

## ON A MISSION

A homily by Galen Guengerich  
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City  
February 7, 2016

For more than 40 years, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders has been a man on a mission. Iowa's Democratic caucus-goers — overwhelmingly white and liberal — proved fertile soil for Sanders' message, which can be distilled to a single word: fairness. As Sanders himself put it on Monday night, "It is not fair when the top 1/10 of 1% today owns almost as much wealth as the bottom 90%. It is not fair when the 20 wealthiest people in this country own more wealth than the bottom half of America."

On Friday, Nicholas Kristof recalled an interview he had conducted with Sanders in 1981, shortly after Sanders — even then a self-identified socialist — had been elected mayor of Burlington, Vermont. In his swearing-in speech, Kristof reports, Sanders declared: "The rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer and the millions of families in the middle are gradually sliding out of the middle class and into poverty."

The Cook Political Report has calculated that Sanders would have needed at least 70% of the vote in Iowa in order to pose a realistic threat to Senator Hillary Clinton, given that Iowa's demographics are skewed more heavily in Sanders' favor than any other state besides New Hampshire and Vermont. Even so, Sanders has already accomplished a significant part of his lifelong mission: he has helped badger our nation into having a serious conversation about inequality.

Kentucky Senator Rand Paul, who withdrew from the Republican race after winning only 4.5% of the vote in Iowa, has long mirrored the clarity of Sanders' commitment. For Paul, too, the message has been about an enduring mission. The famously-libertarian son of a famously-libertarian father, Paul landed on the cover of TIME magazine 16 months ago as "the most interesting politician in America." Unlike Sanders, however, Paul tried to adapt his message to the changing whims of the political marketplace, rather than staying true to his libertarian mission.

Writing on Friday in the *Washington Post*, Radley Balko, whose past affiliations have included *Reason* magazine and the Cato Institute, points out that Paul, once he had been labeled the most interesting man in politics, stopped talking about the issues that had earned him the label. "Paul was the rare presidential candidate," Balko says, "who *had* walked the walk, but for some reason refused to talk the talk."

In politics as in life generally, sometimes public sentiment goes your way, and sometimes it doesn't. But if you're on a mission, you need to be true to it, come what may.

Forty or so years ago, a man named Stephen Dietz was president of the Board of Trustees here at All Souls. In remarks to the congregation, Dietz — a business consultant by profession — said the following:

I continually ask myself and my clients, “Why are you different? What do you do that nobody else does? What is your reason for existence?”

When I ask myself this question of a church, I ask myself, “What distinguishes the members of this church from the general population? Do they walk differently? Do they talk differently? Do they act differently?”

Or is the distinction simply one of membership in a club, as it were, a group of people who think alike? Can you tell a churchgoer from a non-churchgoer, a Unitarian from an Episcopalian? If so, how?

These are exceedingly good questions. We do many things as a congregation, but almost none of them are done uniquely here. We listen to thoughtful reflections on our lives and our world, but so do people at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y. We listen to sublime music, but so do people at Carnegie Hall. We sing songs together, but so do fans at football games. We teach our children and our youth, but so do teachers at PS 6 and Hunter College. We advocate for justice, but so do members of the Center for Reproductive Rights, the NAACP, and the Natural Resources Defense Council. And so on. The question, as Dietz put it, is this: *what distinguishes the members of All Souls from the general population?*

Over the past six months, the Board of Trustees has invited you to be part of a mission and vision process called Vision2020. Through surveys and cottage meetings, the board has asked you what you most deeply value in this congregation and what you most passionately want to achieve as part of it.

You responded with three core values: possibility, connection, and transformation. The members of the board, with support from executive director Eileen Macholl and me, along with Laura Park from Unity Consulting, unified your overlapping sense of mission into the following statement: “As a religious community, we nurture possibilities and create connections that transform lives and serve the world.”

In my view, this constitutes a splendid statement of mission, and I feel proud and honored to serve a congregation with such a clear and compelling sense of calling. Our mission statement begins by answering Dietz’s question. It declares that we are a religious community. The distinctive quality of a religious community — as compared to other kinds of communities — is the experience of worship. In worship, we evoke the experience of being connected to everything: to all that is present in our lives and our world, as well as all that is past and all that is possible.

This experience opens up possibilities for transformation, both in the lives of individuals — ours and others — and in the world at large. Everything we do as a religious community serves the goal of transforming lives and serving the world. We hold up a

comprehensive vision of what will enable our planet and its creatures to flourish, and we move toward it. Reduced to a single word, our mission is transformation.

And yes, because of our sense of mission, we strive to walk differently, and talk differently, and act differently — both within our sanctuary and beyond. We strive to talk the talk and walk the walk. Sometimes public sentiment will go our way, and sometimes it won't. No matter: we are on a mission. And we strive to be true to it, come what may.

As often happens, Emily Dickinson put it best. "I dwell in possibility," she says. Her poem concludes:

For Occupation – This –  
The spreading wide my narrow Hands  
To gather Paradise –

Our lifelong occupation as individuals – and our mission as a congregation – is to help transform our world into a paradise where everyone and everything can flourish. Together, we strive to be worthy of this great calling.