

“This Thing Called Ministry”
Neighborhood UU Church
September 19, 2021
Rev. Dr. Terasa Cooley

Invocation & Chalice Lighting

May this flame cast its light
toward the coming days,
reminding us that “the future
is not simply a place we are going,
but a place we are creating.”
The path of new possibilities will not be found, but made.
A new world is waiting to be built.
May our time together light the way.

Prayer “Choose to Bless the World” Rebecca Parker

Your gifts—whatever you discover them to be—
can be used to bless or curse the world.
The mind's power,
the strength of the hands,
the reaches of the heart,
the gift of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing, waiting
Any of these can serve to feed the hungry,
bind up wounds,
welcome the stranger,
praise what is sacred,
do the work of justice
or offer love.
Any of these can draw down the prison door,
hoard bread,
abandon the poor,
obscure what is holy,
comply with injustice
or withhold love.
You must answer this question:
What will you do with your gifts?
Choose to bless the world.
The choice to bless the world is more than an act of will,
a moving forward into the world

with the intention to do good.
It is an act of recognition,
a confession of surprise,
a grateful acknowledgment
that in the midst of a broken world
unspeakable beauty, grace and mystery abide.
There is an embrace of kindness
that encompasses all life, even yours.
And while there is injustice, anesthetization, or evil
there moves a holy disturbance,
a benevolent rage,
a revolutionary love,
protesting, urging, insisting
that which is sacred will not be defiled.
Those who bless the world live their life
as a gesture of thanks
for this beauty
and this rage.
The choice to bless the world can take you into solitude
to search for the sources
of power and grace;
native wisdom, healing, and liberation.
More, the choice will draw you into community,
the endeavor shared,
the heritage passed on,
the companionship of struggle,
the importance of keeping faith,
the life of ritual and praise,
the comfort of human friendship,
the company of earth
the chorus of life welcoming you.
None of us alone can save the world.
Together—that is another possibility, waiting.

Reading by David Rankin

“As come-outers from other religions, the ex-Catholic expects more authority; the ex-Episcopalian expects more ritual; the ex-Jew expects more tradition; the ex-Lutheran expects more devotion; the ex-Baptist expects more zeal; the ex-

Presbyterian expects more theology; the ex-Quaker expects more silence; the ex-Methodist expects more enthusiasm." And all the opposites of these as well.

On a professional level: "The executive expects an efficient administrator; the professor expects a learned scholar; the social worker expects a good listener; the banker expects a wise economist; the salesperson expects a high-powered fundraiser."

On a personal level: "There are those who expect their father, or mother, or those who expect a childhood minister; or those who expect a Jesus [or Maimonides] or Socrates [or high priestess]; there are those who expect the same qualities as in a predecessor; [and there are those who will not tolerate any of the same qualities as a predecessor.]"

In order to meet these expectations ministers should be: "firm but not rigid; honest but not rude; moral but not stuffy; humble but not servile; intelligent but not bookish; humorous but not frivolous; serious but not depressing; friendly but not superficial; clever but not scheming; prophetic but not critical of anyone."

Job description would look like this: "Researches the universe; inspires the dull; comforts the afflicted; afflicts the comfortable; maintains the tradition; introduces the contemporary; reforms the society; raises the budget; arbitrates disputes; officiates at ceremonies; socializes with ease; stays awake at every meeting."

Sermon

As someone who is mostly on the extroverted side of personalities, I don't have a lot of trouble talking to strangers – except when it comes to them asking me what I do for a living. Just starting off with "I'm a minister" either creates puzzlement for those who have no religious background, or brings to mind stereotypes of ministry. Those with a Catholic background inevitably ask "Can you get married?" Those with Protestant or conservative backgrounds immediately start rehearsing our previous conversation to make sure they haven't sworn or said something raunchy. You can literally see that interior conversation happening in their head. Liberal people start worrying about whether I will try to proselytize them or spout some conservative dogma.

So I often feel like I have to assure people that I can, in fact, get married (even if I don't want to!) Or I start throwing swear words into the conversation to assure them it's okay. Or I try to explain why Unitarian Universalist ministry is different and we all know how easy it is to explain Unitarian Universalism to strangers. It's just easier to try to avoid all this. Or, as my colleague Edward Frost used to say, "I'd rather tell people that I manufacture rawhide dog chews."

But it's a really important thing for us to explore together right now, as you will be discerning for the next two years what kind of minister you would like to call. We're going to talk a lot in the next few months about the *process* of calling a minister, which is important. But you also need to think about your own personal and collective expectations of what kind of minister would serve you best. It may sound rather obvious to say that not all ministers are alike, but in my experience people tend to assume that any minister you call would be good at everything, like in the reading from David Rankin this morning.

Or, the model of the previous minister is imprinted on their minds, for good or for ill. I often say I can tell whether a congregation has really gone through a thorough interim process by what kind of minister they choose next. If the minister is very much like the previous minister, or, conversely, the polar opposite of the previous minister, it probably indicates that they have made a reactive decision, rather than a thoughtful decision.

I've been a minister for over thirty years now. (And yes, I began when I was twelve years old.) I've divided that time between serving congregations and serving the denomination. That has given me a lot of time and experience to reflect upon what I've learned about ministry, both my own and that of my colleagues. So I want to share a few of those reflections.

