

What's a Church For?©

A Sermon offered by the Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz
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The Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis

Sometimes you are called to testify about your church and your faith in the most unlikely of places. Maybe it will happen on a plane and you get involved in a conversation with a stranger, or maybe it happens on the playground or the bus stop. It can happen anywhere or anytime, and for me, it happened just this week, in a nail salon here in Annapolis. “So, what do you?” this 20 something woman asked me while she was filing my nails. I’ve found the simplest way to answer that question is to say: “I work for a church,” because to confess that I’m a minister usually opens a whole line of conversation that sometimes I just don’t want to deal with.

“I’m a Buddhist” she said. As a Vietnamese American, she was keenly interested in Western religion, and the reason for church - so she kept asking a few questions. Then she paused. “What I want to know is why churches hate gay people like me.” Bam. I think it’s called a mic drop. I felt the enormity of the question. I regretted that Unitarian Universalism had not yet penetrated the larger culture well enough for her to know that there was at least one – and we are not the only one of course – but at least one faith that would not reject her – but would embrace her fully. My mind raced to fill the silence that hung in the air after her question. The woman sitting next to me appeared to shift uncomfortably in her seat.

This is an incredibly important Sunday as we honor the decision of people who have made a life-changing decision; they have decided to join a church. For our newest members – you have stepped into a stream of liberal religious thinking and action that is over 500 years old.

It begins with the bedrock belief that you are born good – that you are whole – that you don’t need to crawl on your knees and beg repentance for being human. That’s why the first principle has struck such a chord with newcomers; our covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. It means that we welcome you just as you are; with all of your various

identities; bringing to this faith experience both your brilliance and your baggage; your hurts and your hopes. It is a church where you can expect to be transformed.

My nail technician was waiting for me to answer. I said to her “my church doesn’t feel that way. My church believes that you are good – just the way you are. My church openly welcomes, affirms and expects the full participation of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, gender queer persons.” The woman sitting next to me began to speak, and I must confess that before she did, I was worried I was going to get into a battle of ethics right there in the middle of the nail salon. Instead, she said “oh, you must be Unitarian – or a Quaker – right?” Do you go the church just down the road?

Sometimes you get to testify for your beliefs in the most unlikely of places. On this morning of welcoming new members, I want to look at the question that was in part framed by my conversation with my randomly assigned nail technician: So what’s the point of a church? I’m going away my punch line early in the sermon – so if you only remember two things about this sermon it’s this: *The point of church is to grow a soul and to be of service.* And now, as we used to say in seminary “let’s unpack that.”

The phrase “to grow a soul” is often attributed to the Rev. Dr. A Powell Davies, who served the All Souls Church, Unitarian in Washington DC from 1943 to his death in 1957. He elevated that pulpit to national prominence. Although he is best known for his resistance to McCarthyism, his persistent challenges to segregation, and his relentless championing civil rights, he believed that the primary human calling was the cultivation and development of character and action, and that cultivating a spiritual life was at the core of religious belief.

In other words, as he said “life is just the chance to grow a soul.” I love that! Because that’s what I think we’re about here at UUCA, and as this faith tradition. So if you need a quick response to your Aunt Lilly who leans over to you during Thanksgiving dinner and says “what’s your church all about?” You can tell her - after that brief, slightly awkward pause: “the reason I go to church is to grow my soul and to be of service.” Then, if

she's really all that interested, you can go on to elaborate HOW the church helps you to grow your soul.

In order to do that, I want to go back to the shift that we made earlier this year from Religious Education to Faith Formation. I know that not everyone is happy about that name change. It's interesting to me, the feedback that I've heard is primarily from our older members who no longer have children in the program. They don't like the name Faith Formation because they question what that word might mean for someone who claims to be – say – an atheist – or an agnostic – or who simply doesn't like the word faith. But, if you heard my sermon two weeks ago, you would know that “faith” does not mean a boiled down religion that you are told to swallow like pabulum or gruel.

