have had the honor of serving All Souls these last two years as you searched for your next minister. I came here intrigued by the opportunity to help lead a large, dynamic, complex and historic Manhattan church and community center through a major organizational transition.

As I hoped, it was a fascinating opportunity to learn, serve, and grow as a leader during this vital time in the congregation and in the wider world. Together, we have clarified All Souls' values and vision, evaluated and innovated some of our many programs, built new kinds of partnerships explored new possibilities for what this community could be, and prepared ourselves for the congregation's next chapter.

In the process, I've experienced you as a caring, talented, hard-working community of volunteer and staff leaders and members at large, together living out a powerful mission. Thank you for your own role, whatever it may be, in making this wonderful community what it is. I am proud and grateful to have gotten to minister with you.

And now you are days away from welcoming your new Associate Minister, Audette Fulbright. I am so excited for you and she to partner together. As I look back on my time here, and as you all move into your next stage as a community, I wish you all the best. I look forward to seeing how you will live out your values and principles as a spiritual community. My charge to you, my hope for you, is that you will *lean in*.

Lean into the changes and challenges you will inevitably face. Lean into letting go of some ways of being and doing things, so that other ways can thrive. Lean into adapting to new needs and opportunities. Lean into leadership, and lean into followership: both will be required of you as a place of faith, of values, of mission, and of spirit, in this time in history. Now and in the future,

congregations will be called on in new ways to make an impact within and beyond their walls. Please, lean into the task. And lean into our sacred practices, music, and texts to nourish and sustain you along the way. You have so many resources and opportunities here, to transform yourselves and transform the world. Lean into them.

I want you to know something else I am thinking as I conclude my work at All Souls: that I will have to answer for my time here. Or rather, I will have to answer for my religiosity more broadly: my lifetime of involvement in and deep devotion to spiritual communities.

I have had to do so many times already in a wide range of situations. Like my move to New York City seven years ago. During my first weeks at my new job, I spent all my free time responding to listings for available rooms in apartments. As a prospective tenant, I had conversations with New Yorkers of many walks of life. Eventually, the conversation would shift from apartment amenities and roommate preferences to what I came to consider an elephant in the room: what I did for a living.

At the time, I was leading programs at another large congregation and teaching at a seminary. But I sometimes longed for a simpler, less-loaded job title - something like “librarian”, “graphic designer”, or “veterinarian”. There was something about words like “church” and “ministry” in your job description that could bring certain conversations, like these, to an unexpected standstill, or at least a moment of silent anticipation, as I wondered how these prospective roommates might respond.

People have a wide variety of assumptions and questions about what it meant to be religious. Unfortunately, these roommate interviews left little time to go deeper, and I rarely, if ever, got to explain myself.

I no longer face this particular conversational quandary with prospective roommates – more often, I’m translating my work with religious institutions to secular colleagues and employers or to curious friends and family who wonder about my profession. To them, I lift up organizational experiences that transcend religious affiliation – things that happen in many corners of society.

You see, I came to All Souls with the same calling I bring to all my work, whether in religious or secular settings. I feel called to devote myself to social change; I consider that a direct extension of the faith I was raised in. Since being birthed as a community organizer and leader in the church of my youth, I have had the opportunity to build the capacity of organizations to live out their values, develop effective, grounded and sustainable leaders of all ages, and activate communities in pursuit of the common good – from building localized groups, to making a national and/or international impact on a range of causes.

The tools I call on, for example working at All Souls, range from coaching and counseling to teaching and preaching, to collaborating on organizational strategy, vision, and change. In multiple ways, this is the work of transformation: enabling powerful and lasting change in individuals, organizations and communities.

So, while I can more or less explain my religiosity as a professional endeavor, I feel less certain about how to account for it on a personal level, particularly in a new role I now hold. As some of you know, this year I became a parent.

In my last sermon in October, I reflected on what it meant to be alive in such a time as this – and to be an expecting a child. I felt acutely aware that I would have to answer to the next generation for my actions and inactions. What values did I live out in my life, and how? Was I positively engaged in community, contributing to the common good? Did I speak up and take action against injustice? What was my vision for a better world, and how did I manifest it?

As I stated then, throughout my life I have remained steadfast in one belief, one value, one commitment in particular: the power of spiritual community to guide us through this broken world and help us build one that is more compassionate, sustainable, and just.

I know I will have to answer to my daughter for that belief, for my religiosity. I don't know yet how to do so – especially as her vocabulary is still in its earliest stages. But as she learns to describe and understand the world around her, she will, I hope, already have positive and meaningful experiences at church. For example, when I tell her of her birth, I may tell her all the ways our family was held and loved by spiritual communities in the process.

