

Question Box Sermon: Stump the Preacher!

Sermon reprint by Rev. Tess Baumberger
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Did you know that the word sermon actually means “conversation?” This sermon is more like a real conversation because I’m responding to questions that you ask. Some folks from the congregation gave me their questions in advance, so part of this sermon will be my prepared responses, and part will be off the cuff answers to questions from the floor.

Most of the questions you asked merit at least a full sermon, if not a series of sermons, so you can think of these responses as “teasers.”

Questions about theology

Is god so powerful that god could make a rock even god can’t lift?!

Oy, this is one of those crafty questions that have kept theologians and philosophers in business for centuries because really it’s unanswerable and circular and could drive you crazy. It’s based on the premise that God is all-powerful or “omnipotent,” which is something I don’t believe. If you don’t believe god is all-powerful, then the question doesn’t make sense, and that’s my final answer.

The second question was part of a larger one. The questioner starts by lamenting all that is wrong in the world and goes on to say, “It’s a good thing I don’t believe in god, the world is too unfair a place to believe in something greater than ourselves. I guess I don’t even have a question, isn’t that sad?”

Yes, it is sad. In fact, it sounds like it comes from a despairing heart. Actually, I see a couple of questions in here. One is an old theological question called “the theodicy problem” - how do we reconcile the existence of evil, pain and suffering with the notion of an all-powerful, ever-present, all-loving, justice-seeking god?

I can’t give you THE answer to this problem, because in our tradition we believe each of us has the right to arrive at our own answers. What I can do is offer MY answer for your consideration. I do believe in a force that some might call God because I have

felt its presence in my life. I experience it as ever-present, loving, creative, and feel its push towards justice, but I do not believe it is all-powerful.

This is because I believe we have free will, and free will limits the power of God. If there were no free will, then we would just be puppets of that higher power or else victims of fate (if there is no such power). I reject both notions because I believe we have the power and the obligation of choice.

We are free to choose how we will live our lives and treat one another, even if our choices create suffering. If God has consciousness (which I'm not sure about), It wants us to choose right actions, but cannot make us do so without violating free will.

The other question I see in these remarks is, "Are our only choices either believing in the traditional god or not believing in anything?" My answer is "No, there are other choices."

Love is a power greater than our selves. It lasts beyond our lifetimes – it exists within and between us, and it calls us to greater good. Justice and community are greater goods. A loving community centered on justice can be a higher power that inspires us to go beyond our normal capacities, beyond our limited concerns.

The good news is that the traditional God is not the only show in town. We can still believe in something greater than ourselves.

Questions about religion and Unitarian Universalism

Some of the questions you asked arise from trying to reconcile traditional definitions of religious words with our very non-traditional faith.

Is Unitarian Universalism a religion? And if so, why? Edie Marsden

It's hard to apply the usual definition of "religion" to our faith. When we think of religion, we tend to think of those that have creeds, statements of shared beliefs recited every week. In order to belong to a creedal religion, you have to agree with this statement, which specifies a belief in a single god.

Unitarian Universalism has never been a creedal faith, so it doesn't fit that narrow definition. If religion can only be a set of shared beliefs that center on a single god, then ours is not a religion, but then neither is Buddhism, which has no god, or Hinduism,

which has many. I think we'd all agree that those two are religions, so why not ours?

Luckily, we can redefine words like "religion" in ways that make sense to us. The root of the word "religion" means "that which binds together" and clearly there is much that binds us together as a religion. For one thing, we have a strong set of shared values, including a great value for community.

Here we unite in a quest for truth and meaning, supporting one another even when that journey takes us in different theological directions. Perhaps what binds us most closely is our covenant, the set of promises about how we want to be together. We enter into the sacred bonds of that covenant freely and with joy. They unite us into one strong body.

Why do we call it "worship service"? What do we worship? Jason Gold

Here is another disconnect between the traditional definition of a religious word and the way we use it. Most religions believe in a deity that they consider the proper object of worship. Some of us may believe in such a deity, but as a group we don't share such a common object of worship.

To me, worship centers not on "what" so much as "how." I see worship as an attitude, a willingness to open our hearts and enter into a different sense of time with one another, as a community.

How can we define "worship" to reflect that "how?" In old English, the root of the word worship means, "to shape things of worth." We definitely do that here on Sunday mornings.

