

# Last Words

---

*A sermon preached at the First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque, New Mexico  
on August 20, 2017, by the Rev. Christine Robinson*

## Introduction to the Message

What a wonderful Summer we've had, as we have edged up towards my retirement which becomes final next Sunday! Along with some beginnings of goodbyes, we have had return visits from our interns. What fun! And how satisfying to see how they've taken what they learned here and flown with it.

I was reminded last week that one of the things that every new minister must learn is to not try to put everything they know into their first sermon. "Relax," I tell them. "You have a career full of sermons ahead of you."

And then I realized why I was having such trouble writing this sermon. I no longer have that luxury. Although I certainly imagine I will be preaching again here and there...as a part of my consulting work, or because I love to go to cold places in the winter so I can exercise my cross-country skis, or even, eventually, here, there is something about preaching to one's own congregation...the one that heard your last sermon and the one before that, and has even heard that story or reading or poem before.... The one that has come to understand you as you understand them.... that is extra rich; layered with history and meanings and relationships, as well as with the ideas of the morning, and of that kind of preaching, every minister's favorite, there is but one sermon left.

You're gonna be here 'till noon (three).

Just joking.

But we are going to have to scoot through some things...let the music speak for us. Because things are shaking in our world, goodbye's or not, and we need to pay attention.

We've already talked about how to say goodbye. How to honor the importance of the relationship and say thank you, ask forgiveness and give and hear a blessing. Remember? Four things.

We'll do that next week, all of it. This week, we'll do it vicariously, by overhearing an infamous goodbye: between two sisters who have been tangling all their lives. Their original creator, Frank Baum called one Good and one Wicked, but in the contemporary version of the world of Oz, things are a little more nuanced and there is much to admire, as well as dislike, in both

women. After Dorothy's house falls on the one called Wicked, they have a last meeting, and they do an admirable job of saying Goodbye. So get out your hankies.... Let's listen.

The psychologist Karl Jung entitled his autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections*. It seemed to me to be an appropriate way to sum up a ministry. Here are the memories.

## Memories

I have been here a long, long time. So long that when Mike McDonald came into my office to say that it was soon going to be very important for congregations to have a website and could he make one for us, I said, "OK. What's a website?"

I remember the day that the mayor's mother in law, 80 years old, her very thin hair fluffed with hair spray into a perfect coif, came up to light a candle, leaned down, and caught her hair on fire. Luckily I was standing right there, and...from her perspective started beating on her head. She hadn't felt a thing, except me, and she was mightily surprised. But I hope I never again hear the sound of 150 people gasping in horror all at once!

I remember helping to organize and MC the memorial service on Civic Plaza the week after 9-11. It's a good thing, to have saved the mayor's mother-in-law from burning. It was good to have our values shot through that service.

I remember the Sunday that a bird.... a curved bill thatcher, to be exact.... flew into the old sanctuary and, confused by two walls of windows, couldn't get out. He landed on top of the mural wall and walked back and forth for the first half of the service. I told the congregation that it was Pentecost...a Christian holiday devoted to the celebration of the holy spirit, who is often depicted as a bird, so this incursion took on special meaning. Finally, an usher opened one of the side doors for the bird, and at the end of the prayer, right on the amen when everyone opened their eyes, the bird flew out. It was a blessing.

I was present for the birth of a baby...somebody else's, that is, which is a very different experience from the birth of one's own. It was 15 months after I was present when that baby's older sister died at birth, as expected, and I blessed the baby for her family. That was one of the most poignant of many times I've had the chance to be with people and families through changing circumstances.

I've officiated at weddings for people who had been sure they would never find their true love, blessed twins of a couple who had been told they were infertile and didn't know they were pregnant until 10 hours before their children were born, watched families recover from tragedy and go on with their lives and find love and laughter again. It has been an education in resilience and recovery which changed me for good.

I remember taking Kevin to Washington DC to see the sights, and while at the Viet Nam Memorial we made a rubbing of the name of a young man who had grown up in this church. His parents, still members, had not been to Washington and had not seen it.

I was the recipient of two suicide notes during this ministry, neither of which was I allowed to keep, but I remember that their writers, who both had struggled with unrelenting mental illness, were intentional, sorry to put me through the trauma, and grateful to me and the congregation for our ministry to them.

I remember being on the platform at GA, with other staff and leaders from the congregation, when we were named as a Breakthrough Congregation, for our growth from 400 to 750 members. We're 850 now.

