

IN GRATITUDE: CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF
LOVE AND MINISTRY WITH GALEN GUENGERICH

Sermon by Audette Fulbright
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All Souls Church, New York City

I still remember when I first met Galen, although there's no particular way he would have remembered me at the time. It was June of 2013, and I was at the end of a very long eleven years in my first settlement. I was needing spiritual refreshment, and at General Assembly that year, I joined the huge crowd at a presentation offered by Galen Guengerich, Senior Minister of the prestigious All Souls New York City. Galen's presentation began with the engaging and spiritually effective use of music videos; I still remember realizing with some surprise that I had never actually seen the video for REM's "Losing My Religion." That was just the beginning of a powerful presentation that had me agreeing that we did a better theological language and dexterity – a "God, revised." I bought the book on the spot and absorbed it even before I went home.

I was so inspired, I wanted more. I crafted a little plan for myself – I would ask Galen to let me come to NY and just shadow him for a week; see up close and firsthand how he did this whole ministry thing. That's how moved I was by his presentation and his work. That particular idea never came to pass, but as fate - or spirit, or grace - would have it, after a satisfying second ministry in the wilderness, I was myself called to All Souls, and into sharing ministry with the very person with whom I had felt such a theological and ministry connection.

The real point I want to make, however, is that - in ways you may know, and ways you may not – Galen's ministry over the last quarter century has been *significant*. I mean that in its original sense: sufficiently great or important to be worthy of attention; noteworthy. You may not know this, but Galen does not like to toot his own horn - a quality which distinguishes him from some of our other noteworthy colleagues throughout the years. Indeed, it's only taken almost two years for me to get him to actually agree to show up for a celebration of his 25th anniversary at All Souls – an event which really should have been marked almost two years ago! But you should not doubt that his imprint on our faith, his leadership among colleagues, and his long and steady, faithful ministry to the members and friends of All Souls has been... significant.

And so this morning, I want to take you on a small journey through his time with you, via his own words and theology. Because there is no good way to sum up 25 years of love and preaching, I had to create a structure, and the structure is simply this: I have chosen one theological idea he's professed from every five years he has been with you – five theological ideas in all. If you think of it even briefly, you know what a butchering job I've had to do, frankly. Think of the extraordinary amount of wisdom and care, craft and insight, work time and imagination that I leave to the past. One last point, before my words end and his begin: to do this, obviously I needed access to, well, twenty-five years of his sermons. So I asked for access of some kind, imagining this might take some work, but with more or less the push of a button, he'd easily sent it all to me. He keeps it collected, organized, and ready to go, because of course he does. And what a feast was laid before me. I cannot tell you what an incredible blessing it is to be able to read 25 years of Galen's sermons - among the best we have in our beloved faith.

So with that, let me take you on a small journey, back through time and memory – back to the first five years, 1993 - 1997. Galen was the Assistant Minister when he preached a sermon called

“The Church of Risk and Hope,” which contained a message that seems even more true for All Souls today than it was back then.

“Last Sunday morning at about 9:30, Forrest and I were upstairs together before the first service. We had already discussed the final details of the morning, but it was not yet time to don our robes and head for the steps leading into the vestibule. We stood at the window in Forrest’s office and gazed out at Lexington Avenue coming to life on a Sunday. I noticed that Forrest seemed more restless than usual. I told him so and asked him why.

He replied, “In sixteen years of my ministry here, we have never taken the kind of risks we are taking this year. As a congregation, we have listened to each other more carefully, scrutinized ourselves more rigorously, and made changes more courageously than we have ever done.” He paused, then added, “We have taken a lot of risks to make this a better place. I hope they pay off.”

Risk and hope. You and I, and other people with us, have drawn a picture of our house together. Through surveys and focus groups and committee meetings and chance conversations, we set sail to draw a map of our world here at All Souls Church. There were some dragons there: things about ourselves and our life together that were tough to face. But we took the risk. We took the risk because that’s the kind of people we are; that’s the kind of religious community this is. We took the risk of representing clearly and honestly who we are now because of an abiding hope that we can together construct a future that will do us and our faith proud.