The first is that ministry is really, really hard. I say that not to garner sympathy, but to help you understand why ministers sometimes struggle. We can laugh at David Rankin's description of ministry, and we should, but the harsh reality of so many

competing expectations can take its toll. In my first year at Divinity School a minister said to me: "If you are someone who really needs concrete results, don't go into the ministry." I've never forgotten that because it is so true. There is never a sense that the work of the day is done. There is always the next sermon to think about, the people we haven't fully attended to, the administrative task that still awaits.

It can be one of the loneliest of professions, because it is so important for ministers to have good personal boundaries and to pay more attention to the needs of others than our own. If we don't have well-developed communities of friends and family outside of the church it can be debilitating. It's not okay for me to fully dump my feelings on you. I am the one who is expected to carry the full vision of what needs to be done. And everyone else involved can just walk away, and sometimes do. Ministers are twice as likely as the general population to struggle with depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and even suicide.

I went through two periods of deep burnout and tried to walk away from the profession. I know many talented colleagues who have walked away for good. But I kept feeling called back. Why, you might ask, would anyone do this?! Because there is nothing like the feeling when you have truly comforted someone, or given someone a new way of looking at their lives, or provided a new sense of faith and meaning, or helped someone feel better about themselves. In those times it feels indeed like one of the most privileged professions you can have.

I have also learned that burnout is real among lay leaders. Many people probably have little idea about what lay leaders really have to go through, especially during times of conflict. They have to hold their own distress and still try to bring positive energy to the congregation. It constantly amazes me how much people are willing to do for the congregation they love. I am eternally grateful for it. Healthy ministry also means supporting lay leaders in their difficult work. As a minister I have to do that. And as a wider congregation it is important that you do that as well.

The second thing I have learned is that it's not all about me. Sometimes it is. Sometimes it is about what I can and can't offer. Sometimes I succeed and sometimes I fail. But my actions or inactions alone cannot make a congregation soar with growth or fall into oblivion. It is all about the partnership that is nourished. It's one of the reasons I like interim ministry: it is during interim times when a congregation can become the strongest.

The congregation I served in Arlington, VA, before coming here, was deeply wounded by a manipulative and abusive minister, who was ultimately removed from the ministry. But in our two years together they rallied behind the call "We are the church." Meaning, that the church does not have to be defined by whomever is its minister. They began to recognize some of the ways in which they needed to be responsible for the church and decided to try to eliminate some crushing debt that had held the congregation down for years. They took the bold step of launching a

capital campaign, something not often done in an interim time, and raised a million and a half dollars before the pandemic interrupted their campaign. I have no doubt that they will ultimately reach their goal.

Ultimately I have realized how liberating this realization is: it is not all about me! I do not have to feel responsible for everything like I did early in my ministry. I am far more effective by empowering and encouraging lay leadership, than I am by any miraculous actions of my own. The vision of the congregation comes from you. The mission is executed by you. I am not your puppet. I do have ideas of my own and experience to offer (which you probably already know about me!) But ultimately I am here to serve your vision, not my own.

The third thing that I've learned is that healthy congregations are not creatures of perfection. There is no perfect way to do things, there are no perfect ministers, there are no perfect lay people. What does make a healthy congregation is *honesty*. Many ministers are fearful of admitting mistakes or even failures because of the pressures I've just been describing. But *not* being open and honest about them is far more damaging to a ministry than open acknowledgment. And the same is true of a congregation. Having the courage to honestly confront mistakes that have been made in the past and find creative ways to correct them makes for a *real* healthy congregation. Not a perfect one.

I often see congregations who are in the middle of a search process try to understate the challenges of the past. I recently had a conversation with a colleague who was in search who interviewed with a congregation that had just been through a major conflict and terrible split. During the interview he asked what they could tell him about the past conflicts, and they literally said, "Conflict, what conflict? We've worked through all those things." Needless to say my colleague decided not to continue in the process with them.

I have been really impressed with this congregation and your ability to name your challenges, both past and current. That makes you so much more of an engaging partner because we don't have to go through all that pretense.

It is in the context of these three realizations about ministry that I hope you can engage with one another and with me during this interim time. There are a lot of burned out lay people among you, who have been deeply hurt either by a minister or by one another. We can never fully heal these hurts, but we can be an open and compassionate listening presence for one another. This is one of the reasons why I think it was a good decision for you to extend your interim process. The separations we had to endure because of the pandemic have meant that much of this healing still needs time and attention.

And while you certainly need to process how past ministers have helped or disappointed you. I hope you will put just as much attention on the question of how you, collectively and individually can contribute to making this a thriving

congregation. How can you really own this congregation, regardless of who your minister is?

You have already been engaging in truth telling processes, both about the past and your current challenges. I can only ask that we hold each other in the courage to take those honest reflections deeper.

My colleagues Barbara Pescan and Ann Tyndall once wrote: "Ministers and congregations call ourselves and each other closer to the edge - where reason and risk meet, where personal understanding leaves less and less room for denial of our own or of another's ultimate concern. This edge is in us. This is the edge of the path that leads us out of the sacred space we visit together with the holy in us. It is the edge from which we leap, again and again, into the unknown with greater loving and trust. This is the way we walk into the world, which needs all our voices, all our passion and healing, all our love, to be whole."

We can stand at that edge together, holding each other in love and in courage. So may it be.

Benediction

Much of ministry is a benediction
A speaking well of each other and the world
A speaking well of what we value:

Honesty

Love

Forgiveness

Trust

A speaking well of our efforts
A speaking well of our dreams

This is how we celebrate life
Through speaking well of it
Living the benediction
And becoming as a word well-spoken.

Go in peace.