

“The Bones That Hold Me Together”

A sermon preached at First Parish in Wayland

by the Rev. Ben Hall

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In a way, I’ve been preparing this sermon for the last 33 years—that’s about how long I’ve been coming to First Parish—in other words, my whole life. That’s why, as I say my goodbyes to you all this morning, I feel like I have so much to say, so much to tell you—everything I know, everything I’ve learned with your help. Yes, I’m just a poke down the road now, and yes, I’ll be back, but I am saying a kind of goodbye today. This will always be the church where I’m from, but it will no longer be the congregation where I am both a worshipping member and an Affiliate Minister. I will miss you very much. I will miss this place.

It was, as far as I know, here—right here—where I was dedicated as a baby. Several of you were probably here for the occasion, some Sunday back in 1968 or ’69. That choirloft, in its pre-renovated state, was where I sang with the junior choir. We rehearsed across the street in the former Parish House. I went to Sunday School there, and taught Pre-Kindergarten when I was in High School. And this pulpit—even before having the honor of preaching to you as one of your Affiliate Ministers, I co-sermonized here in the mid-80s with my fellow high school youth group members—UFO, as we called ourselves, standing for Unitarian Fun Organization. Before that, I stood here and called out “My God is a Lord of Kings!” as part of the Junior Choir presentation of “100% Chance of Rain.” Right back there, I went before the Parish Committee with my former youth group advisor, Maddie Sifantus, as both of us sought sponsorship by First Parish for our journeys as ministerial candidates. And just two and a half years ago, you came to Boston Common and ordained me. Members of that committee, including Maddie, presented me with this stole, which was crafted and sewn together by Kate Norr, who decades earlier had been a member of the high school youth group when *my* parents were the advisors.

I have been with you, and you with me, for a long time. Along the way, you have given me so much—more than you or I will ever really know. But I am going to try to tell you this morning some of what you have given me—to thank you, to lift up your gifts, and to encourage you to keep giving and growing, just as you have always done for me.

From as early as I can remember, you made me feel like I mattered. I knew that people cared what I said, and what I did. At my Eagle Scout court of honor in 1986, Brownie Parker said something like, “I have know you since you were small, and even then, I always listened carefully to you, because I know that little people grow up to be big people.” This is one of the things I am most proud of about our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition: we value our young people. We take our youth seriously. I am a firsthand beneficiary of this, from age zero to...well, really to the present.

One example that I love to tell is how in Sunday School, Ginny Steel, Director of Religious Education extraordinaire, gave us this assignment: take a hunk of clay and create an image of what you think God looks like. Hers looked like a dog with wings. How great is that? And how well it conveys a central tenet of Unitarian Universalist

Religious Education for people of all ages: that there is no one right answer, and that each person's truth is valid.

Along similar lines, I remember one year when I was a high school youth group advisor. As the group planned its own service to lead on Youth Sunday, the topic of ritual came up. I think I suggested something I had always dreamed of: ice cream communion. As some of you may remember, the group did go through with it—chocolate or vanilla, your choice. I think we were a little short on the theological meaning of the exercise, except perhaps to suggest that ritual can have a sense of humor. If I had to explain it now, I'd say that ice cream for me symbolizes boundless possibility, symbolizes hope and joy, particularly when introduced into unlikely settings. What mattered most that day was that you all welcomed their innovation and honored their choice with your sincere participation. I remember people smiling and wondering if it was OK to giggle out loud. Before long, people did, demonstrating that you got the point.

Those few years of my life were pivotal. When I came back to Wayland after living in Montana, I also returned to First Parish, somewhat to my surprise, first as a choir member (with both parents) and then also as a high school youth group advisor. During that time, you helped me find my identity as an adult (a process which is still in progress; maybe it never ends). It was then, too, that I started to have an awareness of just how much Unitarian Universalism (through you) has shaped me as a person. My rekindled identity as a Unitarian Universalist guided me to divinity school as a way to live out my newfound commitment to make my life's work about helping people connect with each other.

This mission was no coincidence, as I later learned. What we are most anxious to teach others is what we ourselves most need to learn. I have always struggled between taking time out on my own, alone (in Montana, for example), and allowing myself to connect with others. This is probably the biggest lesson I need to learn in this life. And so, as I learn it again and again, I try to share what I learn with others.

