

“Why Bother with Religion?”

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Following our enlivening Flower Sunday service last June, I hopped in my truck to drive cross-country to the Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly of congregations in Portland, Oregon. Or, “GA” for short. After two years online, GA was finally going to be in person and I wanted to be there to connect with colleagues and to participate in the worship services, which I often find deeply moving. And, well, polity geek that I am, I also enjoy attending the business sessions and voting on various measures. But I’ll skip that part for today...

When I arrived, I encountered a lot of tired colleagues as well as weary delegates from Unitarian Universalist congregations across the country. The well-worn conversational paths about pandemic struggles, declining engagement in congregations, and the dismal political landscape were widely present. Like slowing down to rubber-neck the scene of an accident, it seems that we cannot help but return again and again to the same topics, even if we’re tired of the conversation.

Given these patterns, it was with some surprise that I found myself in conversation with an enthusiastic and energetic colleague, the Rev. Sean Neil-Barron. About ten years ago, Sean and I crossed paths in seminary classes and our summer chaplaincy training. As we caught up over dinner, I almost felt conspiratorial in our confession that we weren’t burned out, but rather optimistically restless with the possibilities of congregational life. Sure, like any colleagues, we had irritations and frustrations we faced, but on the whole, we both still believed in communal religious life.

As we ate our meal, I learned that he would play a part in the upcoming Sunday service. In that service, Sean began his piece with a funny quip: “My friends used to ask me why do I go to church?! After I became a minister, they stopped asking.” Leaving a beat for a chuckle from the audience, Sean added, “But the thing is, I never did. Why *do* I go to church?”

Continuing, Sean does not hold back in laying out the heartbreak and disappointment that he has experienced at church. People misbehave in harmful and hurtful ways. People we care about leave. The music changes. We start to wonder if *we* should move on too. As he rather effectively lays out the challenges and conflicts of religious community, you start to wonder, wow, really, why bother with church!?

His answer? Well, “because church.”

I love this answer. Yes, its self-referential and simplistic. And I happen to think it’s true.

As recently as Friday evening, I was chatting with a couple who learned I was a minister. “What made you want to be a minister?” they asked. My answer, “Because church.” Ok, what I really said was that I grew up loving church and after a period of theological searching which included grad school, I found Unitarian Universalism. In Unitarian Universalism, I found both the multigenerational, religious community that I longed for from my childhood experiences *and* the theological openness I now deeply valued.

In other words, I wanted to belong to a religious community that would bring casseroles to people facing heartbreak *and* be okay being an atheist. I wanted to belt out Christmas carols in a community that included five-year-olds seated near ninety-five year-olds, even if I didn’t believe in the Virgin birth or identify as Christian anymore. I wanted a place to go and be with others when planes crashed into office towers or gun violence killed children. I wanted to be in relationship with people who identify as Buddhist, Muslim, or Hindu without condemning them to eternal torment for being born in a different cultural context or to parents who passed down a different religious tradition.

Because church to me means a multigenerational community of love. Or, as Sean puts it, we are drawn to church by

“ . . . an almost indescribable promise that answers a question coded deep within us: the need to belong, to be reminded of that belonging, the full embrace that conveys the truth that all the parts of you—the questioning parts, the doubting parts, the cynical parts, the hurting parts—are not only welcome but they are necessary here. That if universal salvation is true for all of us, it must be true for all parts of us.”

Why church? Because the gathering of people into communities of care and purpose answers a deep need to belong. Because we need to feel embraced in the fullness of who we are.

But for religious community to work like *that* we must have faith that we’ll find something like it when we gather with others. And well the reputation of religious community is not faring well. Religion is a particularly tough sell for liberal and progressive-minded folks who associate “religion” with fairytale beliefs, unscientific—or even anti-science—ideas, as

well as socially conservative, even shaming attitudes towards LGBTQ+ folks, immigrants, women, and more. If *that* is religion, then really, *why bother!?*

Why bother with religion if religion is the antithesis to one's beliefs and values? Why bother with religion if it preaches love but manifests hate? Why bother with religion if it proclaims its necessity but remains aloof, indifferent, or even hostile to the pressing issues in your daily life?

Religion is *not* equivalent with conservative expressions of religious life. As long as religion is perceived to mean bigoted exclusion and anti-scientific beliefs, there will be a whole host of liberal and progressive people compelled to declare, "I'm not religious." As long as religious communities, even liberal ones, remain more committed to sustaining the institutional status quo rather than seeking to remain relevant to the needs of people in their neighborhood, more and more people will simply not see a need to be "religious."

And that's not okay to me. Because to me religion is an essential part of being human. To me, religion is simply the term that names our deeply seeded need to feel like we belong in a meaningful way. Amidst the flood of all that life brings, we need a way to navigate the complexity of choices and relationships. We need to be able to make sense of what is happening, or at least, to not feel alone as we encounter the inexplicable. And, yes, there are plenty of religious systems that offer answers for the questions of life that I do not find compelling. But the presence of religious frameworks that we reject does not mean that the questions religion seeks to answer are moot. Rather such frameworks motivate me to do better in articulating a different religious framework—one that might just be life-saving for someone floundering in a morass of loneliness, rejection, or despair.

Why bother with religion?

Because we need frameworks of beliefs and relationships that give us a place to belong. And, consciously or not, I believe we seek out places where we sense belonging and acceptance for who we are in our beliefs and our brokenness, our aspirations and our imperfect humanity. Whether we call it "religion" or not, I believe we will keep searching for meaning and for belonging—or suffer in loneliness and despair if we do not find it.

Why not find it here? At a religious community? What keeps people from bothering with religion? With showing up here for our religious community—whether they are new or drifted away after twenty years?

While I cannot answer those questions for everyone, I want to suggest that instead we ask ourselves, “why am *I* here today? Why do *I* bother with religion?”

As I continue to ask these questions, I return to that simplistic answer, “Because church.”

Because a church was the place 50 migrants were sent on Wednesday after unexpectedly arriving on Martha’s Vineyard. Of course it was a church—a religious community—that was equipped to welcome and care for strangers with no notice. Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Unitarian Universalist. . . religious communities are places associated with help and care. They are places of welcome and belonging. They are places that matter in our world.

What we do here at First Parish in Wayland as a religious community is both rooted in ancient human practices and entirely relevant for 2022. Religion changes and evolves—that is only about a two-hundred-year-old offshoot of Christianity, Unitarian Universalism is itself a sign of that. Religion is always about answering questions about belonging and meaning for the people gathered in a particular time and place. When we gather here today, I believe we are not simply recreating community out of habits and tradition, but out of an ongoing need to make sense of life and to not feel alone. Meeting such a need is worth the bother.

As we move together into this year, I invite you to continue to ask yourself why bother? My hope is certainly not that you’ll decide it’s not worth the bother! Rather, my hope is that in naming what matters to each of us in showing up here, we might just be able to learn what it is each of us needs from religious community. In this way, perhaps we might just build the kind of religious community that is relevant and meaningful to 2022, to our neighbors, and to the future.

May it be so.