

Kim Mason's Ordination & Installation Sermon

The First Unitarian Church of St. Louis, November 24, 2019

By Rev. Alison B. Miller

Let me offer a story that is emblematic of how in a shared ministry the minister shapes the congregants' collective ministry and the congregants shape the minister's ministry, and, hopefully in both cases, for the better.

A new pastor received a call to come to the bedside of one of the elders in his congregation, a pillar of the church. She was on her deathbed and she wanted him to visit. Now, he had a fair number of commitments that day, but, of course, he shifted things around and went straight to her. When he arrived, she seemed to be asleep. Now, he didn't want to disturb her rest, so he waited quietly and patiently by her bedside, but couldn't stop thinking about what remained on his to do list.

After a while, he looked at his watch to see how much time had passed. At that very moment, she opened her eyes and quipped, "Do you have somewhere more important to be?" Flustered and jolted to a new level of wakefulness, he said, "No, you're right. I am here."

He then took a deep breath and sat with her, this woman who he had begun to love, this woman who meant so much to the people he served. He turned his heart towards prayer and his full body towards presence.

Those were her last words, and they shaped the minister he became, and the quality of his presence.

The beauty of a call to shared ministry in a congregation is that the minister, the staff, and the members can be present to and with one another's callings in ways that co-mingle into beauty and truth, compassion and just relations with one another here and in the world beyond your doorstep.

In shared ministry, you must be present and awake to what is called for in this moment. This requires a degree of searching as you have on your banner outside, but it also requires landing on an answer in this moment – or the opportunity to serve in word and in deed will pass you by.

So, I ask you, what is your current answer to what it means to be a church that responds to the pressing needs here in your sanctuary and the pressing needs of the community in which you are planted? How will you engage your heart and your body in service of love?

William Greenleaf Eliot, the first minister of the Church of the Messiah, one of the two churches that ultimately merged to become you put it this way, "It is a living sacrifice which God [or Love] demands, not a dying sacrifice." Where he writes about this, he continues on to cast a vision of the best kind of religious life as being a lifetime pursuit that is strengthened through dedicated application from our youth and young adulthood through our elder years. Eliot also emphasizes the need to engage our minds, spirits, and bodies in service of our faith – through our words, our liturgies, and our deeds. That last part matters. It is important, he reminds us, else we

are simply ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual’ but not ‘moral.’ Religion for Eliot requires the discipline of spiritual practices and moral discernment and activity in the world. He writes, “Religion, if rightly considered, is the spirit in which we live.”

It is clear he was a man of these words doing his best to dedicate his life to the building up of this community for spiritual practice and filled with partners with whom to further the causes of broadening access to education, the projects of emancipation and abolition, and alleviating poverty.

Indeed, he offered a living sacrifice to this congregation and to St. Louis. Eliot also made it clear, though, that he wasn’t interested in being venerated long after his death for his accomplishments. He was much more interested that the spirit of your founders would live on in your own dedication to the spiritual life and to acts of justice in this time. As you have captured in his statement on your website, "The past has much for which we may be reasonably grateful, but the future must and will have better things in store."

After all, he was aware that justice had not yet arrived for many in his time as is the case in our time for a number of reasons including the patriarchy. Many of his projects created the heaviest burden on his bright and capable wife, Abby, who it must be said had the strength, moral compass, and dedication to this church of a minister – but, would never have been allowed to reach for such things. And, from what I have read, Eliot had high and tough expectations of his congregants that were softened somewhat in his sermons occasionally by Abby’s sage advice. The Eliot Family didn’t make much room for displays of sorrow and suffering – but, Abby who lost 9 of her 14 children knew that sorrow and suffering must find a home here as well as lofty aspirations – else only the very privileged could find their stories reflected here.

The first minister of the Church of the Unity, John C. Learned, the second of the two churches that form you, also placed an emphasis on moral discernment and just action. He wrote, “When you name justice and truth you name all there is, whether in Christendom or heathendom, whether on earth or in heaven.” *Now, I will note that in the world we live in today, what was considered heathendom, would be most of us.

