

# ***What Do We Do?***

**A Sermon by Rob Keithan  
Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockville, MD, on  
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## READING

“Is This Your Religion?”

From *WITHOUT APOLOGY: Collected Meditations on Liberal Religion* by A. Powell Davies. Edited by Forrest Church. Skinner House Books, 1998.

We are the consummation of thousands of years of religious history. We are thousands of years that have stripped off superstition and battled with tyranny; thousands of years that struggled to take fear out of religion—to take it right out of human life; thousands of years that have marched, sometimes joyfully; sometimes in agony, toward spiritual emancipation. We are indeed the consummation of something.

Yet in this world of blood and sorrow it is scarcely important, hardly worth mentioning, unless in addition we are the *beginning* of something, unless our religion is new—the religion that has always been new in every prophet who died rather than forsake it; the religion that has been buried over and over again in creeds and rituals... and yet has always come to life.

The religion that says freedom!—...freedom to seek the truth, both old and new, and freedom to follow it, freedom from the hates and greeds that divide humankind and spill the blood of every generation; freedom for honest thought, freedom for equal justice...

The religion that says humankind is not divided—except by ignorance and prejudice and hate; the religion that sees humankind naturally one and waiting to be spiritually united; the religion that proclaims an end to all exclusions—and declares and brother- and sisterhood unbounded!

The religion that knows that we shall never find the fullness of the wonder and the glory of life until we are ready to share it, that we shall never have hearts big enough for the love of God until we have made them big enough for the worldwide love of one another.

As you have listened to me, have you thought perchance that this is your religion? If you have, do not congratulate yourself. Stop long enough to recollect the miseries of the world you live in: the fearful cruelties, the enmities, the hate, the bitter prejudices, the need of such a world for such a

faith. And if you still can say that this of which I have spoken is your religion, then ask yourself this question: What are you doing with it?

## SERMON

I'm going to start with a story about the heretical origins of our faith. The setting is Transylvania, in the mid-1500s. The Protestant Reformation is creating enormous conflict throughout Europe. The Spanish Inquisition is going full throttle. It is not, shall we say, a time of religious peace.

And yet, in the small kingdom of Transylvania, the governing body and a young ruler somehow manage to set a national policy of religious tolerance and freedom of conscience. The King was John Sigismund, the one and only Unitarian king in history. He was greatly influenced and aided in his cause by Francis David, a powerful public speaker and recognized leader of the Unitarian faith whom Sigismund appointed as his official court preacher.

I'm about to share a quote from Francis David, but before I do I want to remind you of the historical context. At this time in Europe, there is no separation between religion and state, and people are literally killing each other over theological differences. And yet, out of this morass, David manages to say: "We need not think alike to love alike."

"We need not think alike to love alike."

How incredible.

I tell this story to illustrate this point: that from our earliest beginnings, our religion, our Unitarian Universalist religion, has had profoundly political implications. In 16<sup>th</sup> Century Europe, saying "We need not think alike to love alike" was a tremendously prophetic statement. Indeed, it's still radical now.

And so, with this little piece of our heritage in mind, I wonder: what is it that the Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockville has to say to the world today? What's our message to this community, to Montgomery County, to the state of Maryland? Do we have a prophetic voice? And if we don't, can we?

As you think about these questions, consider this. A few years ago, the Unitarian Universalist Association gathered ministers from the fastest growing congregations in order to share best practices. When asked to summarize their missions, one of the most common themes was that each congregation saw itself as a vital, active force in the larger community.

So in order to bring people in, we have to go out. We have to stand for something. And, my friends, we have so much to stand for. Recall the words from A. Powell Davies in our reading this morning. What do we stand for? We stand for freedom to seek the truth, both old and new, and freedom to follow it. We stand for equal justice. We stand for an end to ignorance and prejudice and hate.

Indeed, one of our biggest challenges is that we stand for so many things. And, though we may wish it weren't so, there is a basic reality which we cannot escape. It is the reality that no organization, this congregation included, can be an effective, sustainable force for change without focusing its activities. It is simply not possible. Our concern may be unlimited, but our time, energy, and money is not.

Actually, this is just as true for individuals as it is for organizations. The number of causes begging for our attention far, far exceeds our capacity. So how do we pick priorities? How do we decide what to do? I want to suggest a few things that I hope will be helpful, to us as individuals and as a congregation.

