

Celebration Sunday
March 11, 2018
Rev. Otto O'Connor

Do you know how strange it is that you're here?

I don't just mean because it's daylight savings and I wondered if *anyone* would actually show up.

No, I mean it's really strange that you are here, in a more general sense.

You see you, you people of all these different backgrounds, religions, ages, genders, have decided to come to a building that was built over 100 years ago, to sit in this relatively dark room, with people you might not have ever met, to listen to some music and a couple people just... talk.

You have decided to leave your cell phones in your pockets and in "worship mode." You've come to a space with no flashing lights, no concessions and snacks to be sold, no moving advertisements.

You've come here, not because you want to buy something here, not because someone has lured you in to pick up the latest gadget or sell you a latte. In fact, we'll give you coffee for free after service. It might not be Starbucks, but... Well, you don't have to pay for it.

You have come when you could have been sitting at home in your pajamas watching Netflix, or scrolling through Instagram, or reading the newspaper. You could have been out for brunch with your friends, drinking mimosas and enjoying avocado toast.

You could be with your kids at some sporting event, or some other extra-curricular activity. But you're not, many of you brought your kids here. Even if it was a struggle to get them out the door today, and every Sunday you come here.

Nobody is paying you to be here. You're taking the time out of your week to come here, in the morning, a time when you could be doing something else. And many of you do that every week, or many weeks, or the weeks that you can manage it, on top of everything else that is happening.

And, you're also not here because God says you have to be, or because it's the law of our religion for you to be here. Because we don't believe that. We believe that you are worthwhile whether or not you come to church on Sunday morning.

So, then, do you realize how strange it is that you're here?

Christians sitting next to atheists sitting next to pagans sitting next to Jews. Queer and trans, people of color, people with disabilities, people who are struggling with money, sitting next to straight cisgender people, white people, wealthy people.

Five generations sitting together.

This is one of the most counter cultural things that you do. Yes, you who are a radical. Yes, you who are a progressive. Yes, you who doesn't follow the flow of the world.

Yes, this is counter cultural. This is unexpected. This is pushing back.

In a culture that says buy, buy, buy, a culture of consumption, you come somewhere not to buy something or to make money.

In a culture where computer screen and smartphone screens and TV screens are everywhere - where you can meet your roommate, your significant other, and plenty of communities online you've chosen to come to one that's in person and not in any way mandatory.

And you've come for this thing we call "Worship". Even if the word makes you a little uncomfortable - and I know for some of you it does - even if the church space feels Christian and you aren't so sure about that Christian thing, with these crosses and this Reverend and his fancy robes.

You've come for worship at a time when people like us more often than not claim to be "spiritual but not religious." Yet here you are. At a church. On Sunday morning. By definition this is religious. At worship.

Because you know, somewhere you know, that worship means to ascribe worth to something - literally worth-ship.

And so we've come together in this literal worthship - and we are ascribing worth to what?

To our lives?

To our world?

To our values?

To each other?

Because you, my friend, has realized something different about the world. That beyond the cell phones, beyond the news cycle, beyond the advertisements that tell you to buy, buy, buy, maybe there is another way to be in relationship with your fellow humans.

I know you get this. In a time when corporations run things, and bottom lines are important, and making sure that you are succeeding at your mission is important, and metrics are important, religious communities are kind of strange. They are kind of this weird outlier.

Because, you see, our job as a church, is not measured in numbers. Not really.

We can celebrate numbers, that's for sure.

Like the fact that we raised \$810 for Black Lives of UU, which is a collective who center the experience of Black Unitarian Universalists, over three Sundays at church, surpassing our goal of \$760, or ten dollars per members.

We can celebrate that.

In fact, we can celebrate all the shared offerings that we started to collect this year at church, for Hurricane Disaster Relief, Immigration Support, for support for Survivors of Sexual Violence - We have raised \$1,213.86. That is love and numbers that are going beyond our walls.

This a new program in which we have committed to sharing our plate at least one Sunday a month. And, if you can believe it, on those Sundays we give much more generously than we do on normal Sundays.

We can celebrate those numbers.

We can celebrate that our fundraiser for Puerto Rico, where 11% of the population is still without power, raised over \$700 back in October.

And we can celebrate the fact that, on Christmas Eve, we raised over \$900 for the Minister's Discretionary Fund. This is a fund that I can use to give grants to people in the community who need help with food, rent, or other expenses.

We can celebrate that number, not because of what the number is, but because of how it represents who we are.

Because who we are a people who care about the folks who are still without power in Puerto Rico, folks who know that immigrants make our communities stronger, who believe victims of sexual assault.

Who we are, are folks who, when asked, will give our money away to those who need it. Defying a culture where things are bought and sold.

Do you know just how countercultural it is to have something like a Minister's Discretionary Fund? Where you can come to me if you need money and I don't need to see you taxes or your bank statement or have you fill out a form? Where else can you do that?

Because we believe in taking care of each other here. And we take care of the world here. And that's not about numbers.

Ok, so something about me. I'm a millennial. I almost never carry cash. And I do all my banking online so a personal check book is a foreign concept to me.

