

“Shared Ministry: The Language of Commitment”

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
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It has been just shy of nine months since I arrived as your minister. Some call such a time “the honeymoon period.” I prefer to call it a time of gestation. But rather than mother and baby, it’s congregation and called minister. In just four weeks, you will install me as your first full-time minister in three decades. We know that it’s impossible to be “somewhat pregnant!” The deed is done; a birth is imminent in this pivot point of your decision, my acceptance, and a spoken covenant with one another for a time period as yet unknown. As with the birth of a child, this is scary and joyous. As with the birth of a child, our lives will never be the same. As with the birth of a child, there is an immense commitment to be made. It is a commitment of mutuality. It is a commitment to ministry that is shared.

Yes, I am the professional minister. I went to seminary, did my Clinical Pastoral Education and an internship, went before the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, and added a doctorate in psychology (which I use every day) and a seasoned life of professional ministry and more. Each of you brings your own gifts—your childhood, your memories, your professional and work experience, your distinctive talents, and above all, your presence. All of this plus the treasure that we contribute in the form of money comprise our stewardship of participation and presence.

“From you I receive, to you I give; together we share and from this we live.” We sing it together. We live it together.

Ours is a ministry shared. Ours is a family of faith—not just this congregation but also the family of faith that is our Unitarian Universalist world and the even larger family that is this web of life of which we are a part. Ours is a ministry of mutuality. It’s not just about you, and it’s not just about me. It’s about us as we gather for worship and religious education and rites of passage and justice making and conspiring with Mother Nature to create a garden—both literally and symbolically. How is our garden growing? How are we tending it? Is it just for one season or for the long haul? What is our commitment to a garden whose plantings we intend to be perennial?

What is your ministry? What is my ministry? What is our ministry in planning and planting and tending this garden that is a work in process? What is our ministry as we gather to discern the lives we are living as works in process? What have we already decided and what is that to which we have already committed? What commitment are we or are we not honoring as we move beyond the gestation period to plantings that are sprouting, buds that are bursting, and new arrivals in this ever changing landscape and lifescape?

One garden, many gardeners. What an extended family of gardeners is called for to create one magnificent garden. It’s another version of *e pluribus unum*—out of many, one.

I've been to more than one political demonstration where we chant: "This is what democracy looks like! This is what democracy looks like!" Shared ministry is a democratic practice. Democratic practice is a living affirmation that we're all in it together—whether we're referring to life on this planet, life in our Unitarian Universalist Association of interdependent congregations, or the day to days of the Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden, Connecticut. When we listen deeply; when we practice love and justice; when we hear and heed the needs of one another; when we teach and learn through religious education and exploration; when we laugh together and cry together; and when we commit our time, talents, and treasure to the livelihood of the many ministries of this congregation and this faith—well, "This is what democracy looks like!"

Democracy is imperfect; it's messy; it's sometime like wading through mud. As Unitarian Universalists, we seek to be fair. We seek to hear every voice if not to abide by what we each have to say. We seek to stretch the fiber of our souls into a community to which we can all say, "YES!" Yes, this is what democracy looks like. This is a more or less functional family of caring and sharing. This is a place where I find meaning and challenge. This is a place where with you and you and you I can sing my heart's songs—sometimes off-key, sometimes not agreeing with the words, but in a textured harmony of listening and love and justice and reverence and yes, commitment. Shared ministry and democratic practice are all about caring. And caring is all about commitment – of our time, our talents, and our treasure.

Consider Pierre and his story.

Pierre comes to us through the talents of one of my favorite writers and illustrators, Maurice Sendak, perhaps known to many of you through the pages of *Where the Wild Things Are*. Wildness I'll postpone for another Sunday. Pierre is with us this morning through a story that Sendak dubs, "a cautionary tale."

*There once was a boy named Pierre
who only would say, "I don't care!"*

...One day his mother said
when Pierre climbed out of bed,
"Good morning, darling, boy,
you are my only joy."
Pierre said, "*I don't care!*"

"What would you like to eat?"
"I don't care!"
Some lovely cream of wheat?"
"I don't care!"
"Don't sit backwards on your chair."
"I don't care!"
Or pour syrup on your hair."
"I don't care!"

