"Of Ultimate Value"

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
at the First Parish in Wayland, MA
March 1, 2015

What *is* your reason for being here today?

Already this morning, some of us gathered early for the fun of eating pancakes in our pajamas. While David and Amy, our stewardship chairs, also brought humor to their special message, they also challenged us to reflect upon our reasons for being a part of this congregation. Because it does matter that we are *still* here after 375 years. And, after a winter like this, it matters quite literally that our 200-year old Meetinghouse is *still* here in one piece and in apparent good order. In fact, the Meetinghouse is even sounding better than ever with the new sound system!

Having fun together and being good stewards of our historic buildings are certainly some of the reasons that we are here. Yet, we are also more than our buildings and more than our good humor. What is the *more* that you come for when you walk through those doors on a Sunday morning?

One of the aspects of this Meetinghouse that I greatly appreciate is that my office is just behind the sanctuary. Most days, I choose to take the stairs which means that I must walk through this sanctuary in order to reach my office. And, even when I am in my office, this beautiful Palladian window lets the light flow between the two spaces.

In these ways, I feel an ongoing sense of connection between my weekday work and our Sunday morning gathering. If you've been in a weekday meeting with me, you may have heard me encourage the group to light a chalice. Lighting the chalice in meetings is one way that we can all be reminded that what we do in our committee meetings, book discussions, and other smaller gatherings is linked to what we do here on Sunday morning.

So, what *is* it that we do here on Sunday mornings? We're social; we sing; we listen to some readings and a bit of spoken word. On one level, we could (and perhaps sometimes do) seem a bit like a kind of social club with an interesting speaker and some good music. And, I do hope that we appreciate how good the music is as well as find the speaker interesting—especially since it's often *me!* Nonetheless, I hope that there are also more levels to why we gather and what is going on here on Sunday morning.

According to various communications streams—from the website to the weekly calendar in your order of service, what we are doing here in this 10 o'clock hour is called *worship*.

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But, what do you think of when you hear the word *worship?* I suspect worship is generally understood to be a *religious* term expressing honor or reverence to a deity. Other ways of conceiving this might be acts of devotion, adoration, or veneration to a deity. But still, there is this concept of a *deity* right there.

So how do you worship if you don't believe in a deity? Now you see why I preached about God last week—because talking about worship inevitably raises questions of gods and deities. Is it our purpose to gather here as a congregation each Sunday morning to worship God, to venerate a deity, or otherwise seek to honor and acknowledge divinity?

Well, yes . . . and no. Here's the tricky thing: the first part of our covenant clearly claims a freedom in searching for truth and this freedom means that we indeed have a range of beliefs about God, deities, and divinity within the congregation. So, given this freedom of beliefs that includes all manner of belief, what then does it mean to *unite* for worship? In what ways does worship bring us together?

In one way, answering this question is simple. One definition of worship is simply "a religious service." In so far as we understand ourselves as a *religious* community and this Meetinghouse as a *religious* building, then it seems appropriate to call this 10am gathering of people a *religious* service—especially as it contains many elements of religious ritual such as prayer, song, and preaching that are broadly recognized as *religious*. In a poem like "Life of Sundays" by Rodney Jones, we too can recognize our Sunday worship as part of a genre of Sundays. But, I'm not fully satisfied with the answer that "worship" is simply the name for our gathering each week.

On the one hand, I think we all know what we mean when we go to a website and see the word "worship" that we're talking about this hour. On the other hand, I wonder if we've given much thought to what this word *worship* really means? Is the idea of "worship" simply an archaic, albeit broadly known term? Or can it indeed be a meaningful concept that helps to unite our community?

If "worship" is understand as adoration of a deity, then, no, I do not think it will be meaningful way to unite our theologically diverse community. However, I do believe that there *is* something fundamentally *religious* happening when we gather here together most Sunday mornings. And, I do believe that as a congregation we are a *religious* community—something more than a 501c3 non-profit and certainly something more than a social club.

What makes us different is our *religious* mission. I believe religion is the practice of intentionally making our way through life. To live *religiously* is to be reflective about what matters and how one should live.

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Of course there are many different answers about what it means to live religiously. Religions extol participants on how and when to pray or meditate; what to eat and not eat; whom to marry and when to have sex; and often much, much more.

In fact, often religions even tell people what to do with their money. Buddhism commends the practice of giving alms to the poor. Within Islam, donating 2.5% of all of one's *wealth* is one of the five pillars that define the religion. And, within Christianity—including the Mormon Church, there is an expectation of paying 10% of one's income to support the clergy and the church.

Last fall, a group of six of us attended a daylong workshop on Unitarian Universalism and money. Significantly, the day began with a time of worship as a gathered community representing dozens of New England congregations. After a time of song, the Rev. Vail Weller invited us to sit comfortably and to close our eyes for a meditation. She first asked us to imagine the people for whom building the sanctuary in which we sat was just a dream—people whose names were unknown to us just as our names were unknown to them. She then asked us to imagine our own congregations—the spaces and communities that we have inherited, for which we are now stewards for the generations to come. And then, she asked us to imagine that money was not an issue or a barrier for our congregation . . . what then might we do? What programs or ministries, outreach or community engagement might we foster? Having fostered within us a sense of abundance, she asked, what are your dreams?

