

“Taking Measure”

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

First Parish in Wayland

January 10, 2021

There are moments in life when we know right then that *this* matters. *This* will change the course of how one experiences life. The afternoon of Wednesday, January 6, will be one of those moments.

As a minister, my role today is not to *tell* you the news—I suspect most of us have already read or watched plenty of the news already this week. Rather, I understand my role as helping us to make meaning of what has happened, of what is happening. It is to lift up the events of the day and to ask, what *matters* here when measured against ultimate concerns.

“Ultimate concerns” is a phrase central to the work of the 20th century theologian Paul Tillich. Born in 1886, Tillich spent his first four decades in Germany as a pastor and scholar before his liberalism and criticisms of Nazism forced his relocation to the U.S., where he would teach until his death in 1965. Tillich understood theology not as the study of “God” narrowly defined, but as the careful consideration of what matters most to us, our ultimate concerns. *These* concerns, these *ultimate* concerns, are after all what constitute our very being. They are the metric by which we measure the meaning of our lives.

Of course, pointing to our “ultimate concerns” does not get us anywhere if we do not know what they are. As a Christian theologian, Tillich took his cue from the Christian scriptures and tradition to name these ultimate concerns. What ultimately matters to Unitarian Universalists? To us at First Parish? To each of us?

At First Parish, our covenant functions to teach and remind us of our congregational ultimate concerns: *With open minds and loving hearts, we gather to search for meaning, to care for one another, and to work together for a better world.* These words are the measure of who we are as a congregation. What matters to us are minds open to questions, to inquiry. Interactions with one another shaped by an attitude of love. Searching for rather than simply inheriting meaning. Cultivating compassion for others by committing to care for others—we cannot belong fully if we only care for or about ourselves. This is why when we imagine a better world we work *together* to help build it.

At First Parish and as Unitarian Universalists, we do not measure our community by adherence to orthodoxy; we do not measure our community by adherence to perfect action, correct interpretation, or right belief. We measure our community by openness, by love, by shared engagement in caring for others and our shared world.

These are our ultimate concerns as a congregation. And, for many of us, they may also reflect our ultimate concerns as individuals—which is why we come here to be part of this community.

How then might we take the measure of this week's events against these ultimate concerns of openness, love, and a shared project of a better world?

Perhaps a place to start might be to consider the ultimate concerns embodied within the soaring marble and granite of the Capitol building.ⁱ More than just a building, *this* building, whose cornerstone was laid in 1793 by President George Washington, tells a story about who we are as a nation. The design emerged from a call for ideas that led to the plan for a central dome flanked by two chambers—one for the Senate and one for the House. Delays and underfunding plagued construction and building use for the first two decades. When the Capitol was set on fire in the War of 1812, only a sudden rainstorm prevented complete destruction. When construction resumed, the building and grounds were finally completed in 1829, more than thirty-five years after that cornerstone.

When the size of Congress exceeded the building, another design contest was held. As the building expanded, marble from Lee, Massachusetts formed the new veneer. By 1857, the House met in its new chamber and in 1859 the Senate began to meet in theirs. The old House chamber of the original building would soon be designated as the National Statuary Hall.

While the National Statuary Hall itself only holds 35 statues, the full Statuary Hall collection is comprised of 100 statues—2 from each of the 50 states. Each state places two symbols of their contribution to our shared national project into the collection. In this way, this Hall and the Collection of Statues that expand throughout the Capitol complex are not simply blocks of marble and bronze, but intentional monuments to who we are, clues to and statements of our national ultimate concerns.

What you may not know about the National Statuary Hall is that there are also two statues there were part of the original design as the chamber for the House of Representatives. One statue is the “Liberty and the Eagle” which is comprised of a massive 13’7” Lady of Liberty who firmly grasps the Constitution in one hand. With the Lady flanked on one side by a powerful eagle with wings arched open and on the other side by the serpent of wisdom coiled around a column, the symbols of [“Liberty and the Eagle”](#) convey the ultimate concerns of the fledgling government—to powerfully govern in service of liberty, with the aid of wisdom, and by the rule of law established in the Constitution.