You get the picture. This was not a caring Pierre. His parents went off on an errand, desperate for respite. (Sendak is contagious!) Pierre stayed behind, resolute.

Enter a hungry lion, who:

“...looked Pierre right in the eye
and asked him if he’d like to die.
Pierre said, “*I don’t care!*”
“I can eat you, don’t you see?”
“*I don’t care!*”
“And you will be inside of me.”
“*I don’t care!*”

What happens next does not take a prophet to tell, though the lion became quite sick with Pierre in his newly stuffed tummy and crawled into his bed, with Pierre more or less dead. The parents returned to find the lion there and after assaulting him with a chair, carted him off to the doctor in town, who shook him up and down. Out fell Pierre onto the floor. Clunk!

“Then everyone looked at Pierre
who shouted, “*Yes indeed I care!!*”

Are any of us Pierre? Not quite so extreme. But we have historically encountered a lion looking us in the eye, a lion who’s simply hungry; and far from getting the lion’s share of whatever we can possibly give, this lion simply invites each of us to think hard about giving our fair share. Pierre just didn’t understand until he had sufficient time and the proper place to reflect on why it mattered.

It was there that Pierre grew needy—not just for a benevolent lion, but for friends and family, for his neighborhood. He returned, how might we say it—radicalized? Pierre not only cared; he was passionately committed to caring! He had discovered that he was as much in need as anybody of the gifts of community and that these gifts can be unwrapped only through caring.

The words of my colleague Victoria Safford echo:

We need religious grounding.
...We need community.

We find the sources of these things we need,
And then we choose to sustain them, to nurture them,
not by willpower, not by some sense of duty or obligation,
but because we care passionately about them
and find them central to our lives.

That is, we need grounding in what matters most to us, and we need it in the company of others. We discover where they may be found, and then we choose to support them. We choose to support them, because we care. And when we care, we are committed. And when we are committed, we contribute generously of our time, our talents, and our treasure.

This morning we saw our youngsters struggle with “how to spend their allowance.” What choices they had—10 dimes each, and in pretend mode, \$10 each, to divvy up in any combination of seven different directions: a new book, a new toy, ice cream, savings, our church

(deftly slid in there), a birthday gift for a friend, a really cool T-shirt. Early choices matter. Choice matters.

Just yesterday a gift arrived in the form of a forwarded e-mail from one of you. It held the reflections of teacher/ecologist Joanna Macy on the occasion of her 84th birthday. Drawing on her studies and life experience, Macy illumines “choice-making as the genesis and essential nature of the self. If you want to find out what and who you are, that’s where to look.”

Choice is core to living our faith as Unitarian Universalists. Choice and commitment are twins of spirit and deed. Choice, commitment, and caring deepen and extend our communal identity.

In this ministry we share, in the actions of our children and this entire congregation, in the lessons we learn from the likes of Pierre, and through the wisdom to which we are privy from the thoughtful reflections of Joanna Macy, we are stewards of the miracle that is life.

In this spirit, I commit to be responsible with you for the life and health of this congregation. I will continue to give of my time, talents, and treasure. I believe you should know what your minister gives in all three dimensions. As for time, you know that I seek to be generous. As for talents, that is for you to judge. As for treasure, while I would like to give more, the draw of other demands suggests that I give what I can with some stretch. So I’m raising my pledge from \$2,800 for the current fiscal year to \$3,000 for this next fiscal year, plus my commitment of \$500 per year for this current year and the next three years to our Campaign for Growth. You should also know that my fiscal commitment to my home congregation in Montclair, NJ is \$500 for this next year. My commitment is to the shared ministry of this congregation and to the shared ministry of this faith, but you get the lion’s share.

May we each and all commit our treasure to the outer stretches of our means. If you’re limited by economic hardship, please let me know. Your membership will be honored while, in confidence, I’ll ensure a waiver or work with you toward a commitment that you can afford. We’re all in this congregation together, giving and receiving, giving and receiving. Through committed community, our today and tomorrow will come alive with promise and possibility. We are moving beyond the gestation period into a time of ministry that is shared abundantly. May our garden grow.

Amen.

Sources:

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Maurice Sendak, *Pierre: a cautionary tale*, Harper & Row, Publishers, 1962.