

Good morning. My name is Lisa Ross, and I have been asked to share with you a little bit about what First Unitarian Church means to me. I hope that in hearing about my journey [toward finding community], you will find something that resonates with you.

I grew up in a secular Jewish household, and although my parents were both atheists, they very much identified with being Jewish. I, on the other hand, did not. I went to secular Sunday School at the JCC, but I never felt at home in that community. *My* Jewish identity was my extended family, and getting together on holidays (and of course, the food!); I loved that sense of belonging, of being part of a tribe. But I couldn't relate to the religious part of Judaism. And what I really found offensive was the implicit (and sometimes explicit) belief that we, as Jews, were "the chosen people," somehow better than everyone else – we suffered more than anyone else, we were smarter, wiser, more resilient. I don't mean to pick on Jews here; this is actually what really bothers me about most organized religion.

So where was I to find community, and how could I feed the spiritual part of myself? At the time, I didn't really even ask that question, and so I didn't try to answer it either.

I went to college, and medical school, and residency. Got married and had children. During those decades I didn't really think much about religion, or community; day-to-day life took all my attention. We got a minivan, a dog, went to work, and lived the suburban life. I became disenchanted with politics and focused on my family. You don't really have to question the *meaning* of raising kids; it has its own intrinsic importance. I tried to live my values for them – kindness, compassion, respect for the environment, love of nature, curiosity about the world and people. But was I *really* living my values? *Could* I be, if I wasn't connected to a larger community?

When our kids got to a certain age, we started having those discussions I'm sure a lot of you are familiar with – should we do something spiritual for the kids? Can we give them 1 hr. a week when they're thinking about the larger issues, being exposed to a diversity of perspectives, forming relationships outside their Clayton bubble? After some searching, we came to First Church. I'll admit; at first I felt a little uncomfortable. I was raised Jewish after all, and the sanctuary was pretty imposing and formal, and the service was organized like a church service (well, it *is* a church!). But, wow, here was a place that felt spiritual, and reflective, *and* I could actually relate to and agree with the words! There was none of that “we are the chosen people” that

had so turned me off from other religions. Instead, there was an *intentional* embracing of diversity and the interdependent web of life. Unitarian Universalism was a religion I could believe in whole heartedly. (Really, who *wouldn't* believe in the 7 principles??). This was a religion that articulated *my values*, and one I could endorse having my kids be a part of.

So, we started attending First U. At the beginning, we came for the RE classes, and for the chance for Chuck and me to spend an hour contemplating something more grand than what to make for dinner that night. We had busy lives, and 1-2 hrs. on Sunday morning was about all we could carve out for “making meaning.”

Gradually, though, I got more involved. As I did, I began to notice a change in how I felt when I walked in the front door on Sunday mornings. I felt part of things; this was my church, my community. Here was a place where I could join with others to connect to something larger than myself.

I had never experienced that before. The more involved I got the more I realized that there had been something missing in my life for the previous 25 years, something that I had vaguely sensed but hadn't

really identified; something that made me feel whole: a sense of community.

My Dad could never understand that – I'd try to explain to him what I loved about Unitarian Universalism and being part of the church, and why having a spiritual component to my life was important to me, and he would say "well ok, sure, but why do you need a *church* for that?" Why indeed. Because, as Kurt Vonnegut wisely wrote "I say to you that we are full of chemicals which require us to belong to folk societies, or failing that, to feel lousy all the time....—and there aren't any folk societies for us anymore." This church has become my folk society.

So, what does community mean? To me it means connection, and shared values, and the opportunity to live those values by working together with common purpose. Here at First Church I have worked with others to support the RE program, teach holistic sexuality to teenagers, care for the environment, grow vegetables for the food pantry, express our spirituality through love of the Earth, and work for racial justice.

When Mike Brown was killed in 2014, I awoke to the realization that there was a whole other lived experience going on around me about which I was totally clueless. I was outraged, and guilty. How had I been

so blind, and insensitive, and yes, complicit? For the first time in 30 yrs., I really wanted to *do* something. This feeling was only heightened by the 2016 election.

Had I been alone, I might have spent the last 3 yrs. lying on the couch staring vacantly into space with tears running down my face. Or I might have punched a wall or 2, or screamed and torn my hair out. But because I was part of this church community, I was able to join with others, with the leadership of Lynn Hunt, to form First Unitarian's Toward Justice group. We have been working together to educate ourselves and the community, and to collaborate with other groups in action. Being able to join with others in doing this work has saved me from total despair during the past few years. It has given me the ability to work for change at a local level and contribute in whatever small way I can. I would not have had that opportunity had I not been part of this church community.

What I want to say is this: Chuck and I came to this church 17 years ago for the RE classes and the worship service, but it has given us so much more. I longed for a sense of community, and I have found that here at First Unitarian Church; a spiritual community in which I can feel connected, live my values, and join with others to do meaningful work.

That is because of all of you. Every single person I have had a conversation with at First Unitarian over the years is interested, engaged, and passionate. I think often of something profound that our former interim minister Sam Schaal used to say at almost every service: “We don’t just *come* to church, we *are* the church.” We don’t just come to church, we *are* the church. *Please*, get involved. Join a group, start a group, volunteer on a committee. Make a commitment. You will receive so much more than you give. With your help, we can do it! We can do our small part to build the beloved community we all so desperately need.