My choice of the Carl Rogers reading stems from this lesson. I resonate deeply with Rogers' observation that it is not helpful "to act as though I were something I am not," in pretty much any situation. It is helping me beyond measure as I learn to be with people, to connect with people, to cultivate this kind of honesty, this relational integrity. We all know it's hard to say what we feel, to say what we really mean. Rogers speaks of a façade that conceals what is really inside. We usually tell ourselves when we hide something that it is to protect the other person, imagining that our honesty would somehow overwhelm, or damage. And perhaps sometimes it would. But I think we are usually protecting ourselves, and only temporarily.

As a youth group advisor here at First Parish, I witnessed people practicing honesty and growing in trust. During check-in, the youth passed the big, lumpy candle around, taking turns saying what was going on in their lives: what was tormenting them, challenging them, calling them, giving them joy. Everyone listened. I pray that we adults can be so brave with one another. I know that I myself am only learning. You covenant with each other to join in community here, to walk your different paths side by side. While I realize that trust is precious and built only over time, you've got time here. I know that many of you enjoy relationships with other parishioners that span years and decades, relationships that are like bedrock in the uneven terrain of life, relationships in

which the sharing of personal truth helps you come to know yourselves, each other, and the world. Small groups also offer this invitation, including the new ones which you have inaugurated recently. I had the privilege this past fall of being a part of the group, “Co-Creating Space Where Spirit Can Thrive In Community.” As the name suggests, we explored what it takes for us to feel free to be ourselves, and to invite and receive other people’s whole, true selves, and what this means for the wider world. I challenge you to keep making this church a place for such exploration, such shared truth, not just for veterans but for newcomers as well. I challenge you to keep calling one another to be who you are, as you have called me.

Finally, I need to tell you how much your willingness to embark on the adventure of community ministry means—to me, to our Association, and to our world. Our first hymn this morning, “May Nothing Evil Cross This Door,” though one of my favorites, reflects a very problematic attitude that is all too typical, not just in our churches but in many communities. First, it imagines that evil is something that we can keep “out there,” out with “those people,” whoever they are, who sow evil in the world. I submit that evil and goodness alike, love and hate alike, live in our own hearts. We are no more immune to evil than anyone outside here is immune to love. We all have it all. Only by recognizing and befriending our own weaknesses can we tame evil among us. Second, and equally scary, is the hymn’s suggestion that we need care only about the comfort of those in here, everyone else be damned: “This hearth, though all the world grow chill, will keep you warm,” says the hymn. This is my big lead-in to community ministry (and I know you know this; just humor me this one last time and allow me to harp on it a little): we have a responsibility that extends beyond these walls. Each of you lives this in one way or another, this belief that our human family transcends congregational bounds. From your work with OnTrac in Roxbury to meals at Arlington St. to meals at Turning Point to empowering someone in prison to any number of other pursuits—all these are lived expressions of your faith. Community ministry lifts this up by ordaining and sending people from congregations out into the world—the world which *grows* chill, the world where the roar and rain does *not* go by but soaks people to the bone.

The vocation of a community minister is circular: beginning in a congregation and taking root there, learning and shaping and sharing the faith, she ventures out into the world to meet a pastoral and/or practical need, like hunger or injustice, with compassion and action. She is the church’s outward-reaching branch. Because ministry is never one-way, she, too, receives a blessing, and this she brings back to her congregation, sharing it, reflecting on it, and inviting the congregants to join in. It’s a funny lot, bridging two worlds. It’d be much easier just to focus on either half. But this bridging, which can easily be lost, is precisely the point: that we remember not “to keep hate out and hold love in,” as the hymn says, but to face our own hate, melt it, and share our love and mercy in every direction, flinging it out the open windows and singing it from the rooftops. In order for this bridging to occur, both the community minister and the congregation must value their mutual relationship. I have felt valued as an Affiliate Minister, though I do wish I had come around here much more often. I am impressed by your willingness to have an Intern Affiliate Minister, still a very avant-garde practice. As I leave, I urge you to continue to invest in and refine this vital enterprise of Community Ministry, especially including the bond between you and your Affiliate Ministers,

perhaps through a community ministry committee, which I never managed to follow through with.

Most of all, this morning, I want to thank you as much as I possibly can. You have helped me grow into who I am. I will carry you with me wherever I go. You are in the bones that hold me together. Thank you. Thank you. Amen.