

## Calling Sermon 5.7.19

I have worked for six years to say these words to you: Good Morning First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque.

I'd like to tell you about mysterious time in my life. In 2012, I spent a year in Afghanistan repairing the x-ray scanners that they use at the bases to check people and trucks for bombs. At that point in my life, I had been fired from the charter school I founded in Washington DC, my marriage was ending, and I lived in a place where periodically sirens would tell me that I had to run for a bunker because of incoming rockets. So yeah, there were mysteries, such as, "what am I doing with my life?".

One day I was wandering around the base and I came across a flier tacked up to a bulletin board for, of all things, a UU worship service. It had a chalice and it even had a rainbow. I was stunned. It turns out the only UU Army chaplain in all of Afghanistan was at this base. So in the middle of this brutal, ugly, hot and dusty place, I found an oasis. I'd been a UU since the early 90's but I had been in places like DC and Boston, where the culture on the street was progressive and not all that different from the culture in the sanctuary. Now for the first time, I was in a place where my UU church was truly a sanctuary, an oasis where I could find consolation with people who shared my values.

So on Veterans Day of that year, our minister, First Lt. Chris Antal, also known as Rev. Chris, gave a sermon entitled "A Veterans Day Confession for America". I bet you can guess where his sermon went. So in this sermon, he talked about how America celebrates war and treats its soldiers and veterans poorly. Everyone in that room was either an active duty soldier, holding a weapon in their laps as they sat in our little plywood sanctuary, or a veteran like me. And we were fine with the sermon, it reflected our lived experience. But his superiors got wind of it and he was summarily relieved of his command and sent home.

And before he left, he took me aside and asked me to become the lay leader of our little fellowship. And I said, "Rev, do you have any idea what kind of person I am?" And I made a hundred other excuses about why I couldn't do it. And Chaplain Chris just said "You're doing it". And when your chaplain in Afghanistan says you're doing it, you're doing it.

So I took over and I gave terrible sermons and I fumbled through the rituals and was totally terrified the whole time. Honestly, I feel bad for the folks in Kandahar who sat through those services. But they stuck around, and we made community, and I realized that I loved it.

So here's news flash from Captain Obvious: being at war has a way of clarifying one's priorities. I had thought about seminary before but now I realized that I needed to do that. Out of the mystery of a miserable place in my life, came that new voice, a calling. I was called. And two months after I got back from Afghanistan I was in Chicago, starting my education at Meadville Lombard Theological School.

So that's a decent story and it's actually mostly true and it makes a nice neat portrayal of how calling works. But ya know, it's not really the whole story. The real mystery of calling is that callings aren't neat. Callings don't have clear beginnings and endings. In my case, the real story of my calling, to the ministry at least, started way before my time in Afghanistan and will continue for a long, long time.

There are romantic illusions about calling which I think are part of why callings seem mysterious. If you looked at my web site and learned a little about me you probably realized that I've done a lot of different things. I'm 56 years old and so much of my life was just me casting about for direction. I was always drawn to work that had meaning. Making meaning is very important to me. But the source of the meaning evolved as I got older. The idealism that drew me to the Marine Corps at 24 is not the same idealism that led me to become an advocate for afterschool programs for young folks at 40. And the things that call me continue to evolve.

This is different from the romantic illusion of a person having this giant epiphany, this moment when the burning bush speaks to them and their purpose is set for life. In the calling fantasy, we expect that the clouds are supposed to part and the message is presented with great fanfare. All those years when I was seeking, I would have loved some fanfare! Where were the trumpets? Susan Peck, can you help me out with trumpets? Maybe another service.

I think finding a calling, a vocation, isn't one decision in our lives. It's a decision every day, really a hundred decisions every day. Callings aren't a moment. They are a way of being.

And churches have callings too. And for churches, there are so many sources of that calling that it's fair to call them mysteries. The calling lies embedded in mission statements, and budgets, and hiring decisions. The calling is brought to the church by the city that washes up against the walls of our campus, by the people driving by, by the folks who sleep on the church's sidewalk. The calling comes from the hundreds of people who come to be fed in this sanctuary, and who sit in our classrooms, and come together to make the music that soothes and inspires us.

Over the past week I had a hundred conversations with people in this congregation who are bringing their callings to this place. And the sum of their callings becomes the part of the calling of this church.

This week I saw those callings manifest in so many ways. I met with folks doing the work of justice and I am so impressed by their passion and by their nuanced analysis, and their discerning between doing the desperately needed work of direct service and doing the long grinding work of systemic change.