In worship we step out of our regular routine, our everyday lives, in order to recall what is most important to us, "to rest a while at the forming edges of our lives" as my colleague Kathleen McTigue puts it, and to center ourselves in the ground of our beloved community. We come here to remember who we most essentially are, and to imagine who might become. This is precious, a thing of great worth and beauty.

People who come to us from other religions bring customs, rituals, and beliefs that they value. What about us secular people who come to Unitarian Universalism from "off the street," who don't bring anything with them from the other camp. Sure customs and rituals can be picked up "ala carte", but where does the deep stuff come from? Jason Gold

The deep stuff comes from our hearts, from sharing our longing and then finding ways to meet that need. Many among us feel a great longing for Unitarian Universalist rituals and customs that we can offer to people who have never been part of a church community before.

However ours is a relatively new religion, and developing such rituals and customs takes time. It's been less than fifty years since Unitarianism and Universalism combined to form a new tradition.

We have developed some unique rituals for worship, like lighting the chalice. This is something you can take home – it's easy to make a chalice of your own, which you could light at family dinners. You can accompany it with a reading, a special poem or a simple prayer like “For all that we have received, and for all that we are about to receive, may we be truly thankful.”

We also have Joys and Concerns in our worship, which are our form of “prayers of the people.” Again, around the dinner table we could share our joys and our concerns with one another. What else are families for?

So the answer is that we have some rituals and customs, and we are developing others. I'm planning to offer a Saturday workshop in April or May on poetry writing as spiritual practice. I am happy to talk to anyone who has this longing and willing to respond in whatever ways I can.

Let's pause and sing a hymn that captures some of the despair and longing for something better that I heard in these first few questions.

Hymn *By the Waters of Babylon*

Questions from the Floor

Offering

Pastoral Questions

When people of other religions are in a crisis or need strength they have a prayer to recite or a gesture (i.e. the sign of the Cross for Catholics). This ritual gives them some peace of mind. What do we have to rely on in such moments? Jason Gold

Last fall our ministers' chapter had its retreat at a Catholic retreat center. Outside the chapel was a lovely shell-shaped basin with holy water in it. One Catholic tradition is that when you enter the church, you put your finger in the water and bless yourself in the name of the trinity - father, son and holy spirit.

To my surprise I felt this great longing to dip my fingers in the water and bless myself, though not with those particular words. I shared this longing with the ministers in my small group, and another ex-Catholic felt the same way. So my small group gathered around the basin, holding hands. We dipped our fingers in the water and blessed our selves and each other, saying,

“Bless my mind that holds so many thoughts.
 Bless my shoulders that carry so much in life.
 Bless my heart to contain all my joy and sorrow.
 Bless my hands to do good work.”

We talked about how it would be nice to offer this possibility for people in our churches, perhaps using water from our annual water communion. We worried, however, that there might be a popular uprising if we tried to introduce this ritual. Would you revolt if I tried that?

Could we come with a sign of the chalice? Would it give us comfort? I don't know. I do know that when a member of my former church was dying, in hospice care, we gathered around her bed and sang “Spirit of Life” and it brought her peace. So you can sing that in the meantime, while we can work on developing rituals to bridge troubled waters.

My son attended UU church for many years, and at 16, doesn't see anything worth investing his time in at the Church (or anywhere else for that matter!), and would rather stay home and sleep. Is it me or my church? Anonymous

Well, as someone who can't get her own teenager up and to church in the mornings, I'm also kind of stumped by this problem. All I can suggest is that his choices may not reflect you or this church. They may reflect him. There are so many pressures on teenagers these days, some may just need to decompress and rest on Sundays. There's nothing wrong with that.

It sounds like there's feeling of failure underneath this question, so please consider – is he a good kid? Is he kind and thoughtful? Is he generous and open-minded? Does he tolerate differences? Is he concerned about the wider world? These are all gifts of our faith, and if he has them it may have something to do with this church, and with his parents. Or not. Either way, if he's a good kid, why worry? Will that solve the

problem? Is there a problem? Am I answering this question by asking even more questions? Yes!

