

**Sermon for the First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque:  
*Some Steps I've Been Glad to Take (but I wasn't glad when I started....)*  
 Rev. Joel Miller, March 7, 2021**

**Reading:** *Against Dying* (Poet Kaveh Akbar was born in Tehran, Iran. He currently teaches at Purdue University. He writes from the perspective of a Muslim)

if the body is just a parable  
 about the body if breath  
 is a leash to hold the mind  
 then staying alive should be  
 easier than it is most sick  
 things become dead things  
 at twenty-four my liver was  
 already covered in fatty  
 rot my mother filled a tiny  
 coffin with picture frames  
 I spent the year drinking  
 from test tubes weeping  
 wherever I went somehow  
 it happened wellness crept  
 into me like a roach nibbling  
 through an eardrum for  
 a time the half minutes  
 of fire in my brainstem  
 made me want to pull out

my spine but even those  
 have become bearable so  
 how shall I live now  
 in the unexpected present  
 I spent so long in a lover's  
 quarrel with my flesh  
 the peace seems over-  
 cautious too-polite I say  
 stop being cold or make  
 that blue bluer and it does  
 we speak to each other  
 in this code where every word  
 means obey I sit under  
 a poplar tree with a thermos  
 of chamomile feeling  
 useless as an oath against  
 dying I put a sugar cube  
 on my tongue and  
 swallow it like a pill

**Time for All Ages:** *Jonah and the Whale*

**Sermon:** *Some Steps I've Been Glad to Take (but I wasn't glad when I started....)*

Long ago, after a Board meeting, Dottie stayed after the meeting to talk with me. I had just been with this church for a few weeks, and the church itself had only existed for a couple of months. Dottie and I were part of a group of people starting that congregation – and we were all getting to know one another pretty fast.

When Dottie pulled me aside, she said, “I’ve been coming here for a few months now, but I feel like I’m on the outside of everything, I feel like I’m looking in through a window in at everybody else. And everyone here is a Christian!”

The very next day, after the Religious Education meeting, Alex, another member starting the church, took me aside after that meeting. Alex said, "I feel like there's an 'in-group' here and that I'm in the 'out-group.' And everyone here is an atheist!"

There wasn't be an "in-group" or and "out-group" in the church. And there were most spiritual beliefs than there were members (I have two – I change my mind a lot). Everyone was new in this new congregation. Dottie and Alex and everyone else were very involved. Alex and Dottie were even on the Board of Trustees.

And both felt a loneliness they hadn't expected. I've seen it in the ten congregations I've served as a minister and the three I joined as a lay member. It's a surprising loneliness for people who grew up in the church, for those finding Unitarian Universalism after leaving another religious group, for active, long-time members with hundreds of good friends. I go to church to be connected. I think most of us do – and we connect. And still, somehow, might feel an unexpected loneliness.

It isn't the raw, harsh loneliness of a thoughtful, open-minded child in a restrictive and punishing church. It's not the aching loneliness of lost friendship or faraway homes. It's not the scary loneliness of going to a church for the first time and no one talks to you. This is different. It comes after we've deeply connected our lives. Even when surrounded by people who love us.

I first heard it after being in recovery from my addiction to alcohol. Even now, always working to grow more sober, I hear it. I'm an alcoholic – although I haven't had an alcoholic drink in over 29 years. I am deeply grateful for the life I now I have because of being in recovery. Some of us who are addicts describe our journeys from addiction as one of "recovery."

I have good friends, a family that loves me. I love being a UU minister. I have a practice of 12 steps that keeps me connected and grateful for all this love... and sometimes I still feel like an outsider.

There are 12 steps in the program I follow, and the majority of those steps are a spiritual practice of making amends.

I do these steps of making amends every day. I begin with this step: understanding the harm I have done to others; next step: I tell another person about those hurts; next step: I become responsible for them; next step: become willing to make amends to those people; next step: I then I go to the people I've harmed, I apologize, and if repair or repayment is possible, I correct the harm I caused.

It's spiritual work. And it's important to note: it only goes one-way. I don't demand amends back from those I've hurt. I don't expect forgiveness from people I've harmed. I make amends – in mending what I've broken I am being accountable – and recovering the integrity of my own life.

The story of Jonah is a great companion to the steps of making amends. I like telling it. It reminds me I've had moments when ran from something my life called me to do. It reminds me that I've felt like I was in the belly of a whale. Reminds me that I fume at the deeds of other people – for me it's usually powerful people like Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, or Donald Trump. I find myself resenting these guys, and then I go on to resent my neighbors who support them.

My resentments make me ugly as I wish for the universe to punish them with cosmic lightning bolts. And then, like Jonah, a voice in my mind reminds me that I can be just as deserving of that cosmic zap. We all can be. Those steps remind me that having resentments is like drinking poison and expecting that the person I resent will die.

Making amends has been some of the hardest spiritual work I've ever done. I find the personal self-evaluation required to make amends is deep and painfully honest. I confront the most unattractive parts of my own soul.

That's why I can relate to Jonah going to Tarshish instead of Ninevah. I've had my own version of the sailors throwing me off the boat and being swallowed by a whale. I've dwelt in whale-bellies for days and for years, covered in half-digested fish guts, stewing in my own resentments.

And I can relate to Jonah's resentment at having to go to Ninevah, covered in rotten fish. It's hard to apologize to someone I've hurt; hard to really listen to them, accepting from them the opportunity to mend what they have lost... having prepared many times to do that well meant seeing the part of me that looks and smells like someone covered in rotten fish.

This spiritual practice turns my soul outward. I don't get to sit in judgement of others – making amends has no room for judgement, stinking in resentment at others, wishing for them the wrath of the kind of God who will smite Ninevah in vengeance.

But, you know, these steps consistently bring me hope and Joy. And open me to more connection. Partly because I'm so relieved at mending what I've broken. And because doing it shows how our seventh principle isn't just nice words: when I've broken connection, I feel it. It's a lonely, harsh, broken feeling. Making amends mends the lives of others, and that mends my own soul, too. It's as though I've washed the fish-guts off.

But! That unexpected loneliness. Dottie lamented how she felt like she were "outside looking in" -- but she was as "in" as anybody could be.

Here's where the web of life calls us to more than making amends. Something calls us to love the world. Dottie came to understand she was called to this love – a love so powerful she helped start a church in a spiritual tradition she barely knew. She asked me to share her story of being called to love world – a call that started as an unexpected loneliness.

Those steps I've taken open me to the call of that love, the love speaking to us through that unexpected loneliness. A love our world needs in times of broken promises; A love to mend our broken relationship with the web of life.

Every moment of life is a chance to answer that lonely message: to mend the world with love, through service, and searching for truth with compassion. This Living Tradition that tells us the Spirit of Life and Love are calling us. Let us gather answer that call with our lives: to be guides in living in love, in service to all, and by the truth that mending any life is mending our own.