I met with program leaders who give so generously of their time and energy to weave the fabric of this religious community. I met the members of the Board who work hard to

be loving stewards of this institution. I met folks who care deeply about developing UU identities in our children and youth, and I sat with the staff and ministers who bring all of themselves to the calling. And as an aside I want to say right here that one of the reasons why I'm here is that I'm 100 percent behind Rev. Angela's vision for this congregation.

Over this week I met people who, as Marge Pearcey puts it, "strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward, who do what has to be done, again and again." These folks and, I know many, many more folks that I haven't met yet, have callings.

Calling becomes purpose. I have my own ideas about the purposes of a church. I think folks come looking for community, and consolation because life is super hard, and guidance, and inspiration to follow that guidance. Folks come to First U for these reasons and surely lots of other reasons too. And you'll hear me talk about this a lot: everything we do here is an act of co-creation. All the ministries we conjure, lay and ordained alike, are acts of co-creation. It is our community that makes things happen, and the more everyone shows up the better the result.

So with all that in mind, what's the calling that we are all here for? For sure there's not just one. But I want to tell you about one of my real calls right now, and why, I think, the folks in this church have it too.

So just last Sunday, as I was coming into my office at the congregation I'm serving now to prepare for worship, the phone rang. It was a gentleman who was stranded in Salt Lake City. Let's call him John, but that's not his real name. John is a member of a small UU fellowship in a large West Coast city and he was in trouble. John's in his 50's, and has full blown AIDS. And a little while back his doctor told him that he has five or six months to live.

So John resolved to visit his family on the East Coast one more time. This decision was an act of grace, and courage. When he came out to his family decades ago, they disowned him. They were part of a homophobic Christian tradition, and they threw him out of the house. That's when he made his way to the West Coast. Despite this terrible history, John hoped for a reconciliation. He told me that his partner of twenty years had died a year ago, and when that happened, when he lost his family of choice, he thought that perhaps his family of origin would have a change of heart.

John went by train and the trip took a huge toll on John's health, and he ended up spending two months in the hospital when he got to the East coast. When John was well enough to be out of the hospital, he explained to his family the full extent of his illness and its cause. Their response was to throw him out of the house again, to literally throw his luggage on their front lawn. It seems that since he last saw them, his family had become affiliated with the Westboro Church. So they were more homophobic than ever. And in an act of real cruelty, they took his train ticket.

Somehow John found a friend of a friend who just happened to be driving from the city he was in to Salt Lake City. He got sick again on the way, and spent another two weeks in our local hospital. When he got out, he managed to get another train ticket home that would leave the next day. But he was out of money. And friends, and hope.

And so he called us. He called the Unitarian Universalist Church. And this, this phone call, is where my calling comes from, and maybe yours too. He called our little UU Society because he hoped to find some shelter from the storm. He called the UUs because we are the place where we don't turn people away because of who they love. He called us because we are life affirming, and life changing, and life saving.

And we, in that little church in Salt Lake, we answered that call. It was nothing fancy that we did, a little cash, some groceries, maybe an hour of my time. But we answered. Our calling as UUs is not a mystery. Our calling isn't some whispering in the night or fanfare of trumpets. Our calling, the calling that we share as UUs, is to listen to the pain in the world and say "Here we are. How can we help?"

This is a special moment we're in right now as a country and a planet, and when I say special I don't mean special in a good way. Right now we members of this progressive tradition are constantly witnessing things that we know in our heart are not right. And that takes a toll. We are all being wounded daily, receiving a slow motion trauma on top of the traumas we all carry from the act of living. And in these times, more than ever, we need to listen to our callings and honor them and follow them.

Folks, my calling brought me here to First Unitarian Church in Albuquerque for us to answer OUR calls together, all of us.

I got ordained on March 18, 2018, and I wanna finish by saying some of the words that were said on that day.

As part of the act of ordination, the Chair of the Board of First UU Church in Niagara Falls said this to me: May you minister from your whole self: heart and mind, body and spirit. May you always speak the truth as you know it with courage and wisdom, demonstrate grace, gentleness and good humor, celebrate the mystery and wonder of life, share in the joys and sorrows of our human condition, embody the living tradition of our faith, and above all, serve the world with compassion and love.

And I said: I vow to serve with a deep sense of obligation and opportunity, mindful of the privileges and responsibilities of ministry. I vow to always remember the most vulnerable among us, and work to make a more just and caring world. With profound gratitude for all who have journeyed before me and beside me, I will keep alive the meanings of this service.

I bring these big, big vows to First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque. So come, let us answer our calls together.

Amen, and blessed be.