And I do give money to the church - more on that later - and I'm so, so pleased that we now have online giving available (another thing to celebrate!) because it just makes things so easy for me.

But - I have to tell you - that on Sundays when I know where are sharing the plate, I take whatever cash I have (around my house - I literally walk around my house looking for it) and I put it in the offering plate. And we know that we get more money in the plate on those dates, so I know I'm not the only one digging into my pockets. Because I want to be part of that experience.

So, if you, like me, have done that, I want you to think about what that feels like. How it feels to give that money away to organizations and causes that we care about.

Because for me, it feels like a moment of letting go. Of releasing my tight grip on my own finances that I have. Because we're taught to believe that we have to hold on to what we have. And that what we have is not enough.

And this, my friends, is also counter cultural. To sit in a room and collect money and send it away is countercultural.

You see, we are a society so obsessed with money, but we don't talk about money. It's an oxymoron.

So when we are told to hold so tightly, sometimes something happens and we hold a little less tightly. It's happened to me. I've felt the lightness in given away my money. That freedom. I literally can feel it in my gut.

Now, I'm talking about all of this, because it's Stewardship season, which is the time when we figure out how much money we can raise over the next year, so that we know what our budget will be.

We have a goal of 100% pledging participation of all our member households. Pledging is telling us how much you plan to give to First Parish over the coming year.

Currently, we have collected pledge cards from roughly a third of all households in the congregation.

But remember, those numbers aren't who we are. But then why do we have a goal of 100% of members pledging?

Well, because being a member of this spiritual community, of this religious community, is a special, sacred thing, and a sacred responsibility. We do not ask for a particular amount, we ask that you are generous within your budget.

We ask you to give to the church, not because this is a transactional exchange, where the church gives you something that you are paying for. We ask precisely because it is *not* transactional.

Because if you don't give to the church, you are still welcome here.

If you don't give to the church, I will still come to your home when you are sick.

If you don't give to the church, you can still participate in all our events.

But if you don't give to the church, whatever that amount that may be, are you invested in it in and its mission in all the ways you can be?

Let me start with myself. Because I wouldn't ask you to do anything I wouldn't do.

When I started here, I had some older, wiser ministers remind me of something very important. They said "You can walk around calling it your church, but really, it's their church, they were there before you, they'll be there after you, don't act like you own it."

And it's true, but it's also kind of weird. As your Minister, I am, yes, an employee of the church, but I'm also a Member of the congregation (it says it right there in our bylaws). Unitarian Universalism *is* my religion - it is what I practice and it guides my beliefs and who I want to be as a person. And it's deeply personal and dear to me. Unitarian Universalism changed my life. And so, no matter what my career was, I would want to be in a Unitarian Universalist church.

And so, even though I'm a Minister, I still picked this church to be *my* church. Not just that church that I work at. But literally *my* church, *my* Unitarian Universalist community.

I picked it because it gives its money to those in need in the world, and see beyond its own walls to a community in need. I picked it because you all are wildly odd and strange and so am I. I picked it because it was the kind of community I wanted to be in. Because it was going to be *MY* church community. The one I want my kids to grow up in. When my partner comes to church, she comes here, because you are our church. Because this is my community. It's not just a job.

And so, I pledge to the church, and I increased my pledge by 20% this year over last. I give extra money to every fundraiser we have, I give money to my own personal causes, and even to other communities that I'm part of. But I give money to the church because it's a part of who I am and I believe in it - I believe in you - so deeply.

This is my community. And I care deeply about it not because of the numbers of people who show up, or the number of people who pledge, but because of who the people are and what they do in the world, what WE do in the world.

Among the many things we have to celebrate today is our new Mission Statement. You can see it in the source words of today's service.

“Worship is what we do when we gather together, take risks for justice, embrace difference, and give back.

Worship is what we do. This is what it looks like.”

Remember earlier when I talked about how you come here for Worship service, where you are ascribing worth to things.

When we think about worth, often we think about monetary worth. So I think it's funny that as I'm preaching about money, we are unveiling this new Mission Statement that's so worship focused.

But if you look at what worship is for us, it's beyond what we are doing here, right now, in this space. It's about taking those risks for justice, what might those things look like? Embracing difference? What might that mean? And giving back?

We are giving back, aren't we?

This is a special place. You are special people. I believe in the power of this community, and it's not about money, and it's not about numbers. But it is about the things that we do, and the people that we are when we are together.

If we want to do these things, these things that aren't about numbers, but are about the things that we do together, the way that we feel when we give back. The ways that we feel when we take risks for justice. The countercultural reality of what it is to come here and sit, not to be charged for anything, not to be changed for anything.

So let us take these risks together, let us invest in this church because of the force it's able to be in the world.

We are place where we can fly our Black Lives Matter banner and our rainbow flag, and go out and march for the things we believe in, and accompany those who are detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, raise money for causes we believe in, and gather menstrual products for those in need.

It is a place where we can bring our greatest joys and a deepest sorrows. Because we can be real here with each other. And it's a place for those of us who are different. Where we can realize that to stretch to see those who are different than us is what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist.

Worship is what we do. This is what it looks like.

And, let us, as we gather together this Sunday morning, and every Sunday morning, let us say together, Amen.