This is the church of risk and hope. We are adventurers together, explorers on an enchanting voyage to we know not always where, lured by we know not always what. But we are convinced in our hearts that risk is always more constructive than fear and hope is always more productive than despair. That is true for me. I hope it is true for you. I believe it is true for all of us together. We are a people united for an adventure more mysterious and magical than we can ever imagine. We are the people, and this is our church, the church of risk and hope.

Fast forward a few years. In a sermon titled, “Picture Perfect,” Galen begins to speak of poetry in a way that would come to be a defining element of his theological worldview:

The poet William Carlos Williams writes, in a line I have quoted before but is well worth re-quoting: “It is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet people die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there.” This is an extraordinary claim. To be sure, what is found in a poem varies from poet to poet and from reader to reader. Yet, lacking what is found there, Williams suggests, people die miserably in spirit or in body every day. Their death may not be caused by a lack of what is found in poems, but their misery certainly is. “It is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet people die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there.” So what is the news from poems? It is generally not the same as in the Sunday Times or on the news at eleven. The news from poems is not that the weather will be humid or the Yankees are being the Yankees or the Dow is making like a porpoise. Rather, the news from poems is the real, truthful news that life is what it is. What is found there in a poem is not an objective description of life’s most salient features, assembled from a wide range of sources like the latest edition of Encyclopedia Britannica. What is found there is a personal, visceral struggle with life, an attempt to meet existence on its own terms. The pretense is gone, the facade has crumbled, the veneer has worn through. What remains is a poet and a life. What results is the news from poems.

The news comes, as do all revelations, in surprising ways. A poet searches for experiences and images which cut across deep-rooted perceptions and time-worn expectations. Poetry is as much a way of seeing life as it is a style of writing about it. With both eyes alert for the real truth, the poet unveils images which surprise us by means of words which resist our tendency to assume that life is the same as it ever was. As Adrienne Rich writes, "The impulse to enter, with other humans, through language, into the order and disorder of the world, is poetic at its roots...." Put another way, the poetic impulse seeks not to render life neat and tidy, but to engage it fully, in its order as well as its disorder."

Jump ahead again. The year is 2004, and Galen preaches a sermon called "The Harmony of Heaven and Earth," in which we can already see how he has grown clear on how science is a guiding light in that pursuit:

My favorite universal law ... was originated by Ernst Poppel, a brain researcher at the University of Munich. Dubbed Poppel's Universal, it asserts that, "We take life three seconds at a time." Poppel illustrates his law by pointing out that a handshake lasts about three seconds. So does the preparation for a golf swing, short-term memory, a phrase in spontaneous speech, and the pause when channel surfing for a television program to watch.

Poppel's Universal prompted me to formulate a universal law of my own. Like all such laws, it is based on my observation of the natural world, yet it applies directly to our experience as human beings. I call it Galen's Law of Diminutives, or more informally, The Law of the Small. The law is this: "Small adjustments result in big changes." ...In practical terms, the Law of the Small means that small adjustments can create large changes in our world and in our lives. More to the point, the path from the life you now have to the life you want may be shorter than you think, just like the genetic path from a mouse to a human, or the harmonic path from a melody to a symphony. ... Here is one more example. The average high school graduate has a speaking vocabulary of between two and three thousand words. The Law of the Small suggests that the difference between people who are sought after as friends or colleagues and those who are merely tolerated or even avoided comes down to how they use a dozen of their vocabulary words. How frequently and how sincerely do they say the following words? "Please. Thank you. I am sorry. I was wrong. I love you. I need help. That was terrific." Even if your speaking vocabulary is middling-sized, these twelve decisive words make up less than one-half of one percent of the total. Small adjustments in what we say can create big changes in how we live.

Perhaps, in the spirit of Ernst Poppel's Universal, The Law of the Small should be renamed The Law of Three: three notes, three words, and three seconds. It is long enough and words enough to say "I love you," "I am sorry," or "That was terrific." It gives time enough to think twice before speaking harshly or to choose to make the extra effort. It provides notes enough to make a tune into a fugue or even a sonata. The key is to pay attention to the small adjustments you can make in your life, the little details, and the diminutive differences. The payoff can be huge.