First, though, I want to say more about why focus is so important. It boils down to this: what we do matters. And what we do matters, in large part, because we have power. We have power as individuals, and we have exponentially more power as a congregation. I mean, look around this room. Look at the people here. Look at this beautiful space, built just a few years ago. We have resources and we have power.

Many UU congregations fall into the trap of trying to do too many things. Part of the reason may be the simple fact that we're human, and one of the things humans do is push our limits.

However, another reason we Unitarian Universalists spread our justice work thin is particular to the fact that the culture of our congregations tends to be white and middle class. In most cases, our quality of life does not depend on the outcome of our justice activism, which means that we have the option of stopping or starting the work at will. We can dabble in social justice; a little of this issue here; a little of that issue there.

The problem with this approach is that it can very, very easily lead to our feeling that we're making a significant difference, when in fact we're simply playing the part the system wants us to play. It's not exactly rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic, but it's close. We're improving some people's lives, to be sure, but we're not making systemic change. We're not changing the structures that perpetuate oppression. In the words of Shakespeare, we are "Full of sound and fury; signifying nothing."

Our task, I contend, is to signify something. It is to be, in the words of A. Powell Davies, not just a consummation, but a beginning. When we take our power seriously, when we resolve to focus enough to be effective; we show the world that our values are more important than our conditioning. We show our community that we stand for something.

We're already doing this in some very meaningful ways. Through the Rainbow Youth Alliance, for example, this congregation is providing a safe and supportive environment for area teenagers, who, because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, are often targets of discrimination. Think about the significance of this action for a moment. Think about what it says to these youth, and to the larger community, that a religious organization has stepped up to be a safe haven for queer and questioning teens.

For better or for worse, religion plays a very influential role in American culture and politics. Faith groups are the driving force behind sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia in our country. So the fact that we Unitarian Universalists, along with other moderate and liberal people of faith, can offer an alternative religious voice in the public square really matters.

And, I'm pleased to say that I have some good news! On Thursday afternoon, February 17, legislation that would end the exclusion of committed gay and lesbian couples from marriage passed a Maryland Senate committee for the first time ever.

I sincerely doubt that we'd be this close to marriage equality in this state if it weren't for the focused, ongoing support provided by religious leaders and organizations, including people from this congregation, the UU Legislative Ministry of Maryland, and our primary organizing partner Equality Maryland.

I'm intentionally naming the Legislative Ministry and Equality Maryland to emphasize how important it is to work in partnership—with other UU congregations and with other groups. Organizations are exponentially more powerful than individuals, which is why working for social justice as a congregation is so important.

When you get multiple congregations and organizations working together, though, systemic change becomes a possibility. In my 10 years of policy advocacy and justice organizing in the Unitarian Universalist Association Washington Office, I can tell you that we did next to nothing that wasn't in partnership with at least one other group. It is so much easier to have an impact when you're sharing resources and taking advantage of each organization's relative strengths.

Let me give you a real world example. Although I know about it through All Souls Church in Washington, where I am a member, I honestly didn't have anything to do with it.

All Souls is one of many DC congregations that are members of WIN, the Washington Interfaith Network. Like Action in Montgomery, the organization in this area, WIN operates as a branch of the Industrial Areas Foundation, a national network of groups that use a particular model of congregation-

based community organizing. The model is very effective in many places because groups do extensive surveying and relationship-building with the community to determine policy priorities, and then they really stick to those priorities.

Notably, these groups are focused on systemic change. They identify problems, and then they identify exactly what policies need to change and which people need to change them. Frederick Douglass was absolutely right when he said that “Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.” Industrial Areas Foundation groups are successful because they make clear, specific demands backed up with ongoing pressure—pressure provided by people from the congregations.

For example, in 2002, the Washington Interfaith Network launched its “Neighborhoods First” Campaign, which initially asked the Mayor and City Council to designate \$200 million dollars for investment in poor neighborhoods—an investment equal to that set aside for downtown. The question WIN raised, and continues to raise, is “Who is the city for?”

At a public meeting in 2007, after five years of hard work, Mayor Fenty stated publicly that WIN’s agenda is the people’s agenda. He committed to implementing WIN’s updated goal for community investment, which was then \$1 billion dollars. And—and!—he even committed to giving WIN regular accountability reports on the status of his progress.

And all this came to pass as the *direct* result of religious groups working together. This is the kind of success that becomes possible when there is focus and commitment.