I appreciate Learned’s guidance in the following words, “As you grow better there are some things which are always growing loose in their grasp upon you; there are other things which are always taking tighter hold upon your life. You sweep up out of the grasp of money, praise, ease, distinction. You sweep up into the necessity of truth, courage, virtue, love, and God.”

Now, theologically their orientations were quite different, and from what I have read about their feelings each about the other was that they were theological sparring partners and perhaps less appreciative of what each had to offer.

What a gift that lives inside of these walls – a union of a more traditional understanding of how we worship and a more innovative way of worshipping for the time – a mixture of theists and humanists – a place where religious pluralism and a multiplicity of spiritual practices can thrive in our own time. Yet, and I say this gently, I am curious when I see two of the words in your current mission statement “tolerance and decency.”

I wonder whether that is a relic of two churches who were theological sparring partners as well as people of the same faith in this city that ultimately came together and tolerated one another's differences. Or, perhaps it is meant to capture a broad-minded sensibility of tolerating religious and other differences that you have with your neighbors.

Freedom, Reason, and Tolerance was also the rallying cry of our shared faith that came into use through the words of Earl Morse Wilbur, president of Starr King School for the Ministry during the beginning of the last century. However, tolerance is merely a starting place in our work to navigate religious, racial, ethnic, class, and gender divides in our congregations and in society at large. As we approach 2020, "decency and tolerance" are words that recall and celebrate our past more than they chart a course for the future.

A time of an ordination and installation is one where we are called to imagine the better things in store for the future that Eliot spoke about. It's an occasion for you to ask yourselves who is the First Unitarian Church of St Louis and who are you becoming? It is an occasion for all of us gathered to ask what is this shared faith that we dedicate our lives to all about and where are we headed collectively?

Contemporary, Unitarian Universalism might be summed up this way:

We believe that we all come from the same source, and that, ultimately, we are heading towards the same place and our destinies are intertwined. Therefore, we must protect the source (or sources) of all life on earth, and we must work for the betterment of all people. Our very own lives depend upon understanding and living out these faithful beliefs.

As soon as I take a stab at my elevator speech, I am reminded of the words of Rev. Lewis B. Fisher, the dean of the Universalist seminary at St. Lawrence University, who described the flexibility of religious liberalism as opposed to the religious orthodoxy. "Universalists are often asked to tell where they stand," he wrote. "The only true answer . . . is that we do not stand at all, we move."

So, where might we be moving now and next?

I think the answer lies in a movement from liberalism to liberation. While the question of where we are located in relationship to the continuum of orthodoxy and liberalism still exists, much of the recent controversy and promise of our faith is centered around whether we locate ourselves with traditions of liberalism or liberation. This has everything to do with the value we place on individual liberty vs. the act of liberating itself.

This might be the shift: If every human being comes from the same source and is inherently worthy... If our futures are linked and we are part of the interdependent reality of all existence... then our call is to work for collective liberation.

Our pressing spiritual work in our recent religious history, in the present, and in the future is centered on whether our communities are engaged in the act of liberation.

Here is an example from your story, my congregation's story, and many of our congregations' stories:

Last year, our country in general and UUs in particular celebrated the 50th Anniversary of the Stonewall Uprising – what is often used as a marker of the civil rights movement for LGBT rights.

Throughout the 70s and 80s and 90s through this moment, Unitarian Universalist communities have made and continue to make strides towards greater inclusion of members who identify across the sexuality continuum. In the last decade and now, we are moving to make strides in how we welcome people who identify across the gender continuum, including trans and nonbinary.

The congregation I serve started hosting the Gay Activist Alliance in our red county back in 1972. We felt it was only out of relationship with the gay community that our membership would figure out what was the moral path, and we knew they had turned away repeatedly throughout our county. Now, for the first two decades of this relationship our stance would best be described as tolerant and our members would have identified all across the spectrum as far as gay rights.

Let's just talk about the issue of marriage – some would have been for gay couples getting married, some would have been for gay couples being together but not getting married, and some would have thought being gay was less than or even morally wrong. In the beginning, we supported that individual liberty was what mattered most on those questions.

