

What are we doing here?"

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Story: *A Messiah Is Among You*¹

Reading by Gordon Atkinson² (adapted)

Sermon

What are we doing here?

It's a chilly winter Sunday morning. We might be sleeping in, taking a walk, getting caught up on things, working, caring for someone, spending time with family or friends or animals, or getting some precious alone time. There are so many other possibilities, and yet here we are. And because we are, we have a church.

But what are we doing here?

Each of us might answer that question a little differently. Our opening reading offered a few ideas, and we could add more. You might lift up connection or challenge or growth or inspiration. You might be seeking solace, refuge, a place to heal, or at least rest for a moment. You might be here with deep questions, a longing for meaning or belonging, or a hunger that's hard to articulate. You might be here to sing; to serve others; or for your children's well-being, or for company or the coffee. All these things happen here - and will continue to happen here.

And. What if we expand our thinking about this question to consider even more than all the individual longings of all the individual people. Because in addition to the reasons why each of us is here, there are reasons why Albany UU is here. In fact, part of why you're here may be because this is a community where our separate reasons for being here are bound up in something bigger.

In theological lingo, the question of how we understand religious community is the topic of "ecclesiology." It may seem like one of the more mundane theological issues (questions of evil or salvation might be a little juicier), but ecclesiology is the core theological issue for Unitarian Universalists. We don't agree on what happens after we die, or why bad things happen, or what (if any) deities are real (or helpful). Probably, we will never agree on those things - we certainly aren't trying to agree. But in this faith tradition we do agree on coming together in covenantal religious community. And in spite of Unitarian Universalism's long-standing leaning toward individualism, it's not all about what any of us want, or even need.

¹ Adapted from a story in Tapestry of Faith's [Moral Tales](#) which itself was recrafted with permission of the author, Francis Dorff, O. Praem, of the Norbertine Community of Albuquerque, New Mexico, from his story, "The Rabbi's Gift," which is copyrighted by The New Catholic World magazine.

A different version is by Rosamund and Benjamin Zander <https://philipchircop.wordpress.com/2012/09/06/the-messiah-is-amongst-you/>

² formerly publicly available at <https://gordonatkinson.net/rlp-archive/how-to-find-a-church>

Accepting that there is something here that is bigger than us can be scary. A lot of harm has been done (and is still done) by religions that demand conformity, maintain abusive power structures, and offer meaning in violence. Colonialism, white supremacy, genocide, terrorism have all been fostered, encouraged, promoted, even led by churches. At this point, there's a lot of distrust of churches, and rightly so - there is power here that can be used for remarkable good, and misused for appalling evil.

Misuse of church power and pushback against that misuse have been around for millennia. In the Unitarian Universalist religious lineage, the oldest prophets of the Hebrew bible nearly 3000 years ago decried - over and over - the hypocrisy and failings of their religious community, calling out their people for "oppressing the poor and crushing the needy,"³ while going through the motions of their faith. God, said those prophets, was so enraged about the injustice that God rejected, even hated, their sacred rituals.⁴ What God wanted instead, said the prophet Amos, was to let justice roll down like waters.⁵

These critiques of religious communities continued in the early Christian church, and through centuries of protestant reformers. Our Calvinist religious ancestors critiqued the Anglicans; then our liberal religious ancestors critiqued the Calvinists. The calling out continues today as Unitarian Universalism and this church (along with many others) strive to acknowledge and address the abuses of power and privilege in our past and present. Religious aspirations have always been hard for humans to live up to. The church we're looking for does not exist and never has.

And yet, we are here.

And one of the things we're doing here is continuing the tradition of noticing when who we are is not who we say we are. We're constantly seeking to be in the world in more loving and life-affirming ways. I hope we never get so comfortable that we abandon this kind of self-reflection and growth in response to difficult truths. And. There's more to what we're doing here.

And what we're doing here has never mattered more.

Gus Speth, former presidential advisor and co-founder of the Natural Resources Defense Council, frames the issue this way, and I quote:

"I used to think the top global environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. I thought that with 30 years of good science we could address these problems, but I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy, and to deal with these we need a spiritual and cultural transformation. And we scientists don't know how to do that."⁶

We need a spiritual and cultural transformation. This church is here for spiritual and cultural transformation.

³ Amos 4.1

⁴ E.g., Amos 5:21-22

⁵ Amos 5:24

⁶ BBC, Shared Planet: Religion and Nature, Oct 1, 2013, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b03bqws7>

The Jewish Midrash is a collection of rabbinic narratives that elaborate on the Torah, often filling in backstories and motivations. It contains a wonderful story about young Abraham (the Abraham who goes on to become the ancestor of Judaism, Christianity and Islam). In this story, Abraham's father made and sold idols - religious statues of the local gods that people took home and worshipped. One day, when young Abraham was left in charge of the shop, he took a stick, and smashed all the idols except the largest one and then put the stick in the hand of the largest idol. When his father returned, he asked Abraham what happened. Abraham explained that the idols got into an argument, and the largest one smashed all the others with the stick. His father didn't buy that explanation, pointing out that they're only statues. And yet, said Abraham, you worship them!⁷

Sometimes we, too, find ourselves fiercely loyal to gods that are not worthy of our devotion. Gods perhaps like security, power, status, productivity, popularity, tradition, image, perfection. This church isn't here to tell us whether there is a god or gods or goddesses; it is here to help us choose what we will treat as a god in our lives, and to offer freedom from a life of loyalty to gods that are not worthy of our deepest commitment.