A van. That's what came to my mind. I'd buy a van. In the Midwest church of my teen years, we had a van, and, actually, a whole school bus as well. If we had a van, here, at the First Parish in Wayland, then we could help foster groups of people going together to volunteer at the Urban Ministry. We could send youth on spring break work trips. We could pick up seniors who struggle with driving for Sunday services and congregational events. Now, I'm not saying that I think we should immediately add a van to the top of our "must-have" list. I'm only saying that it's one idea of something that might change the kinds of impact we can have on lives within and beyond this congregation. What's your idea? What's your *dream*?

At the stewardship workshop, Rev. Weller and the other presenters, encouraged us to consider how our budgets are so much more than complicated categories of expenses and incomes. Rather, she encouraged us to see them as a "financial statement of mission." How we allocate financial resources reflects what we value in our shared life as a congregation. To this end, the Finance Committee been working to recast how we allocate our financial resources.

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As a framework, I proposed using five categories from our covenant: 1) "In the Search for Truth in Freedom and in the Spirit of Love" (or, all the religious education elements); 2) "We Unite" (the infrastructure elements that glue us together like the Parish Administrator); 3) "For Worship" (all that goes into these services, including music and much of my salary as minister); 4) "For Community" (the elements that sustain and nurture connections such as the Membership Coordinator and communications); and finally, 5) "For Service" (the resources we use to help those in need within and beyond our walls as well as to speak out for justice and love in our larger world.)

You can learn more about this model from a handout available with your stewardship packets. But for now, let me focus on the largest piece of the pie: "We unite for Worship." Approximately 30% of our shared resources are devoted to our worship life. Admittedly, my own salary as your minister is the largest portion followed by investments in Polly's salary as Music Director and Organist—as well the upkeep of the organ and pianos, music for the choir, and guest musicians.

If our budget is indeed a reflection of what matters to us as a congregation, then *worship* is top of the list. Recognizing this leads us right back to the question, *what is worship?*

Worship is about naming what we most value; worship is an intentional engagement with the religious questions and experiences of naming what matters and how to live a meaningful life.

As a word, worship emerges from an Old English term that wedded together two other words: weorth and scipe. Woerth was as it sounds today—worthiness or acknowledgment of worth. Scipe meant "shape." So worship suggested something that had the shape or the character of worthiness. In this sense, worship is akin to words such as friendship or sportsmanship in denoting a certain quality of character.

Within this etymological framework, the original sense of worship can be understood as a broader sense of that which we acknowledge and honor as worthy. In my sermon title and blurb, I suggest that worship is a time where we can be reminded of what is of ultimate value. Worship as a *religious* service is a unique endeavor in society that asks us to name what is of ultimate value. What *really* matters??

Beauty matters.
With its clean lines and clear windows, this sanctuary is a *beautiful* space. The gleam of the organ pipes and the majestic sounds they emit are beautiful—as are the harmonies of the choir it accompanies. Such experiences of beauty are restorative as well as preventative

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against despair in the face of too much sorrow and darkness in the world. It is always good to experience life's beauty.

Connection matters.
While we could sit alone to contemplate life, being with others in the same space and in the same moments assures us we are not alone in our questions and our longings, our joys and our sorrows. We can speak out, sit silently as a witness, and join each other in song to affirm one another in our journeys. Whether we come as a family or alone, in this place we recognize that we are all connected one to the other in community.

Seeking truth and understanding matters.
Whatever you may or may not believe about God or the nature of God, it matters that we're asking big questions about the nature of the universe. Such questions challenge us to seek out ways to perceive the world from a larger lens that recognizes the plurality of multiple, intersecting lives—human, plant, animal, and the systems that support the lives of all.

Service matters.
I believe that there is a reason that so many religions instruct people to give away their resources. For through the practice of generosity, we live out our connections to others and practice compassion for lives other than our own. Through service, we engage in helping to craft a world that comes a bit closer to reflecting the kind of ideals we imagine and the values we hold.

For all of these reasons and for the many more that you have already named among yourselves today, the First Parish in Wayland *matters.*

As this stewardship season kicks off, I invite you to keep reflecting upon why *you* are still here. What's your reason? We are the stewards of this place and this mission. What if money wasn't a barrier—what could we do? What could we do to strengthen the mission of our congregation if we operated from a place of abundance?

As your minister, I am pledging 3% of my gross salary to First Parish in Wayland. Since my salary is public, I'll do the math for you and say that 3% is $2,500. My hope is to grow to a 5% leadership pledge over the next five years.

Whatever your resources and situation may be, I challenge you to give this year what you are able to support First Parish because it *matters* to you. We are more than a charity, more than a social club or health club. We are a unique endeavor that is seeking to make life more meaningful and the world a bit more loving and just. It's good work and it's work that matters. May we all be a part of celebrating that yes, we're still here . . . for a reason.

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