Faith *in this context* is an alive, active, dynamic dance between your own beliefs and cherished values and those of this 500+ tradition. Religious Education is a model that was based on a kind of open-your-mind-and-let-us-pour-in facts-model of learning. Children would come out of our churches knowing a lot about Judaism, Buddhism and Science and virtually nothing about how to develop a spiritual practice that sustains you through good times and bad. Faith formation is more closely aligned to another theological belief we hold: that revelation is not sealed; that the person you are today is not the person you may be in a year from now. It is a never-ending story that continues to evolve, shape and change – and we think that's a good thing. That's why we changed the name from Religious Education to Faith Formation – to reflect the reality, as A. Powell Davies put it so well, that life is just a chance to grow a soul.

I can personally testify to the ways in which I have been changed because of my relationship with you this past year and a half. I've learned a lot about you – as a congregation – and how much I admire your tenacity, your commitments, and the ways in which you truly dig into hard work. In a couple weeks I'm going to talk White Fragility; Mine and Yours – and some of the lessons I've learned, often painful and frankly embarrassing for a person who though she was pretty woke – about anti-racism and anti-oppression. My own faith has

been profoundly shaped by my working with the BBC – Building Beloved Community, with Rev. John, with Josh, with Leika, Jannina and before her, with Maurita. My soul has grown deep through witnessing hard work of groups like ACT, and UU Legislative Ministry and Sanctuary and so many other groups too numerous to name, but whom you can meet afterwards during the Volunteer Fair.

Likewise, you are going to be learning a lot about yourselves in the next month, as the Ministerial Search Committee (MSC for short) is hosting a series of Cottage Meetings every week, before the service and during Middle Hour. The purpose of these meetings is for the MSC to hear your thoughts about what is important to you in your search for a second minister. Folks, if you haven't already realized this; this is extremely important opportunity for you to shape the future of your next ministerial team.

But what is even more important about these meetings is not to ask yourselves or each other “what kind of minister do we want?” but rather, “what kind of church do we wish to become?” I continue to insist that the answer to the second question will give you all the information you need to help answer the first.

So we grow a soul by engaging in faith formation both as children, youth and adults. One of the experiments we're trying this year is to frame our Adult Faith Formation offerings into something I called PUURL – Practicing a Unitarian Universalist Religious Life. It's categories our offerings into four areas that comprise a well-balanced spiritual life: Mind, Body, Heart and Spirit. -I like to think of the spiritual life like a wheel that's true. Let me tell you what I mean.

One summer I was a bike mechanic on Block Island and sometimes I would have to true a bike wheel by tightening the spokes so that they all had the same amount of tension. When a wheel was out of true – it would create a flat spot, a kind of clunk when the wheel hit that place in the road. Over time, it could lead the cyclist to a crash. Our spiritual lives are like that too – too much intellectual study without engaging the heart can become patronizing and abusive. Too much heart without the rigors of reason can be sentimental and anemic. Focusing solely on the spiritual side of life

at the expense of taking care of our bodies can lead to physical ruin; too much emphasis on the body without care for the mind, spirit or heart creates an attractive, but empty shell.

You get the idea; To grow a soul is to have a spiritual practice that you do, preferably every day and the purpose of the church is to help you to find and/or deepen in that practice.

The good news is that you don't have to do that alone! Church is one of the few places left where you are provided the opportunity for meaningful engagement within the context of a covenanted community. What do I mean by that? Those of you who have been around for a while know that as a faith we are not creedal – meaning our new members didn't have to sign a document that says “yes, I believe the Nicene Creed or the Athanasian Creed” but that we make promises to each other about not what we believe, but about how we will behave. That's why I had us read the safe congregations covenant as our call to worship this morning. People wonder “well, does being a member of UU church mean I can believe whatever I want?”

Unitarian Universalism has a history of elevating the right of individual free speech above all else. While I was pleased to tell that nail technician that we welcome BGLTQ people today, it was not always the case. Years ago, there was a fierce battle going on among Unitarian Universalists around how welcoming we truly were to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people – and today, I would queer or gender non-conforming. People would say the most hateful things about persons who identified as BGLTQ and defend their right to say those things as free speech.