In 2009, Galen became the Senior Minister of All Souls, and perhaps feeling his oats, wrote a sermon he called "The Next Ten Commandments." Considering the author of the first ten – about which Galen did speak rather glowingly – I thought it a bold move and read eagerly. In it, we find the centerpiece of Galen's theology – gratitude.

The first principle of the universe, in my view, is utter dependence. Everything that exists is made up of constituent parts that are borrowed from, shared with, and related to others outside it. As humans, for example, we are utterly dependent upon the parents who conceived us, the plants and animals that daily provide our nourishment, the trees that give us oxygen,

and the sun that warms the atmosphere and lights our path. We depend upon governments to provide for the commonweal, upon teachers for education, upon friends for love and companionship, and so on.

These constitutive relationships, along with countless others, make us who we are—not in the way a potter shapes a bowl, but in the way flour, butter, and sugar go together to make a cake. If you take away the ingredients that make up our lives, what remains has little meaning. We are made of, or constituted by, these relationships. As the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once put it, “we are dependent on the universe for every detail of our experience.” This principle applies to everything whatsoever. Nothing—not people, not rocks, not galaxies—is what it is strictly within itself.

The appropriate religious response to our dependence, I have suggested, should be gratitude. Gratitude links us to the past by revealing to us our identity: how we became who we are. And it links us to the future by revealing to us our duty: what we owe back in return. Our sense of obligation elicits a discipline of gratitude, by which we constantly acknowledge our utter dependence upon the sources that make our lives possible. It also elicits an ethic of gratitude that works for a future in which all relationships—among humans, as well as between humans and the physical world—are fair, constructive, and beautiful.

The ethic of gratitude is both personal and universal. It stems from an insight that is simple, yet profound. You and I are constituted by the world we live in. The ethic of gratitude demands that we nurture the world that nurtures us in return. It is our duty to foster the kind of environment that we want to take in, and therefore become. Let me be clear: when I say that I am dependent on something, I mean that it constitutes a part of my world, and therefore constitutes a part of me.

At last we enter the last five (really seven) years of Galen’s ministry here, and of course, this ignores his first book, *God, Revised*, as well as his new book, which I also have a copy of but could not include today. I thought we might end with the example of how Galen can take the practical challenges that confront All Souls and frame them exquisitely in their spiritual place – for example, the responsibility of caring for this church as a building, but understanding it in its transcendental nature. In “The Machinery of Grace,” Galen said:

...our sanctuary and the building around it constitute what the poet Michael Donaghy once called “the machinery of grace.” In his poem titled “Machines,” Donaghy talks about the simple beauty of a harpsichord or a racer’s twelve-speed bicycle. The harpsichord is not the music, of course, nor is the bicycle the race. But the harpsichord, exquisitely built and finely tuned, is essential to the beauty of the music. And the bicycle, exquisitely engineered and finely constructed, is essential to riding in the race. Donaghy says, “So much agility, desire, and feverish care, as bicyclists and harpsichordists prove, who only by moving can balance, only by balancing move.” This sanctuary — exquisitely designed and beautifully constructed — is essential to the experiences of grace that happen here. As the poet says, the machinery of grace requires agility, desire, and feverish care. ... We’ve resolved not to let this building fall into disrepair like our previous three buildings. We commit ourselves to doing our best to care for this sanctuary. Week after week, and generation after generation, people will be able to gather here to experience grace — to discover an authentic identity and feel deeply connected to a larger purpose. Because of our care and our commitment, this will remain a sanctuary for seekers. By helping transform lives, we can help transform the world — make it more truthful, more beautiful, more compassionate, and more just.

My friends, what more needs to be said? You and our Unitarian Universalist movement have been served faithfully and well by this man, and I hope you will join me in celebrating and giving thanks for a quarter century of love and service. The Rev. Dr. Galen Guengerich.