However, around 1990 when the Morristown Unitarian Fellowship voted to become a Welcoming Congregation, we set out on a journey centered around the question of liberation. (I will name that at the time of the vote, we did lose some members. However, we did not allow that to hold us back from what love required of us.)

You have also moved towards this bolder step and became a Welcoming Congregation in 2012, and we are joined by sibling congregations around the country.

As Welcoming Congregations, we will undoubtedly still have the presence of individuals in our communities who hold different views, but we collectively take a stance that we are here to advance and promote the wellbeing, the rights, and the liberation of the LGBTQI community in our words, our liturgies, and our deeds.

Now, we haven't done this perfectly, of course and we still have work today around heterosexism, trans inclusion, and more. But, we prioritize moving forward on all these fronts and on the liberation of our family members who are gay or trans over people who might feel uncomfortable about it or want to slow things down or prefer silence. I am excited to learn this very weekend you have a group of members who are meeting to generate ideas for how you live and love into being: a Welcoming Congregation in St Louis for the decade to come.

Today, many of our congregations are also asking similar questions and learning how to commit ourselves to the liberation of black lives in a time of mass incarceration and white supremacy, the liberation of indigenous lives in a time of devastation of mother earth and her waters, and immigrant lives in a time of global economic injustice.

You are very much a part of this. After all this is the home the Ferguson Uprising, this is the place where the Mississippi is experiencing record flooding, and we all live in a country that has recently separated babies and children from their mothers and put them in cages.

To delve further into the way that orienting towards liberalism vs liberation matters, let's explore the age-old question of what it means to love our neighbor today? Liberalism asks, "Why wouldn't we welcome the struggling stranger to cross the border and build a better life?" Liberation asks, "Who were the borders created to serve in the first place and how do they function to exclude and oppress?"

There are times when individual liberty is called for such as in a women's right to choose and the diversity of sources that nourish our spiritual lives. But, when individual liberty competes with liberation, I side with liberation.

Another example from my home congregation, All Souls in NY, a beautiful old building like this one – this appeared in the form of a small, but well-tended garden – a precious spot in the middle of new York City – versus a wheel chair ramp to empower people across the disability continuum to get into our building without being carried and with their full dignity intact. It was a debate at first, but liberation of our siblings in faith won out – and we have a ramp that my mother fought for and eventually had to use, herself.

The more multicultural and multiracial youth, young adults, and families crossing the threshold of our communities across the U.S. know before the show up on a Sunday morning that we are a place of open minds and hearts ready to include diverse theological perspectives and working to develop a broader array of practices and culturally relevant worship.

But, what many of them are craving are partners who not only reflect upon the moral questions of the day, but who take action. A spiritual community committed and willing to take bold risks and make sacrifices to make love and justice visible in the world – to lift up two other words from your mission statement.

They are looked for a congregation that welcomes the privileged and asks them to use it for the good and welcomes those on the margins and looks to empower and follow their leadership as people disproportionately affected by the discounting and dehumanizing practices of the world we are trying to free ourselves from and to counter.

They are looking for a community that will not only show up for their ideas in the sanctuary or in classrooms, but also in the streets, in the prisons and deportation centers, by the rivers, in the schools, through interfaith organizing and coalition building. These newcomers and the youngest in our midst need congregations who are dedicated to working for a better tomorrow and to help them have faith in a tomorrow at all. They are turned towards us with their eyes open wondering,

“Are we awake?” “Are we really here in this time paying attention to what is asked of our shared ministry now?” Or, are we thinking about something else we thought was important before we arrived at this moment?

They are looking for more than a liberal faith. They are looking for a liberal love that excludes no one and a liberating faith that is inseparable from justice.

Let us then say to our visitors, Welcome, to the religion that is awake and awakening. Welcome to the community that is compassionate and fierce. Welcome to a people who is ready to receive you – your dreams and your disappointments – ready to learn and to grow together in service of liberation, love, and life. Come and have a seat at our table.