They believe they had rationale and reasoned arguments about why BGLTQ folks should not be accorded the same rights, privileges and responsibilities of non-gay members. This was hurtful and damaging to real people and to the church.

Some members changed their beliefs as their children came out to them as gay; as their beloved church member who taught their kids in Sunday school or served on the board, came out as transgender. Over time many members lives were

transformed, but some members couldn't change. Some left voluntarily. Some, whose beliefs about gay people led them to behave badly had to be asked to leave. And some BGLTQ people stayed because they wanted to see this faith change; and some others were too hurt by their own church's rejection and left. This is a hard thing to say on New Member Sunday, but the point is that in order to grow one's soul, we do that not only by individual, private spiritual practice, but by being in relationship with one another, as difficult and as challenging as that can be.

So – the point of church is to grow a soul – through faith formation and through the discipline practice of being in a covenanted community. But there's one piece missing and that is “to be of service.” When people would ask me “what's the point of church?”

I'd say that we do three things: “we connect with our highest values and with others who share them,” “we grow our souls by practicing wisdom and compassion; and by serving needs greater than our own.” It's that last part I want to look at now.

Most UU churches are good at social justice work. Martin Luther used to talk about salvation by faith alone; Unitarian Universalists tend to believe in salvation by social justice. By that I mean we sometimes could care less about all the machinations of theology – we just want to get out there and do stuff. And, the stuff we do is good. In my time as a minister, I've either encouraged or participated in pipeline protests, Black Lives Matter meetings, sit-ins, die-ins, walk-ups, walk outs, lobbying, writing letters, visiting prisoners, making soup and sandwiches, providing shelter, civil disobedience, forming human chains, and have proudly engaged in tree-hugging, vegan-eating and fanatical recycling. To be honest, I do not think I would have done half of this if it weren't for my fellow Unitarian Universalists. We can do these things individually of course, but there is power in putting our bodies together – even if we feel the cause is just but not sure our efforts will make much of an impact.

In March 2018, many of us attended the March for our Lives in Washington DC. I wasn't sure I was going to go, knowing how beholden the

current Administration is to the gun lobby and how many marches I've been to that felt, if I'm honest, futile to attend. But then this church member, this incredibly tall, wild-haired red head texted me: "when we are we leaving from church to go the March?" I texted Wendi Winters back "Let's meet at 9 and ride the Metro into DC together as a group." That's all it took. One text.

I was going not because I thought my presence would make all that much difference, but I was going for those kids in Parkland, who didn't let their despair stop them from marching for their and our lives. I was going for Wendi, who was always up for a fight if the cause was right. I was going for other members of UUCA, who were as fed up as I am about the easy access to weapons of mass destruction. We do these things to serve needs greater than our own. And sometimes, we find they are our needs.

We are diagnosed with a serious illness and discover firsthand how brutal our current health care system can be. Our child struggles with a learning disability or has autism or other developmental needs and we find out viscerally how inadequate our educational system often is to handle those needs. We are driving our car and forget to put on a turn signal and wonder because of the color of our skin if we will survive the encounter. We show up for ourselves, but, more often not, we show up for each other.

This volunteer fair that's held after today's service – on the one hand, it's a chance for the committees, groups and programs of UUCA to show off a bit – brag a bit about their work or their group; to let you know about what's going on- and yes, hopefully to recruit you to their team. But the real spiritual message that is being sent behind the tri-folds, the brochures, the banners – is that each one is expressing their secret love for the cause – the community – the covenant and the commitment we share.

Each friendly face you will encounter is extending a welcome to you – not just to serve on a committee to do the work of the church, but to be in partnership with another in this vast and intimate task of building community, of growing our souls, of being of service, one growing one soul at a time.

So, if anyone asks you the question: "What's a church for? Just tell them that.