Maintaining focus requires saying yes to some things, of course, but it also requires saying no to many things. No, I won’t do that, or no, we won’t do that. I suspect that our tendency to lack focus is caused as much by our inability to say no as by our unwillingness to say yes.

So why is it that we fail to say no, even when we are clear that it’s the right answer? Why do we, as individuals and a congregation, agree to pursue justice issues or initiatives that we don’t really have the resources for? I know that there are nuances that sometimes make it difficult or impossible to say no. However, I also know that there are at least three not so good reasons that we fail to say no:

1. We don’t want to hurt someone’s feelings by saying no. This is otherwise known as conflict avoidance.
2. We feel bad saying no. Otherwise known as guilt, or
3. We really want to be able to do it all. This is otherwise known as wishful thinking.

While conflict avoidance, guilt, and wishful thinking are all incredibly powerful forces, I submit that we can do better. And that we should do better. The stakes are simply too high to let these demons stand in the way of doing meaningful justice work, to stand in the way of being effective individual activists; to stand in the way of being a growing congregation that makes a real difference in the community.

And so, as we move forward with the strategic planning process, and move toward being an even more vibrant, multi-generational, multi-cultural congregation, let us remember that some projects will need to be declined or discontinued. They might and probably are very worthwhile efforts. They just aren't the best fit with the congregation's mission and resources. Being effective means saying no.

Now, I want to give you one concrete suggestion for how you might apply these principles in your individual or family life. Think about the justice commitments you have as an individual or as a family. Is there a focus? Or do they feel scattered? If they feel scattered, I'd like to suggest that you make a serious commitment to a single issue or a group for long enough to really connect. At least 2 or 3 years.

Finally, I want to share my philosophy of how justice work fits in with the other purposes of the congregation. There are many ways to describe the purposes of our faith, but in my view no one has summarized it more clearly and concisely than James Luther Adams, a Unitarian theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. When asked why religious liberals come to church, he answered that we come for intimacy and ultimacy.

"Intimacy" refers to the human relationships, trust, and support that lead to a sense of belonging. I prefer the term "community," which in my view maintains Adams' essential interpersonal perspective while encompassing a broader range of group dynamics and activities.

Ultimacy refers to the desire for connection and relationship with something greater than one's self, a deeper understanding of our nature and existence. Although it might extend beyond Adams' original intent, I prefer the term "meaning," which covers both "ultimate" questions of existence and also our human desire for depth in everyday life.

While I agree that community and meaning are the two most important reasons people participate in religious community, I believe we are wrong to view these as our *only* primary ends. What is missing is an element that responsibly ties our religious life to the world around us, recognizing that the two are fundamentally interrelated. What is missing is justice.

I contend that Justice belongs aside Community and Meaning for two reasons. First, I believe that the call to do justice is central to our history and theology. Second, we live in an interdependent world, and the choices we make matter. Our impact is multiplied when we come together in institutions, like a religion, or even a single congregation. When we come together—even if we are only seeking meaning and community—we exponentially increase the impact we have on justice. We buy land and operate buildings. We hire and pay staff. We consume goods and services. In these and countless other decisions, we have an impact on justice. It is unavoidable.

For me, Community, Meaning, and Justice together represent the three purposes of our Unitarian Universalist religious life. Practically speaking, this means that most of the activities of our congregation should facilitate growth in all three of these areas. Our concern for justice should be reflected in our social activities and worship. Likewise, in addition to promoting social change, our justice work should help build relationships and nurture spiritual development. Opportunities to build Community, Meaning, and Justice can be woven throughout the fabric of our congregation.

Friends, I am convinced that Unitarian Universalism, and this congregation, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockville, has a critical role to play in our broken world.

Instead of discriminating, we can offer welcome and affirmation.

Instead of looking the other way, we can be an ally and partner to immigrants, low-income people and people of color.

Instead of exploiting the earth, we can model responsible stewardship.

Instead of temporary solutions, we can demand systemic change.

Instead of an obsession with wealth, we can encourage an obsession with justice.

The world needs such a faith. Is this your religion? And if so, what are you going to do with it?

## **BENEDICTION**

If, here, you have found freedom,  
take it with you into the world.

If you have found comfort,  
go and share it with others.

If you have dreamed dreams,  
    help one another,  
    that they may come true!  
If you have known love,  
    give some back to a bruised and hurting world.  
Go in peace.

- *Lauralyn Bellamy*