

This morning's sermon is one I do once a year I call it the question box sermon because we collect questions from the congregation in a box and then I attempt to answer those questions. I like this because it gives me some sense of what interests people. The questions I will be answering this morning are a bit all over the place but justice and justice making are a common theme. A couple of questions were duplicates so you may not hear the exact wording of what you might have submitted. And also there were a couple of questions that were really about some difficult times someone is having. If that was you I would invite you to contact me so we can have a deeper conversation.

So here goes:

How do you see the gender spectrum and sexual orientation spectrum becoming the norm/changing? And in your dream world what would happen?

We don't introduce or describe people very often by their eye color or hair color. For instance, I doubt most of us would say – did you meet that new brown eye at coffee hour yesterday? Did you see the straight hair who moved in to the apartment downstairs? We don't ask people who are expecting a baby – do you know is it right handed or left handed? In my dream world we would most of the time see people as a whole person and not defined by one characteristic – and we would not value how that characteristic is expressed so strongly. Wouldn't it be a better world if we said to expecting parent or parents – how's it going – what are you excited about? What are you worried about? Instead of saying – oh three girls you're going to have your hands full or another boy you must be disappointed.

The following two questions are really a pair bookends as it were.

Do people know that helping the congregation physically – up to one's ability is understood as part of one's membership

Do people know that Financial support up to one's ability is included in membership?

The simple answer to this question is yes, I think so. When folks come to membership orientation events they do hear what are the components of membership – signing the book, making a pledge and paying it, getting involved in a regular way. I think the harder part of this question is what is up to one's ability.

There is a quote I see fairly often "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about." Some folks have clear limitations on their times or abilities – they might have young children at home, or they might be recuperating from surgery. Some folks have things that are not so easily seen that affect how they can be involved –

maybe they have a hearing loss, or limited vision, maybe they have a really bad back – that doesn't keep them from walking or driving but spring cleanup day is impossible. And folks have financial obligations that we may not know about. For younger folks school loans can be crushing, for older folks medical expenses can be debilitating. I don't always know who has adult children they are still supporting or grandkids they are helping out or parents who have medical bills.

"What are your favorite and LEAST favorite parts of being minister of First UU?"

This is a hard question to answer because I love this church and I love being pastor of this church. As many of you know I have been ordained for a long time, since 1985, but for a variety of reasons this is my first solo pastorate. There have been some things I have had to experience to learn. I supervise the staff – Sara Jo and Tina. Each year at canvass time and budget time I feel very responsible to them. I know their salaries depend on your generosity. And in that My least favorite part of being the minister at First UU is the annual canvass and budget process. I don't mind asking for money. I call for the morning offering every Sunday. Asking for money is part of church work. The hard part is that every year we are spending more than we earn in rentals and donations. I worry each year that we won't raise enough for the salaries and benefits of our staff. That tends to keep me up at night.

What is my favorite part – also hard to answer because there are so many favorite parts. My favorite part is when people ask me to visit them or to meet them somewhere. I joke that the administrative part of my job is just to keep me busy between the visits and that is true. I like when folks ask to meet with me so that they can talk about a problem they are having or something they are trying to work out. And I like meeting with people to talk about the big questions – what does my life mean, how can I be a better person, is there a god if so what is god like?

If you could change one thing about First UU, or Unitarian Universalism in general, what would it be?

I would like to see First UU grow in numbers and in impact. I would like us to be better known in the community. I know I say this often but I do believe and am passionate about it. We as a community have a deep call to be welcoming to all especially LGBTQA folk. We are good at being friendly, being welcoming, not laying our expectations on newcomers too much, being curious in a friendly way. We attempt to be in covenanted relationship with one another, to speak the truth, walk in love remembering to be kind. Not easy to do all three of those at once. I believe the world needs much more of this kind of community. I would like to see us bring our friends and neighbors in, remember to invite our co-workers. When folks ask you why you live in Syracuse it would be great if you included First UU as one of the reasons. These are the beginnings of behaviors that bring folks to us. I think the other part of increasing our impact is being visible which we

are beginning to do – being at the PRIDE parade and the State Fair, at the Westcott festival, and at protests and community forums with our banner and our yellow t-shirts. And also being visible by helping out the Eastern Farm Workers and St. Lucy's but being part of our kids' schools, volunteering at the local library.

What sound bite or statement would you say to our president that might matter on his limitation on transgender and military personnel?

I actually don't believe there is a sound bite or quick statement that would change Donald Trump's mind on transgender folk and military service. I say this not because I think the President can't change but because I strongly believe that sound bites don't change people's beliefs or feelings. I think that kind of change happens in the context of relationships. I think hearts change first and then minds.

Here is a tough question for you: what do you do when you are frustrated with your beloved community for not following far enough or quickly enough down the path of racial justice and reconciliation?

Congregations are more of an emotional system than any non-family group I can think of. We come together out of a need for connection with ourselves, with each other, and with the larger world. Each of us comes with our own particular story, and baggage as it were. And each of comes with our own temperament. Each of comes with our own strengths and our own weaknesses. Some of us are slow processors – which does not mean we are dumb but rather that ideas need time to roll around inside us and they tend to come out fully formed. Some of us are external processors – meaning we need to talk about the idea not yet fully formed in order to get it formed. Some of us are introverts more comfortable in one on one conversations or time alone, some of us are extroverts meaning we thrive in relationship with others. I could spend the whole sermon time simply describing the ways we are different from each other, the ways we are the same, and the ways we are trying to stay in relationship with each other.

