

Sermon *Invisible Walls*

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What if we could grow new hearts out of old ones? Will your heart grow three sizes today? Are you ready to shuck your skin and become something new? That's kind of what deciding to be a minister is like. You have a moment when you stop what you're doing and say – I am not just me, I've got something else I need to be. I have to shed this part of me and become something new. And I have to do it with unflinching honesty or I don't do it at all.

Becoming a minister was not one of my dreams. Sometimes my brothers and sisters in the clergy will say they were called. They'd always been reading and seeking and thinking about it and felt a deep call to *answer* it. Or someone important to them saw their possibilities. Sometimes my colleagues came kicking and cursing a higher power that was dragging them to be the priest or the prophet or the practitioner of good deeds and devotions. My colleague Rev. Suzanne Spencer once told me she had a knock down drag out fight with God that ended with her deciding to leave her law practice and enter seminary. Me, not so much. No, "ding; Sarah." No, "are you kidding me, God!" Me, I woke up one day. Shaken by September 11th; I woke up one day and said I have to be a part of something that is the opposite of fear and hate. I have to do this, I can't *not* do this.

My way through seminary was bumpy to say the least. I come from an intensely secular family. We went to church regularly and joined in lots of activities. But my parents went for the company of other progressives, and for thought-provoking sermons and lively congregational talk-backs and good coffee. I don't remember them ever talking with me about God.

I was fascinated by the history and scripture and theology. They opened my mind to all the diverse ways in which we understand ourselves and our possibilities. The poetry and the music spoke to my soul. But nothing touched my heart. While my classmates experienced the anguish of doubt and the struggle for affirmation, I remained apart. Typical of many Unitarian Universalists. We forget that what draws most people to church are feelings and yearnings, not just intellectual curiosity.

It wasn't until my chaplaincy training that I had my epiphany. Prayer didn't come naturally to me. I wasn't sure what I was there for – Unitarian Universalist patients were the worst. They were fatalistic and angry and frightened and weren't sure what I was there for either. But I persevered. I was able to connect deeply with people who were afraid and angry. So I hung in there. I was connecting with their deepest yearnings, and bearing witness to the divine in all of us. And the connections chipped away at the barriers around my heart. At the end of one of our training group sessions, when we were all holding each other in a big circle, I suddenly yanked myself away and went to the window.

I wasn't seeing downtown Providence, I was seeing my dad. I carried my dad in my head always – his bigness, his awkward perfectionism around me, his pride and his fear, and his determined secular humanism. My experience of my parents shaped my outlook on life, but they were mysteries to me.

I found out in my late teens that he had been afraid my whole life that I would come down with lupus. His younger sister had died from it and he had spent my whole life silently looking for signs that I would get it – that he had somehow passed it on to me. That haunted him. And I realized that he haunted me. There are other events and stories. Ours was not an easy family in which to be loved – but love we did. So it was that this epiphany hit hard. I realized that seminary was a rejection of him – the dad I carried

around in my head. To think there might be a God was a rejection of my dad. But I had woken up, and to move forward in my awakening, I had to let go of the dad I carried around with me and all his assumptions and the stories that weren't my own. I wasn't going to come down with lupus, I wasn't going to die young. That was his story. I was going to leave and live and make my own way. Only, I realized then, I'd never quite left him – not until that moment. And I turned around to my colleagues; the cantor, the nuns, the educator, the social worker, I turned to them all and formed a prayer: Source of my strength and light and warmth, quiet my mind and life up my heart that I may hold these my people with that deep and abiding care that signifies the love we bear one another. I felt freer and closer to them in that moment than I had in all the weeks we'd been baring our souls.

There's a poem by Rumi:

Come! Take a pickaxe
And break apart
Your stony self.
The heart's matrix
is glutted with rubies.
Springs of laughter
are buried in your breast.
Unstop the wine jar
Batter down the door
to the treasury
of nonexistence.
The water in your jug
is brackish and low.
Smash the jug
and come to the river!

What is this church? What is any community of faith? We're the river when each one of us is brackish and low. We're a river heading to something great and good. We're the community of people trying to stay in right relationship with each other – reviving each other – while we figure out our relationship with the world and the mystery around us. Along the way, we realize that the way we work together and worship together is connected to the way we want to be and never are, at least not yet. Here is where we make it safe to wrestle our hearts, and each other's.

And what do congregations wrestle over? It's pretty much the same everywhere.

What is at the center: a people, a mystery, God?

How does church feel: a second home, a precious sanctuary?

Who do we welcome: the folks we think will fit in, the strangers that will make us stretch and change?

What happens when we disagree: do we take a stand, do we work it out?

How do we act to fill a need: Alone or together?

How do we feel appreciated?

How do we see succeed? How do we fail?

How can we afford to live out our faith?

Who do we trust?

And while we're wrestling, I've realized that we all bring the invisible walls: the attitudes and assumptions and stories we were raised with, or the stories we made of ourselves; stories of what is

right and wrong and valuable and trustworthy. These walls can keep us from connecting with that divine in each other.

And it's not just the walls that bind us and the stories we hearken to, it's how we are with each other in this river. Some of us are passionate and expressive. Some of us are reserved. Some of us are direct; saying what we have to say no matter what. Some of us are indirect – we'll say something with stories or even get someone else involved to make our point. Direct people want to get their message across. Yes, those pants make you look fat. Indirect people want to stay in relationship with the person they're speaking to. I think the other pair might be a better choice. Some of us react right away, and some of us like to mull things over. These are styles of communicating and fighting and working things out we learn from childhood and neighborhood. The problem is; direct people trust direct people. Expressive people feel most comfortable with and trust expressive people. Reserved people want to find the nearest exit when they're with expressive people. You get the idea. But, here's the thing; we're all in the same river when we're together making church happen, there is no swimming to shore.

So how do we stay and work things out? We have to lay down our assumptions about what is right and wrong and valuable and trustworthy. Oh, there is right and wrong, and values and trust – but there are times when we have to work out what that means with each other. We can't do it if we cannot see the divine in each other. So, sometimes we have to unlearn what we've been taught, detach the past, let our eyes see and our ears hear. If you have to unlearn something to be part of something great and good, then unlearn it. Unstop the jar, batter down the treasury door. Smash it if you have to; smash the stockade and the steel around your heart. Let our hearts grow three times larger and become the beloved community we are so patiently and brilliantly and utterly and wholly and holy capable of becoming.

May it be so.