This Hall is one of the places in the Capitol that the mob entered on Wednesday. Let us watch. [[30 seconds of video](#)]

What is the *meaning* of this action? How do we take it's measure? Later in the video, you can hear a woman shout, "I've never been in this House, how 'bout you? You [expletive] own it." To which another woman fiercely affirms, "That's right we own it."

And yet, to whom *does* the Hall, the Capitol, the government belong? Who or what measures that belonging?

Above the doorway through which the insurgents march in the video, you can just make out a clock and a statue. This is the other statute that sat in that first Hall of Representatives. Entitled the "[Car of History](#)," the statue is of Clio, the muse of History, riding on a chariot, or car, that represents the passage of time. A time that *moves* and does not stop.

Looking back, we see the current of time challenging the founding myths of an equality that was far from full or just. As time passes, we witness the emancipation of enslaved persons, the suffrage of women, the immigration of millions from every corner of the globe, the passage of the Civil Rights Act, the legalization of same-sex marriage, and more. As time passes, belonging expands, becoming more inclusive, more just. The struggle for this more perfect, equitable, and just union once erupted into a war—whose flag of rebellion never flew in the Capitol until this week. The struggle has also been fought through an unmeasurable volume of words, protests, and other activism and legislation to make this shared government, this shared House actually serve the interest of more and more people in this nation.

And yet. Days such as Wednesday force us to confront that the dream of a more perfect union in which people are created equal is far from real. As many have noted, had the mob not been white but comprised rather of black or brown skin, the police preparations and responses would have been very, very different. Amidst the strides for equality in our nation, there is a pugnacious and malicious ugliness residing here too.

In her poem, "Good Bones," Maggie Smith confesses all the ugly she would keep from her children. "The world is at least fifty percent terrible, and that's a conservative estimate, though I keep this from my children." The events this week showed a particular kind of terrible many of us never imagined witnessing in our lives. Nor did we imagine that on that same day nearly 4,000 lives would be lost in our nation to a disease whose name we did not even know 12 months earlier. Nor that we would barely even notice these deaths, that number because such thousands of deaths had been happening for weeks and months.

In the face of all of this—the insurrection, the pandemic, the persistent racism and assumptions of white supremacy in our culture—we are called to not only read or watch the news, but to also stop and ask what is the meaning of *this*? What *is* our ultimate concern in all of this?

Smith concludes her poem by writing, “Any decent realtor, walking you through a real [dump], chirps on about good bones: This place could be beautiful, right? You could make this place beautiful.”

The architecture of the Capitol building has developed, decayed, expanded, and been repaired for 227 years. At times, the Capitol has indeed been a real dump of a building. And, yes, the state of the government and our nation has too often been a real dump too. (And I note that I’m using a more ‘church-friendly’ term here than the original word the poet uses in her text.) The world, our nation, our police departments, our governments can be terrible—especially for people who cannot walk the streets or the halls with the confidence and protection of whiteness. But could it not also be true that there could be beauty here. Could we not make this place beautiful?

There is no backing away from the ugliness of this week. And yes, we would certainly want to keep the ugliness from our children and our children’s children. But the truth is we live in a world that is full of both the terrible and the good, the beautiful and the ugly. Here in this community, *this* mix is the truth that we teach our children and remind ourselves every time we engage in the ritual of Joys and Sorrows. We are not a religious tradition that would close our minds or our hearts to the ugly or the terrible. Rather, we are a religious tradition that openly considers the truth of who we are and yet holds on to the hope of making something beautiful here. We are, as the [Rev. Teresa Soto writes](#), “*the people who return to love like a North Star and to the truth that we are greater together than we are alone.*”

Let these statements of what really matters to us be the measure of our lives and the guide for how we might live. Holding these as our metric will not eradicate or even hide all the terrible in the world, but it *will* keep us connected to what is beautiful in this world. No matter what may crash or burn around us, may we not cease taking the measure of what really matters. May we not stop holding fast to our ultimate concerns. May we never stop holding on to the love of others and the truth that we are better together than we are alone.

So may it be. Amen.

ⁱ “History of the U.S. Capitol Building” from the Architect of the Capitol, <https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/buildings-grounds/capitol-building/history>. Accessed January 7, 2021.