I miss the church, but have a very bad personality conflict with one person that completely makes me lose my sense of peace any time I am around him or her. What can I do? Anonymous

It sounds to me like what's disturbing you is not the person so much as the rupture in your relationship. The only thing you can do to heal that wound is to address it. Papering over it won't work, avoiding it won't work, and divorcing yourself from the community only seems to be making it worse.

You may not want to hear this, but I think the only way through this is into it, by talking to that person directly about it. I'm guessing you have feelings of both guilt and resentment. Making amends and asking for forgiveness will help the guilt, forgiving and letting go will help the resentment.

For those of us who never really learned how to cope constructively with conflict, talking about it directly is a really scary thing, like going into the lion's den. If you're afraid to do this alone, I will be glad to accompany you.

If the problem is with me, please tell me and we can work it through, or else speak to someone on the ministry committee who can come with you to talk to me. We are a covenantal community, and our covenant calls us back into relationship with one another, especially when things are difficult and painful.

Questions about Unity Church

“What a horrible world: children are starving and dying. There's so much pain and death on a global scale. People who live 10 minutes away from me have been born into or ended up living in fear, in slums, without support or resources, some without parents or guardians, or with parents or guardians who are unstable and dangerous, and I sit here in a wonderful community, in a gorgeous church, thinking of what can I do to feel more spiritual or about outreach to the community. I feel like such a hypocrite. Anonymous

Wow. You are clearly a sensitive soul. It sounds like you may be suffering from compassion burnout – or maybe you're just on the way there. It sounds like you take many of the world's problems very much to heart, and it sounds like you feel overwhelmed, like you don't know where to begin.

There are at least two types of people who come here, and since this is an anonymous question, I'm not sure which group you're in. One group is the people who already serve the world in their work or volunteer lives. (have people raise hands if they work/worked in the helping professions - teaching, medicine, social work, therapy, justice, government, nonprofits, etc)

If in your paid or volunteer work, you are already addressing pain and suffering in the world, what you may need here is spiritual rest. Advocates and activists and helpers need to replenish their wells, so they don't run dry, so they don't burn out. There is no need to feel guilty about sitting here in this beautiful place in order to refill your well. You're already doing so much.

The other group in this congregation works in other industries, and they may feel even more guilty about not doing more. This group may want to find ways to right these wrongs through Unity Church, and may not see how to work on what most concerns them. You are not alone. If we come together, we may be able to find ways to help in addition to these -

You could volunteer to be a tutor for our English language program.

You could volunteer to help with Sunday school. After the play, the kids are going to be working on social justice projects.

You could join me for UU lobby day on Wednesday April 1st – we'll go to our denominational headquarters in Boston that morning and hear about the bills we're interested in, have lunch, then go talk to our representatives.

And if none of these float your boat, let me know. We can talk.

You've been here long enough to get to know us as a congregation, our collective 'personality'. You could doubtless enumerate our many endearing characteristics, but how about telling us what you see as our warts? (In business, we refer to these as "opportunities for improvement"). Ken Love

This question and previous one both capture your collective personality – this is a very earnest and good-hearted group, aware of the problems in the world and wanting to do something about them. You also very geared to self-improvement and doing things right.

I am part of a twelve step program (AlAnon) which requires us not to take another

person's "inventory." What I can do is take my own, and insofar as we are a good match you may see some of yourselves in it.

Two of my biggest warts are being a perfectionist and being a control freak. I'm working on both of those character defects. I am learning that things don't need to be perfect, they only need to be good enough. So I don't need to run myself ragged or beat myself up over little mistakes and slip-ups.

I'm learning that it's not fair to give people tasks or responsibilities and then expect them to do it exactly as I would. That's the control freak part of me. It's good to state clear expectations up front, and to offer support. But when I give someone responsibility I also need to give them creative freedom and the authority to do it their own way. Much as I hate to admit it, sometimes their way is better than my way.

Another wart is the flip side of my creativity - I come up with more great ideas than I can possibly implement in any effective way. Put that together with a world where there is so much more to do than I can possibly do, and you get one over-worked and exhausted Tess. So sometimes I need to prioritize so I don't run myself ragged. AND I need to learn how to stop and rest. I see that in you as well. That's why I'm preaching about Sabbath making and Sabbath taking next month.

When do you go on red and stop on green? (ha, ha. Michael or Victoria can tell you.

They can't all be so deep.) Jason Gold

- I don't know. When do you go on red and stop on green??