

JOURNEY IN FAITH
Sermon by Rev. Tracy Sprowls
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All Souls Church, New York City

As a minister I often think about religion. As the Assistant Minister of Lifespan Faith Formation, I think about questions like, ‘What role did religion play in your life growing up? What role does it have now?’

I grew up going to the United Methodist Church. My parents were not Methodists but they wanted their children to grow up with religion and Christian values so we, my brother, sister, and I went to a church that they both could agree upon. When I was twelve, I wondered why I should even go to church. I did not believe in what the minister told us. I questioned whether the virgin birth or the resurrection of Jesus really could have happened. It bothered me that the wine and bread of communion were supposed to be the body and blood of Christ. The stories in the Bible about Adam and Eve and the talking snake, Noah and the ark and all the animals two by two, Jonah and the whale that swallowed him up, and the doomed Jesus who was kind and angry, caught my attention. Who doesn’t love a good story? But I had trouble understanding why I needed to memorize Bible verses when I did not always understand the message. *Don't worry* the teacher would say; *memorize the words in the Bible now and the meaning of the Word of God will grow into your heart.* That was not a convincing argument to me. And if I asked difficult questions, well forget about it. My teachers wanted me to take their word for it or the minister's word for it or the Bible's word for it. This was something I had trouble doing because I was taught to think about things and to question things.

So, given the chance when I turned 13, I stopped going to church, that is, until I discovered the Presbyterian Youth Group called Young Life. As a teen, I never went to church on Sunday, only Wednesday nights when youth group met. My family didn’t go at all. Eventually, I left the church altogether.

But many of my friends did go to church. Why? What was I missing in the church-going activity that others found so gratifying or important to them? I realized, as I grew older that there are all kinds of reasons to go to church. Some people find themselves in a particular neighborhood and so become members of the church near them. Others look for a faith community that has a particular ethos that sustains them. Others are born into a particular church and remain with it all their lives because it is a part of their culture, a part of their history. But, was there more?

I, too, eventually came around to the church again. I left the church of my childhood like 88% of all Unitarian Universalists. That’s right, 88% of Unitarian Universalist adults are people who come into Unitarian Universalism from another religion. A small handful come from no religious background at all. And an equally small number of us grew up as Unitarian Universalist. The whole ministerial team at All Souls - Galen, Audette, David, Pamela, and me – we all grew up in a different faith tradition than Unitarian Universalism.

This statistic– that 88% of people come into Unitarian Universalism– tells me two things.

First, while religion may be shrinking in most quarters, while people are claiming to be more spiritual than religious, while the trust in institutions is shrinking, Unitarian Universalism has something to offer.

So, why come to this church? Why come to this place, at this time, with these people? Again, there are many reasons that you might come here. You may want to be with friends you have made through the years. You may want to make new friends. Perhaps you are looking for people who share your ideas, values, and beliefs. Perhaps this church speaks to your social conscience and helps you to reach out to others in a new way. You want to explore your religious beliefs and come to your own truth without being told what to believe. You want to hear what a particular speaker has to say. Maybe you are here because you want "church" but the other churches just don't meet your needs. Perhaps their political or social positions, like that of the United Methodists and their stance against the LGBTQI community, leaves you cold. Maybe it is your children that have motivated you to come to church after so many years of being at home reading the paper on a Sunday morning. Or maybe, still maybe, it is something more?

Caroline Adams, a motivational speaker writes:

Your life is a sacred journey. And it is about change, growth, discovery, movement, transformation, continuously expanding your vision of what is possible, stretching your soul, learning to see clearly and deeply, listening to your intuition, taking courageous challenges at every step along the way. You are on the path... exactly where you are meant to be right now... And from here, you can only go forward, shaping your life story into a magnificent tale of triumph, of healing, of courage, of beauty, of wisdom, of power, of dignity, and of love.

I think she is onto something. Our lives are a journey – as cliché as that may be – a journey of discovery because, ultimately, we all are looking for meaning in our lives, trying to understand our place in the world, seeking the Truth as we know it, attempting to live with dignity and integrity through heartache and joy, yearning for full lives and yet fearing the inevitable conclusion of it, as Forrest Church used to say. The journey is to discover purpose, learn how best to live it in the world, and, hopefully in some way, make the world a little bit better.

As Unitarian Universalists, we know that our faith requires work from us individually and as a community. It challenges us because it is not about accepting a particular dogma or creed. It really is about the journey. Unitarian Universalism gives space to those who acknowledge this journey that we all share and an opportunity to do the exploring. And although our words we use to describe this journey may be different, it is the same quest, the same center of wholeness for which we are seeking.

