

THE GIFTS OF RIGHT RELATIONSHIP  
Sermon by Audette Fulbright  
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All Souls Church, NYC

In my first settlement, I had the joy of working with an incredible lay leader named Dick H. He was patient and kind. He showed up for people and the activities of the church. He was the center of our lay pastoral team - gifted in the graceful arts of showing up when needed, listening with patience and love, willing to go above and beyond to help.

At the time I was both young and new to ministry, and Dick was neither. Although I was a little self-conscious about appearing capable, Dick was a natural mentor to most of us, just by his way of being in the world. He taught by his being, and his doing.

But as it happens, there was actually something he had learned along the way that had helped him become a steady, faithful and largely-unflappable, kind human being. He had learned -- and then taken the time to study, meditate on, and teach about -- the difference between wants and needs; the role of *preference* in human relationships. Dick deeply understood the difference between what actually is, and what his preferences were. It turns out, this matters enormously.

The title of this sermon is “the gifts of right relationship.” “Right relationship” is, to be honest, a bit of an inside-baseball term in churches, especially Unitarian Universalism ones. It is intended to point in the same direction as the 8 fold Path in Buddhism: right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. In this sense, the word “right” means to indicate a way of being that is whole, intentional, healthy, holy. To be in right relationship is to engage each other with intention, awareness, compassion, respect, and a holy form of love. Often the path to building right relationship is to enter into a covenant; to seek to make and keep promises to one another.

Without question, I believe that as a congregation, we should seek to live in right relationship, and that a covenant should guide us in that. Yet it seems to me that before we seriously engage the work of covenant, it would be helpful to think together about what kind of community we are, and hope to be.

There’s a truth we speak at All Souls: we come from the same Source, we’re all on a journey, and wherever we are going, we are going there together. For those of you who participated in the Climate Strikes or who are aware of the climate crises we face, this great truth is more evident than ever. It is not just we humans who are on this journey. We are a part of the interdependent web of all existence, and we ignore that not just to our own detriment, but lay waste to untold numbers of our ecological kin.

There is a reason why we choose to come to church. In a world where our individual preferences are magnified and manipulated 24 hours a day and seven days a week, by shadowy psychological machinations and showy ads that both beckon and berate, we need a sanctuary. It is hard to describe how much it matters that each of us find a place where we can orient toward a powerful North Star. We need communities of hope and resilience, where we take seriously the work of living for something larger than ourselves. We may not all understand that larger something the same way. We may not have the same names for that great wholeness, that Source of awe, that undergirding power that expresses itself when we hear something we know to be true, and are convicted by that which we know to be right. There is so little left in this world that helps us to

find a moral center, and to live by the lights of love and compassion. Communities like All Souls are increasingly rare outposts in a world that pays a premium for division and dissolution.

All Souls is our spiritual home. It is centered in our shared values as Unitarian Universalists. And it is the place where we practice our faith. Let's underline this. It is the place -- a physical place -- where we *practice* our faith. Our culture as a congregation is determined by what we profess, what we do together, and how we treat one another. What we profess. What we do. And how we treat one another -- these are our spiritual practices. They create our culture. As we look beyond our bicentennial to our next epoch, Galen has begun to talk of All Souls as a "laboratory congregation." A place where we can try new things together - see what works, what expands our possibilities and transforms more lives -- and what doesn't. When something works, we celebrate. When it doesn't, we let it go and try something else.

To do that requires some essential capacities as a congregation. These are true of healthy organizations and individuals. For one, it requires us to have strong self-awareness of ourselves as a congregation. We're good at this, we need to grow in that, we need to learn this other thing from others who hold wisdom we don't have.

It requires taking care of one another -- building a community where each of us considers it part of our commitment to support each other along the way. That may look different as we each have different strengths and gifts, but it must be part of our identity as a congregation: no one has to go it alone. We're in this together, and we take care of one another. If you ever need a mentor or guide in that work, our Director of Pastoral Ministries, Pamela Patton, is deeply gifted in this area. She is an incredible blessing as we work to live into our possibilities as a loving, caring congregation for the next century.

But we have to also be a place where we can make mistakes, talk things through, apologize, adjust and go forward together. We must be a place where we make it safe to make a mistake, to be wrong occasionally - as we all are - and to still feel safe and accepted. What is needed most in that equation is a sense of humor and ability to play and laugh together. What works most against it is to be a place where old grievances are constantly nurtured, or where unkindness and intemperateness are the hallmarks of criticism. We all need to learn and grow. All of us, just as is true of children, learn and grow best when we are treated with respect, compassion, and feel we are part of a community of love and acceptance.

Which brings us back to Dick H., and his Very Great Secret of a Good Life: knowing the difference between what *is*, and what we *prefer*. Knowing how to tell what we *need* from what we *want*.

I've been in church life for many, many years now, and I can tell you this for sure: almost all the trouble I've seen comes from people confusing their personal preferences for moral imperatives. If I had a nickel for every time someone caught up in the heat of the moment insisted that their preference was mandated by their firm allegiance to our Unitarian Universalist Principles, I would be quite a wealthy woman indeed, with no student or medical debts. It's a habit most of us have, really -- we have a preference for things being one way, or for people to act another, and we build a glorious substructure of moral imperative to bolster it.

A living, loving, playful, morally sturdy yet transformationally oriented congregation is filled with people who are learning to tell the difference between what they prefer, and what's important. What is important are our *relationships*. What's important is living our values. What's important is taking the time to know one another well, care for each other, laugh

together and also cry together. It's important to be able to have hard conversations that help us grow -- to learn how to make more people welcome in our community, to support the health and wholeness of the most vulnerable, to create a place where we really, truly do not need to think alike, to love alike. When placed in that context, it becomes easier to see that our preferences often represent our resistance to growing, to stepping outside the uber-message of "Me, first" and finding our place in the community of All Souls.

One of the most influential strands in psychology and sociology at this time is the difference between what is called a "fixed mindset" or a "growth mindset." For those with a fixed mindset, we're born with certain immutable qualities -- this much intelligence, or this kind of character -- and so are often driven to prove themselves, again and again. Criticism becomes psychic wound,

and must be avoided at all costs. Challenges are to be feared -- for what if we fail? Failure exposes us, who we are, our very being is proven not-enough, not-worthy.

A growth mindset takes it as a given that we are able to learn and grow. We have strengths, and others do, as well, but challenges allow us to improve --- even if we fail. Failure does not define us; it's one of the most valuable ways we can learn and improve. Others are not innately better (or worse) than we are - and so we look for both what we can learn from them, or what we can share with them. Partnerships are opportunities to build something with the strengths among us -- not competitions to determine who is best. A growth mindset assumes that our whole lives are opportunities to seek wisdom, to see failure or criticism as valuable lessons, and to create communities that encourage members to bring their gifts to the table in service of a greater good that can be accomplished together.

These are turbulent times. The gods of radical individualism and the supremacy of our preferences are hard to resist. We are all hungry for places to rest, refresh our spirits, find our North Star, and some good companions for the journey. All Souls is that place. It's not perfect. Like a good community with a growth mindset, we are growing, learning, taking challenges as opportunity, seeking to magnify what is best in one another. That is what it means to be in Right Relationship. That is what it means to be a people of covenant rather than creed. What I can say for sure is, I am glad to be on this journey with you.

Amen, ashe, blessed be.