I say all this to get to the point that church systems are complicated. It is that complication that makes them powerful and profound. But I try really hard to remember that everyone – everyone of us is on a journey. For some that h journey is about racial justice and reconciliation, but for others it is about fighting for equal access for folks of different abilities, for others it is about the fight for gender equality. And for some of our journey is not about public acts of justice making. For some folks their justice making is supporting the folks who do the actions.

I guess an easier way to say it is this: I travel 3 times a year to Boston for UUA work. I travel by myself by train – I know my stops I know what to pack I know my schedule, I have my walking routes. I can get from the hotel to UUA headquarters in 10 minutes – I am a fast walker – just ask my kids. Every other year I travel to Boston with our Coming of Age group. It takes forever to get a group of 15 people from South station to the UUA

headquarters or from the Science Center stop to the Science museum. My solo trips into Boston are good but those coming of Age trips are memorable. Being in a group of folks deepens the experience but you give up control – you need to make compromises, you need time to learn about each other.

I try to look at the progress we are making and not simply look at what we are not doing. There is always an infinite amount of things that we are not doing but it is the things that we actually do that make the difference.

If marching in demonstrations and calling your representatives isn't comfortable or seems ineffective what are some things we can do to help better times emerge.

Vote and especially vote in local elections. Some folks only vote in the big national elections and skip the local elections but when somebody does that they are giving up their power. Folks in national races look at local elections for direction. And who is your mayor or on your school board matters to the quality of life for everybody.

Think about how you spend your money. Can you spend it at business owned by local residents? Do you have savings or investments – look into how they are invested – what companies are you supporting.

Support local charities over National organizations.

Volunteer in your local school. Schools have an amazing power in children's lives and they are woefully underfunded. Get to your local school and ask to be a reading buddy to the kid who has the worst behavior, not the best. Give that kid a reason to look forward to coming to school. If you can't volunteer ask your local school if there is a classroom you could be an angel for. Maybe those students need some books, or some supplies. Maybe they need a pizza party maybe they just need an angel.

Get your money out of a large bank and put it in a local credit union. Local credit unions are members of our community and profits go back into the community.

Think about how you spend your time and your skills. Maybe you like gardening join a community garden or start one. Help people to raise their own food.

Two paired questions again

Is it difficult to balance sermons when part of congregation has some faith-based underpinnings while others may cringe to hear anything beyond humanism?

Yes. PAUSE This is both the challenge and the charm of preaching in a UU congregations. Sometimes I hear that I use too much God language, sometimes I hear that I am too Christian, sometimes I hear that I am too pagan, sometimes I hear ... well

the reality is that in this congregation on any given Sunday someone is going to leave feeling as if their faith tradition was not spoken too. Hopefully I speak to or engage with people's values.

I will say that one thing I value is that when I have preached on Jesus a bit too much or pulled from more traditional language what I will hear from folks is positive critique from a place of "I" – you know Jennifer I would really appreciate a service that speaks to my Jewish roots, I loved the time you did a Beltane service could you do one again. People do not come up to me and say "If you use the word God one more time I think I might just have to leave." I know colleagues to whom this has happened.

How can we claim words for UU e.g. God, worship, patriotism etc. – seems like far right has stolen them for them selves

Bill Sinkford a former president of the UUA has written and talked about us UUs reclaiming a language of reverence. And this question speaks to that. If because we are an eclectic group we strike all language that might be based in some kind of spiritual values or beliefs then we lose our ability to speak to a diverse group with any kind of depth. But what we do need to do is give context. I might speak about my personal faith but then I would identify it as such. When I did a Samhain service I consulted with a pagan worship leader I know to find out ways that would be good to present that.

Which leads into one of the other questions

Can the positive values – love compassion kindness etc. decrease negative values – hate violence etc.?

Yes, I do believe that. Words matter. How we talk to one another matters. I know that when I speak to someone with respect, with care, I tend to get a similar response. It is possible to de-escalate a conflict with words that express care, respect love.

Why do some songs stick in your head?

Here's why I like this question – it is not uncommon for me to wake up on Monday morning with the last hymn of Sunday morning playing in my head.

So of course I googled this and it turns out that there have not been a lot of studies on this subject but I did find new study, published in the journal [Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity and the Arts](#). This study was done in the UK they surveyed folks and asked them for their ear worms and then took the top answers and compared what the songs had in common.

Jakubowski's team identified three main reasons why [ear worms] occur, and it comes down to pace, the shape of the melody and a few unique intervals that make a song stand out.

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Apparently faster upbeat music tends more to stick in our heads and unusual intervals that make the song stand out a bit.

“The team [that did this study] believes that in addition to simply understanding how and why this common phenomenon happens, understanding how earworms affect our brains could add insight into how we process memories and moods, as earworms are also known to be linked to memories and to perk people up.”

Maybe most importantly the study also asked what could be done to get an ear worm out of your head

- 1) Listen to or play the whole song one theory is that we replay a song when we can't remember how it ends
- 2) Listen to a different song
- 3) Sing God save the Queen <https://www.cnn.com/2016/11/03/health/song-stuck-in-head-earworm-study/index.html>