Our religion is both prophetic and pragmatic. It is prophetic in that it calls us to strive to be better than we are and to make the world better than it is. We are called to not accept things as they are even as we are tempted to look the other way or as we fall under the spell of tangible, throw away distractions. It is pragmatic in that in coming together we believe that religion has something to offer us so that we can do what we are called to do.

And so the journey we all have embarked upon since we first asked the question *why* will ask us to explore all kinds of ideas and theologies. It will demand of us to ask questions and to seek the answers in a variety of ways and places. It asks of us to do the work of creating dialogue, going deeper in seeking clarity, or even in allowing for confusion, and sometimes living in the pain and awe of not knowing. After all, we know the journey is not about arriving in some otherworldly place, but to create a home in this one.

The second thing about the statistic that 88% of people come into Unitarian Universalism tells me is that a whole lot of people raised in this religion are not staying, that there is a lack of staying power in Unitarian Universalism. Why is that?

One function of a religious community is to impart the values, ideals, rituals and traditions of that community to the members and children of the community. What we are doing is more than religious education. It is teaching our children and adults how to be in this world. It is equipping them to live in a world that is ever more conservative, individualistic, and consumerist. It is giving them the tools to think for themselves, to find their own truths and to live by them. It is helping them see the value of life, theirs and the lives of others. It is stirring “inward springs,” as William Ellery Channing said, so that they can serve the world and make it more just.

The Reverend Ann B. Fields once said that:

I have come to look upon religious education as a lifetime process, the quest for meaning, significance, self-actualization. It is much more than a mastery of subject matter; it is learning of the heart, the striving to find one’s highest and finest relationship to the universe. It is not confined to Sunday morning or to a Biblical tradition. Religion is not a way of looking at certain things; it is a certain way of looking at everything.”

And Maria Harris, author of [Fashion Me A People](#) wrote that, “a genuine (religious) education is toward creating and living more and more adequately as religious beings in the world.

The numbers do not lie. If this church and Unitarian Universalism are to survive in the coming decades and in so doing make a real difference in the world, we must do better.

Look, we are not human beings having a spiritual existence, but spiritual beings having a human experience. There in is the key to understanding the function of religious education in our community, whether it is in a class or not, whether it is taught implicitly, explicitly, or not at all, and that is that “religion is not a way of looking at certain things but a certain way of looking at everything.”

Because religious education takes place in so many ways, it is important to remember that we are all religious educators. Our actions and words, as well as the things we do not do and do not say, are noticed by a child. The attitudes we have towards each other are noticed. Our way of being in the world is studied and copied. If we are religious educators, then that means that other people out in the world are too. If we do not want our children to be following these other folks who may be less inclusive, less loving, less concerned for justice than we, we must be sure we give our children the tools, the tradition and the values from which we live our own lives. We must continue with teaching strong religious education through all the means available to us—classes, worship, social justice, conversations, experiences, and community.

When we give our children the tools as Unitarian Universalists, then they will grow up and stay Unitarian Universalists. Frankly, if they grow up and do not call themselves Unitarian Universalists, that’s okay as long as they are living and acting in the world with the values they have learned here and in their Unitarian Universalist families. It is my deepest belief that a faith such as ours makes a difference in our families, communities, and the world.

Each journey begins with the first step. Whether that step is literal or figurative does not seem to matter; to begin a journey of the mind or the body or the spirit, whether it is an adventure or a new routine or a train of thought, each begins with that very first step. Dorothy from the *Wizard of Oz* could not begin her return home until she put her toes on the yellow brick road. Our adventures in space started before the first walk on the moon, but Neil Armstrong's first steps in the moon dust on that day in July some fifty years ago fed the imaginations and creativity and ingenuity of the generations to follow. A child's first shaky steps lead to a lifetime of discovery.

Unitarian Universalism is a worthwhile journey. I really believe that.

So let us prepare for this new journey together. Let us not be dissuaded by those who say religion is dead or it does not matter. What we believe does matter. How we live in the world does matter. How we act to each does matter. What we teach and learn matters. It matters profoundly.

The role of religion in our growing children's lives is to prepare them for the journey of their lives. It is to give them the tools to meet each person with compassion, to greet each new day with awe and wonder, to make even a small difference in the world, and to ground them in something beyond themselves so even when times are difficult they can continue to put one foot in front of the other.

The liberal church has a role in today's world, too. The liberal church has a mission of justice-making that is necessary and essential today. In the words of Rev. Bill Schulz, former President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, our mission in the world is no less than, "to teach the fragile art of hospitality; to revere both the critical mind and the generous heart; to prove that diversity need not mean divisiveness; and to witness to all that we must hold the whole world in our hands."

Let us continue this journey together: with open minds, helping hands, and loving hearts. Amen.