"Tools, Not Boxes"

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
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Last Sunday, I attended church with my parents in Michigan. After raising my brothers and I as evangelical Christians, they have followed in the footsteps of their children and moved in a more liberal path. (Yes, we do learn from our kids, don't we?!) They now attend a progressive Methodist church that is out front in fighting for LGBT inclusion in the denomination. It's a really great church and I always feel welcomed.

But it was also communion Sunday. The altar table was set with plates of bread and goblets of wine. The worship leaders earnestly welcomed all to the table. And yet, as the minister followed the liturgy printed in the hymnbook, I listened to the words and knew it was not for me. I did not believe what he was saying.

Sitting in my pew as the congregation around me took their turns receiving bread and wine, I keenly felt my own religious identity as a Unitarian Universalist.

As you may know, Unitarian Universalism is rooted in two Christian denominations—the Unitarians and the Universalists, which merged in 1961. Our own congregation began in 1640 as a Puritan Christian church. However, two hundred years ago, the religious scene in Boston became divisive. Liberals and conservatives were split on all matter of theological points. As is typical in many contentious debates, the name-calling commenced. With condemning disdain, the traditionals began calling the liberals, "Unitarian." Quite the slander, huh!?!

Well by the spring of 1819, William Ellery Channing, a thought leader among the liberals, had had enough. He traveled from Boston to Baltimore to deliver a sermon for the ordination of Jared Sparks on May 5, 1819. Channing decided to make this sermon a kind of manifesto for Unitarian Christianity—defining it on his own terms. He delivered what amounts to his "credo" . . . although his is more than 25 typed pages. We don't ask our youth to do that!

Channing's "Baltimore Sermon" (as it has become known) is a foundational text in our religious tradition. To many it marks the start of Unitarian Christianity. During the same timeframe, the Universalist church had also been making its own inroads into American Christianity for fifty years. Both the Unitarians and the Universalists rejected the rigid, Calvinist Christianity of their Puritan ancestors. Both sought to reframe religious

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understanding in ways that resonated with the lives of modern Christians. And, I suspect both early 19th century traditions would be somewhat startled by the 21st century Unitarian Universalist world as it exists today.

What *is* Unitarian Universalism today?

For some UUs even today, the Christian roots of our tradition are important. (Some even celebrate communion!) While Unitarian Universalists do not have a theological creed that binds us all together, the key historical claims of both denominational roots continue to define us in significant ways. From the Unitarians, we still widely hold that Jesus was a teacher rather than *the* divine Son of God. From the Universalists, we still widely promote the idea of a divine love big enough to embrace everyone. In short, you're unlikely to ever hear reference to belief in Jesus' death and resurrection as the sole way to God, nor threats that your happiness in the afterlife is in jeopardy based on what you're up to here on earth.

But wait, why am I talking about shared *beliefs*? Aren't we the religious tradition that says, "you can believe in anything"? There's some truth in this statement in so far as the value of religious freedom is deeply embedded in our tradition. For many of us that grew up being told what was The Truth, even when it didn't make sense to us, this freedom to reason, wrestle, and come to our own conclusions is priceless. Rather than feeling like one's spirit is stuck in a box of predefined dimensions, Unitarian Universalism gestures to the whole wide-open experience of life and asks, "what do you think?"

Well, almost.

While we do not require folks to sign-on to a certain creed of beliefs and jump inside a particular box of understanding, it's not as simple as 'every person for themselves.' As an example, consider the wonderful Coming of Age statements earlier in the service. We didn't just give Lex, Gabriel, and Sidney a date and tell them to show up and have something to say! No, they spent the year meeting with one another, their teachers, and their mentors to explore questions of religion, Unitarian Universalism, and more. Moreover, all of these youth have spent years sitting in these pews and attending religious education classes here at First Parish.

As Unitarian Universalists, we may support a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, but the idea is not to leave each of us out there on our own. Rather, we explore in community. This is the significance of being a community in covenant with one another. We may not share the same beliefs about God, the afterlife, or any number of religious questions, but we do make promises to each other about how we will be together. And, if

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we really made it our intention to live by the First Parish covenant . . .well, it's not always a simple or easy path.

Do we always show up with an open mind to a person with whom we are in conflict? How loving does our heart feel towards that person we've known for decades who is just *so annoying*?!? And yet, each week we start our covenant, "With open minds and loving hearts." In saying this, I am not trying to stir up feelings of guilt or self-condemnation. No. I'm trying to argue that our religious tradition isn't all open-ended, anything goes. It's just that instead of being put in a box of limited beliefs, we are committed to tools in a search.

And the first tool in that search is the importance of covenant. Which is to say, the first tool is the recognition that we are not alone but in relationship. When we gather in a group, we start with the assumption that it's important to respect one another and value our mutual participation. But how? What are the ground rules for how we'll be together? This is what get works out in the creation of a covenant. We use the tool of a covenant to acknowledge the importance of being in a supportive relationship of mutual respect and nurture.

Yes, we are all individuals freely in search of truth and meaning. And yet, our religious tradition also calls us to pursue that search in relationship, in community, in covenant with others. And this doesn't stop at 225 Boston Post Road. As a congregation, we are in covenant with other Unitarian Universalist congregations. If you pick up our hymnal, we do not have any preprinted liturgies for a given Sunday . . . not even for special Sundays like Coming of Age. What we do have at the front is the covenant of the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association to promote and affirm 7 principles and 6 sources of religious insight. These are also tools that we have to guide our search and our life together. They remind us to see the gift of each life, to support one another's search, to pursue a just world, and to be aware of our place in the web of life. They counsel that spiritual insight comes from many places—our Christian and Jewish roots, as well as other religions, personal experience, prophetic leaders, science, and nature.

This is a wide-open vision of religious understanding. It's easy to see where the sense that Unitarian Universalists can believe anything comes from. This freedom of belief is a critical part of our tradition. It is what keeps us from being a box that confines our intellects and intuitions. But, for me, it is not what *defines* us. I believe that Unitarian Universalism is a religion defined by its commitment to the deeply human need for meaning. We provide tools for finding that meaning—by being in a community, by naming principles and sources as guides, and by respecting the need for each person to freely find their own beliefs.

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There are many who will say religion is in decline, that it has no place in the modern world. And, I agree that religions who hold beliefs dissonant with modern systems of knowledge will struggle. So also will religious frameworks that have no capacity to accept the plurality of religious viewpoints in our widely diverse world.

But, this is not Unitarian Universalism. We are part of a living tradition committed to respecting the capacity of people to wrestle with finding meaning and to a posture of inclusive love that seeks to provide a community in which to search. We are not a rigid box. We are a community sharing tools for the journey.

Unitarian Universalism today may not look as it did for the Unitarians two hundred years ago or for the Universalists two hundred and fifty years ago, but we are here today because of the tools they left for us. With faith in the human spirit's search and the power of inclusive love, we continue to gather in community as we learn and grow together.

So may it be. Amen.

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