

Sermon 8.16.20
Rev. Bob LaVallee

A Year at First U

I was on campus a few months ago, helping out with the fabulous folks who run the food pantry, and I ran into Rev. Christine Robinson. For folks who are visiting, Rev. Christine was the minister here at First U for some 30 years. When she saw, Christine asked me how was my first year of ministry at First U going in the weirdest year that we've all seen? And she laughed. And that says a lot about my first year at here in Albuquerque.

For all of us, it's been a weird year. For me it's been weird but also full of beauty, and joy, and so much learning. Folks may not be aware that although I am middle aged person, I'm a new minister. I was only ordained in 2018, and this is only the end of my second year of parish ministry. As I've journeyed through this year, I tried to stay true to the vows of my ordination.

If you've ever been to a UU ordination, you've seen that in the act of ordination first the chair of the board of the ordaining congregation speaks, and then the minister speaks. I'll share my vows now. Casey Spivey will speak the words of the chair of the board. Go ahead Casey:

[Casey unmutes]

We, the members of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Niagara, hereby ordain you, the Reverend Robert Edward LaVallee, to the Unitarian Universalist ministry. Live into this call. 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.

[Casey mutes again]

And I responded:

"It is with joy and appreciation that I take up the ministry to which you ordain me. 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 walked before me and beside me, I will keep alive the meanings of this service."

Now the hoopla and ceremony around ordination is powerful and frankly fun for me. The joke goes that an ordination is like a wedding but the minister gets to be the bride and there's no groom.

But it's important to remember this important fact: anything that a minister does in a congregation is co-ministry with the congregation. In my first year here, as I worked to keep alive the meanings of my ordination, everything I did was a collaboration with the people of

First U. Together we shared in the joys and sorrows of our human condition, whether in our religious education classes or our life rituals in the memorial garden.

Together we remembered the most vulnerable among us, whether in the food pantry or the Change for the Future program, or when we showed up at a rally.

Together we embodied the living tradition of our faith, whether through our work with Albuquerque Interfaith or Albuquerque Faithworks, or offering our space to many worthy organizations working for justice.

Nothing that I did I did alone. Even preaching is an act of sacred collaboration, where I hold the minds and hearts that make up this church as I choose my words.

And I thank you all for this co-ministry that we weave every day.

There is however, one place where I alone am responsible. That's where I made my mistakes. Coming to a big church in a new town has meant changing my understanding of how to be a minister. I'm incredibly grateful to Rev. Angela, who frankly has saved me from myself so many times. And I'm grateful to the staff and lay leaders who always support me in good faith. Thank you, thank you, thank you. But I have struggled from time to time. For example, I want to own the fact that I haven't always been as responsive as I'd like to be. If I was slow to get back to you, I apologize. And that's something that I'll be working on. Thanks in advance for your patience.

Being responsive is part of connecting. And one of the real costs of the pandemic is that it's harder to connect. We've lost something and it's good to name it and mourn it. For example, this church was supposed to host the Mountain Desert District annual assembly in May. There are folks here who worked very hard to get that set up. And then we couldn't do it. And I'm keenly aware that my number one job as a first year minister in a congregation, that is, simply connecting with the congregation, has been pretty significantly hindered.

I think we're all feeling this. But we're also learning. And that's why I look to this year with a lot of optimism.

Yep, optimism. And here's why: We're getting the hang of doing church in this new time and new way. And we don't need to just tread water as a congregation for a year. We can move forward, living fully into our call as Unitarian Universalists. Specifically, my vision for this new year is that we more deeply ingrain anti-racism into every facet of the life of this congregation.

Along with the pandemic, we are also going through a profound moment of accountability for the ways that racism permeates our society. Even before George Floyd was murdered by the police, I was keenly feeling the call to do more. And I know that many members of this congregation feel that way too.

I know that this congregation can build on the work that we've done and become a church that is not just multi-cultural, because we're already multicultural, but intercultural. So what does intercultural mean? Let me share a quote from *Mistakes and Miracles*, by Nancy Palmer Jones and Karin Lin:

"Intercultural describes communities in which there are deep understanding and respect for all cultures. Intercultural communication focuses on the mutual exchange of ideas and cultural norms and the development of deep relationships. In an intercultural society, no one is left unchanged because everyone learns from one another and grows together."

It's a beautiful vision. And it's some big talk. When I preach at the end of September, I'll spell out what that might mean for this congregation and how we might get there. But I want to lay out a couple broad strokes now. First, we will work from the belief that racial justice work is faith formation. They are not two separate things. We either do both well, and together, or we do neither well.

Second, we'll work from a set of shared values. Naturally, our seven principles will guide us, but this work is incredibly hard, and messy, and we're gonna screw up, so we need to be clear about what values guide us. For example, one value might be that rather than work from our strengths, we'll work from our heartbreaks. It's in our heartbreaks that we find spiritual growth, and like I said, this work is faith formation.

Finally, we need to acknowledge that this is a big church with folks in a lot of different places around this work. Some folks might not want us to go in this direction. Other folks may think that we're going too slowly. Let me say two things: This effort will not be stopped, and this effort will not be rushed. We're gonna do this together, at the pace that fits where we are as a congregation. You know the saying: If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together. That's what we'll do.

Let me end with some words from our reading: "We all bring some broken things, songs and dreams and long lost hopes. But here, together, we reach within. As a community, we begin again. And from the pieces we will build something new."

That's my prayer for us, that we build something new together. Amen, and blessed be.