Some of these “church folk” were people I already knew. The ministers who counseled my husband and I through this major transition in our lives, who with their congregants prayed for and assisted us during medical challenges and uncertainty. The gospel choir with whom I regularly experienced God – the divine – through music, as the being growing in my womb danced to the rhythm of our repertoire. The congregants who took up a generous collection to help with diapers and other baby expenses.

Some of these “church folk” I had never even spoken to before, which was a humbling experience. There was the “Compassionate Cooks” group that delivered fresh, hot homemade dishes to us on my daughter's first days at home. There were the gathered parishioners who, during her baptism, pledged to be part of the wider community supporting her as she grew.

Even before she was born, churches loved our daughter into being.

When she is older, I may tell my daughter how church communities also supported our family through a tragedy several years before her birth. Amid my shock and grief at the time, wondering how my loved ones and I would get through this, my first instinct was to reach out to a minister. From pastoral counseling, to prayer, to memorial service planning, to the spiritual companionship of yet another choir, my family was held and cared for by churches – both people we knew well and people we didn't, but whom we were bonded to in a sacred, collective purpose.

During my life, I have learned and been reminded of this fundamental truth: No matter what we are facing, what we are struggling with in life, there is at least one other person who can relate to us, at least one other person who can support us through it. I hope my daughter will come to know this truth – and I imagine she might learn it, as I did, from spiritual community.

My husband and I were recently discussing our views on religion and parenting. Though his and my religious upbringings had their differences, we were both raised in families where church played an important role, and we both want our growing family to have a religious home for various reasons.

In my own words, I want my daughter to have a place that welcomes and affirms her for who she is and who she is becoming. An interdependent, multigenerational community where she will feel at home. Where she will learn to think freely and responsibly, to exchange ideas and engage in conflicts constructively, serve others lovingly, believe in her gifts and use them to serve the common good. A place she will have teachers, mentors, role models and friends at every age and stage of life. A laboratory for her to test her values, develop as a leader, and engage her curiosity. A sacred space that will hold her in the transformation and the turbulence, the fierceness and fragility of growing up.

I have high hopes, as you can tell, for what religion, what spiritual communities, what church might have to offer my child. I know it is possible – all this, and even more.

At some point, I may share with my daughter some of my favorite Unitarian Universalist liturgy to explain my thoughts on religion, on church. I may share this reading from our hymnal, *The Task of the Religious Community* by Mark Morrison-Reed.

“The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice.

“It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow

to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.”

Or I may share the words of some favorite hymns from childhood that describe the purposes of spiritual community. We don't have time to sing them now, but here – slightly rearranged – are the words of “Here We Have Gathered”.

“We gather here, side by side; a circle of kinship. Come, step inside. May all who seek here find a kindly word. May all who speak here feel they have been heard.

“We gather here, called to celebrate days of our lifetime; matters small and great. We of all ages, infants and sages, share what we can.

“Life has its battles, sorrows and regret. But in the shadows, let us not forget we who now gather know each other's pain. Kindness can heal us; as we give, we gain. We sing now in friendship this, our hearts' own song.”

And here, words from another hymn, “For All That Is Our Life”.

“For needs which others serve, for services we give, for work and its rewards, for hours of rest and love, for sorrow we must bear, for failures, pain and loss, for each new thing we learn, for fearful hours that pass, we come with praise and thanks: all this is our life. All life is a gift which we are called to use to build the common good and make our own days glad.”

I invite you, now, to connect again with your own journeys, your own words to describe one thing I know we here all have in common: right now, right here, we all are participating in a spiritual community. There are many different things that brought us here today, and in times before. One of my favorite experiences at All Souls has been hearing your stories of why you came here for the first time – or, in some cases, what brought you back to church for the first time in a long time...

You might be looking for a place with room for your family's diverse beliefs and identities – or just your own.

You might find yourself here during a major upheaval in your life – a diagnosis, a death or a divorce – looking for solace and comfort.

You might be in search of a community united by covenant rather than creed, a network of mutuality with whom to exchange ideas and friendship.

You might be feeling the deep divide of our current political climate, yearning for someplace to constructively explore different perspectives, clarify our deepest values, and strive to embody them in our everyday actions and behaviors.

You might be longing to re-experience some aspect of your own religious upbringing – or, something very different from it.

Or you might have noticed something missing from your personal and professional life – you're not sure what exactly, but you hope you might find it here.

Whatever brought you here – the first time, and each time since – I invite you to notice, cherish, and nourish that unique call of your spirit. Whatever the reason you came to church, however you understand and relate to religion, I invite you to lean in. This community is sacred because of what you bring to it: your hopes and your dreams, your wholeness and your brokenness. May it continue to be so, for generations to come.

Amen.