I got to preside over a miracle, on April Fools Day of 2012, when you raised \$230,000 in one day so we could build this much-needed sanctuary.

I remember the day that all our children and teens...this was their idea....trooped up to this platform and sang "Let it Go" from the musical "Frozen." I don't know what was cuter, the three year olds belting out the rather advanced vocabulary of that song or the teens throwing themselves into the defiant gestures. It was so much fun we did it again at the end of the service and that time most of the grown ups jumped up and sang along with the best of them. It was....cathartic.

I remember conducting the choir and a small orchestra in the Hallelujah Chorus... which was quite a kick for an old music major, and I felt that my college conducting teacher would have approved of my performance, and that that would have been the one and only time he had that thought, so I was very happy to be able to do it. And I will never forget the joy of singing the song from Hamilton with the band just last June... wow!

I remember a day at the shooting range, learning to shoot a handgun, in the service of a sermon on gun violence, and the Women's march. And two building dedications. And countless small but significant moments with individuals and groups...moments of clarity, relief, spirit.

It's been good.

## Message Part II "Dreams"

So...here are the dreams!

When I was installed at my first church, the minister who charged the congregation said, "You be a good Church. Christine will become a good minister."

"Huh!" I thought. "Is that how it works!" And it was. They were a good church. Not perfect, but good enough to teach me lots of important things and set me on the path to being a good minister.

And so were you. Ministers are taught and honed and polished, from their internships to their retirements, in relationship to congregations. You've been a good church, and you made me a good minister. You started 8 interns on their path to ministry. And you have shaped Angela into the good minister that she already is. Keep up the good work! Be a good partner. Speak the truth to her in love, as you ask her to speak to you. Keep generous hearts and let her shape you as you will shape her...as you shaped me. That's my dream.

Here's another dream. I want you to become as fiercely bonded to Angela as you have been to me. Facilitating that is one reason I'll be away from this congregation and you wonderful people for a year. It's that important.

And furthermore, I want you to change whatever around here needs to change. God forbid that something that would serve you well wouldn't get done because somebody thought I would be offended. It's all yours now, and I trust you to do as well with it as you have in the past 29 years. You survived difficult relationships or hard partings with the five ministers who preceded me. You will survive what became a good relationship and a good parting with me....but only if you will let it go and let things change. Let me hear an Amen.

My final dream for you is that you will continue to be a shining light on the corner of Carlisle and Comanche, standing for spiritual growth in a dogma-free religious community, standing on the side of love, standing in community. What we built here is for us, for our children, for those who come after us seeking a free faith...and it is a community we can organize to seek justice in the world. Which is what the offering song is all about.

### Part III Reflections

You'd like to think  
the smart people were in charge.  
You'd like to think  
the kind-hearted folks  
had bothered to assemble all the facts.  
With so much at stake  
you'd hope that someone with a microphone  
had a firm grasp on the next step,  
or at least knew more  
than we do.

So many of us have  
good neighbors,  
wise librarians,  
soccer coaches who tell us  
to just buck up and do our best;  
you'd think the whole thing  
would have turned out  
better than it has.

One can only imagine  
that in some celestial living room  
the Heavenly Father,

the Holy Mother,  
is sitting by the light  
of a single lamp  
watching the door,  
hoping that somehow  
we will make it safely home  
before the curfew chimes.

- "Wishful Thinking" by [Lynn Ungar](#)

It was clear early this week, that some part of this sermon would have to be devoted to how to have any kind of hope in this mess of a world and a nation. It's been a changing landscape; I've rewritten this reflection several times this week, and here's the miracle....each time I've written it I have awakened to someone having taken my advice that had not yet even seen the light of day. I don't need to tell you now, that The ACLU needs to hear that there is no free speech at the point of a gun. On Thursday, they decided not to defend those who want to freely express themselves by intimidating those who don't agree with them using weapons. I don't have to suggest that a little private money could profitably go into removing and replacing the statues which some believe are monuments to the supposed beauty of the antebellum south but which are actually monuments put up a generation or two after the war celebrating and enforcing Jim Crow. I had no sooner written that than the three professional sports teams in Tampa issued a joint statement offering to finance a repeal and replace of the confederate monument in Tampa, and it was back to the drawing board for me.