If we get that right, it will be a spiritual and cultural transformation. For us. And for the world.

How might this church do this?

For starters, not perfectly. Did I mention that church does not exist?

But one way we do spiritual and cultural transformation is by gathering and practicing. Practicing being together; and practicing the rituals that ground us in community and build resilience - like lighting a chalice, joys and sorrows, singing together, eating together, the traditions of this congregation and the ways we mark transitions in our lives. These aren't just Sunday morning filler – they are embodied practices that strengthen and prepare us for the work of reflection and meaningful living.

We do spiritual and cultural transformation by practicing being a community that resists the injustice of the world around us, however we can. This one might feel especially hard right now - with the current smorgasbord of injustice to choose from, it's a little overwhelming. But we can still practice. And we are.

And, most of all, we do it by practicing healthier, more compassionate, more loving ways of being. Perhaps by treating ourselves and one other as though any of us could be a messiah. Perhaps by deepening our commitment to values that the dominant culture does not encourage - like forgiveness, kindness, generosity, connection and gratitude.

This is a little harder than the story suggests. In the real world, that church does not exist. But just practicing – working toward being that community is a spiritual and cultural transformation. It's a seed that can, and will, grow beyond these walls.

And there's one more key thing that we're doing here.

⁷ E.g., <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/stories-of-our-ancestors/>

We are carefully tending (and polishing a bit, as needed) the message of this faith - for ourselves, future generations, and this world that desperately needs it. It's a message that was passed to us by our religious ancestors, each generation of whom cared for and polished it in their time.

That message, as I understand it today, goes something like this.

In a world in which human worth is denied in so many ways, **you are loved**. Whatever you're experiencing or struggling with, whatever you've done (or has been done to you), whether you're joyful or despairing, or somewhere in between, you are worthy of love and you are loved.

In a culture of individualism, **we are absolutely interconnected**, to one another and the planet. There is no salvation of one without all. One person's suffering affects us all. And love, given anywhere, lifts us all.

And, amid all the voices telling us that we are powerless in the face of terrifying and sometimes devastating problems, **we are needed**. Our task is to show up, with love - and receiving love - in this world.

Unitarian Universalists and this congregation hold this message of love, connection, empowerment and courage. At our best, we remind one another of this message in what we say and what we do. And we bring it into the world - this, too, is what we're doing here.

Now it's not lost on me, being somewhat literal-minded, that some of this is a little vague, a little light on details about what exactly we're doing in this church. That's partly because those details are changing. And partly, because the details themselves can become gods - when we're fiercely loyal to the details of how we do these things, we can end up trying to make this place conform to an outdated notion of church. Right now, I'm trying not to do that - I'm trying to start big picture, and then to listen to what this church is telling us about the details.

I'm anthropomorphizing a bit here, but you know - this church is telling us. The volunteer work that goes undone (or is carried unsustainably by extraordinarily dedicated super-volunteers) is telling us something. Tasks and activities that inspire enthusiasm are telling us something. The remarkable speed and energy with which you came together and made commitments to pay off the loan that was used to build this very space - tells us something. The people who braved the weather to attend Friday night's potluck and our "Getting to Know UU" class yesterday to learn more about this faith and this congregation tell us something. The recent increase in the number of families with children - the young adult group claiming a place of its own after the service - are telling us something.

What have you noticed that tells you something about how this community is trying to do the work of spiritual and cultural transformation?

What if we pay attention to what this church is telling us? When volunteers are hard to find, might we ask what would happen if we changed how we do this thing, or didn't do it at all? Might we shift some resources from places where they've been to where there is - now - energy and enthusiasm and greater alignment with the transformation that we're here for? When a staff member or fellow congregant in a leadership role lets go of a god of past expectations, might we imagine that this is a response to something that this church is telling us, and offer our support - rather than assuming that they're negligent and need to be set straight?

What gods are we loyal to, and are they worthy of us and this church?

I want to hear about the longing that brings you here. I want this church to help you explore that longing and find fulfillment in committing to something that is worthy of your loyalty. That is something we do here. And, I hope we can also practice and reflect together, tend our message, and listen to what this congregation - as a whole - is telling us about what Albany UU is doing here.

That's why I hope you'll join us after the service, to share with, and listen to, others on this topic. Because what spiritual and cultural transformation looks like on the ground is – always - up to you.

The church of our dreams does not exist. But the church that we need in this moment, does. Because we are that church.

May we come together as people we can hang with, practice with, cocreate with, listen with – love with. May we find here people who will change, and will change us, on a journey that might teach us something. May we keep looking for the sacred in one another, and let it guide how we are with each other. And, may we drink some good coffee together.

May it be so.

Amen.