I didn't even dare to dream that the internet world; so devoted to open mindedness that their brains have regularly fallen out.... would finally see a clear line they didn't want to cross. Company after company has withdrawn their supposedly neutral support for those who would overthrow neutrality. And yes, they will find other platforms. But their life will be harder.

Yes, after a dreary year and a horrifying last weekend, and a predictably discouraging response by our president, it has been quite a week.

Maybe I shouldn't have been surprised. After all, when former President Obama tweeted a quote from Nelson Mandela to the effect that nobody is born hating others because of their religion or skin color, that Tweet got 25% more "likes" than any other tweet had ever gotten.

And so many CEO's resigned from the president's councils that the president abolished them...apparently doing significant damage to his ability to get an economic and tax plan through a congress next Fall.

The violent Right has done it again; been so shocking and violent that they have provoked real change. It happened after a well-groomed young white man wrapped in the confederate battle flag shot 9 African Americans praying together in a church. He wanted to start a race war, he said, but instead he brought unity to a divided city. In the aftermath of that tragedy, many southerners realized that their beloved symbol was not benevolent and the confederate battle flags started coming down.

Last weekend we saw the horrifying whole of the white supremacy movement; not just racist and anti-immigrant repellingly anti-semitic and violent and not at all a matter of aging people from the rust belt whom the economy had forgotten and who needed at least some attention and sympathy, but young men of power and privilege, faces contorted with hatred.

It is so much easier now to see that these so-called monuments to the confederacy have exactly the kind of power that Robert E. Lee told us they would have when he said he didn't want to be so memorialized: Things like this keep open the wounds of war and division.

The monuments are coming down, or being put in their real context so that we can actually learn from history. Turns out that it is not that hard to make a distinction between monuments erected to intimidate good people and egg on bad policies, and monuments erected to imperfect people...and we are all imperfect, who made substantive contributions to their communities and nation.

Turns out White supremacy is not just about enshrining white people by taking back power from immigrants of color and the descendants of slaves, it is about enshrining Christianity, scapegoating Jews, and in case it has escaped your attention, those young men are no fans of women's participation in the halls of power either. And a movement that intends to take power from that many people so that they can prevail is a movement that is likely to forgo democracy, as their idols the Fascists did.

And the president, in the end, cheered them on.

That part was not a surprise to those who have been paying attention, but it was still shocking and we should still be shocked and stay shocked.

Stay shocked. Shocked is different from "surprised". Surprised means you didn't expect something. Shocked means that whatever happened goes against your values. You were not really surprised to hear that there are enough well-heeled young men, well enough organized to hold a march, were you? And certainly you were not surprised that someone was either angry enough or mentally ill enough to plough their car through the crowd, here or in foreign parts? No. We are awake, we pay attention, we are desperately sad, but we are not surprised.

But you can still be shocked, and express shock, because no matter how often something happens, it is still terrible, unjust, hateful, hurtful. To express that shock reminds ourselves of what we care about and reminds those around us. It's a way we can live in the world but not let the world numb us to its worst realities. Be shocked. Every time.

And don't be afraid to be intolerant, either. Learn what Facebook has learned: that when the tolerant value tolerance so much that they tolerate the intolerant, tolerance is endangered. Although it sounds a little funny, as a matter of fact it is possible, logical, and important, for the tolerant to tolerate anything but intolerance.

Yes, a lot happened last week, a lot that is profoundly hopeful. It seems to be turning out that this president is so problematic that the whole system is adjusting around him. It may be that we will see a new rebalancing of the balance of powers, which has tilted dangerously towards

the presidency of late...and that is in no small part a cause of our polarized political system because the president is of necessity either red or blue, while congress, although it always has its majorities, is deeply purple. And even before that happens, we saw this week that corporate America and even international leaders are stepping up in new and effective ways.

It's an interesting time to be leaving the ministry, but, hey, now I'll have time to write letters to the editor, to show up where I am needed, and to work for the local candidates who have become all the more empowered by the chaos of Washington.

And you, too, will find ways to do more than stay shocked and intolerant of intolerance, I know. You'll be ready to join hands with those you trust and go where you are needed when the time comes.

In this last tweet as president, another record breaker, President Obama said that his last ask is the same as his first; that the American people have trust, not in HIS ability to create change, but in their own. And I say the same. There is a little hope in the air today in the world, and a lot of hope in the air in this room, and what we do with that hope is to keep on moving forward. Let's sing.