

Sermon What Matters Most  
The First Unitarian Universalist Society of Middleborough  
January 7, 2018 10:30 a.m.

Sermon *What Matters Most* Rev. Sarah Person  
*After Reading "The Invitation" by Oriah Mountain Dreamer*

This is what passion looks like, sounds like, feels like.

It is all joy, all courage, all humility.

It is standing in the center of the fire.

It is rising up after a night of despair  
and doing what needs to be done to feed the children.

And when all else is falling away,  
it is what sustains us from the inside.

It is the hot coals of our being,  
or the never-to-be-forgotten memory of hot coals  
when ours have cooled to warm and steady.

It is keeping focused on what matters most,  
without counting the cost or limitations;  
because otherwise we cool to ashes.

Think about what sustains you while I'm talking.  
Maybe it's not something you ordinarily consider,  
you just keep going. But think about it now.  
What is it that keeps you going,  
that fires up your spirit?

I was thinking about hot coals  
as I was digging a path to our church door early Friday morning.  
I haven't figured out the secret of keeping my hands warm as I shovel.  
I was visualizing fisting my aching fingers  
around hot coals  
as I cleared my way up the steps and the landing.  
I knew the church was warm and waiting for me so I kept going.  
I finally made it and stuck my key in the door,  
only my key wouldn't enter the lock.  
The lock was frozen. All the exterior locks were frozen.  
What a great and unfortunate metaphor that makes:  
frozen locks on the church door!

You may have noticed  
that my sermons tend to range between two ends of a spectrum:  
some sermons comfort the afflicted  
and others afflict the comfortable.  
Well, I was feeling pretty afflicted at that moment.

But thanks to John who plowed the driveway,  
and Alan who cleared the steps,  
and JR who brought the gas,  
and Steve who plowed the walkways, and oiled the locks  
and when that didn't work on one  
held his bare hand to the keyhole to melt the ice within,  
we were warmed by our concert last night

and are here and ready for enlightenment this morning.

So, here I was,  
all prepared to ask you to think seriously  
about what matters most to you  
and push you toward doing something about it –  
in other words, afflicting your comfort.  
But you showed up this morning just like me;  
in the bitter cold after having spent the past few days  
digging through the heavy snow.  
Or entertaining and feeding a crowd of people  
and cleaning up after.  
And a lot of us are wondering about the size of our fuel bill.  
And whether we can get a job closer to the equator.  
Comfortable you are not.  
So this morning, I'm offering  
a little bit of comfort and a little bit of affliction  
while you think about what sustains you  
and activates you and keeps your faith steadfast.

Where did that expression about  
comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable come from?  
Ministers may be forgiven for thinking  
it had something to do with Christianity  
(or in my case Reinhold Niebuhr).  
There is plenty of evidence in scripture for afflicting the comfortable.

Matthew 19:

21 Jesus said to him, 'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' 22 When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions. 23 Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.'

This reminds us of Siddhartha, yes? (Message for All Ages about the Buddha) Only Siddhartha was able to let go of his riches.

But religion, especially Christianity, cannot take credit for being the origin of that particular quote.

***“On October 7, 1893, Chicago Evening Post journalist and humorist Finley Peter Dunne introduced his readers to the character of Mr. Dooley in a newspaper column. ...***

*However the original quote, which appeared in the 1902 book "Observations by Mr. Dooley," is much different and critical of the press. (The fictional Irish bartender was critical of just about everybody.)*

*“Th' newspaper does ivrything fr us. It runs th' polis foorce an' th' banks, commands th' milishy, controls th' ligislachure, baptizes th' young, marries th' foolish, comforts th' afflicted, afflicts th' comfortable, buries th' dead an' roasts thim aftherward.”*

[https://www.poynter.org/news/  
today-media-history-mr-dooley-job-newspaper-  
comfort-afflicted-and-afflict-comfortable](https://www.poynter.org/news/today-media-history-mr-dooley-job-newspaper-comfort-afflicted-and-afflict-comfortable)

Of course, another way for any religion  
to afflict the comfortable  
is to make them responsible for the afflicted.  
Again, you'll find plenty of references  
in Hebrew and Christian scripture. One of my favorites is in

James 2:

14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters,[e] if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? 15 If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? 17 So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Now, raging controversy exists  
between different branches of Christianity  
over whether salvific grace is offered  
to those who simply believe (sola fide) and adhere to a Christian creed,  
or those who also demonstrate their beliefs with their actions.

Christians find evidence for both depending on how they interpret their bible.

Protestants in particular had problems  
with requiring particular actions  
that were supposed to guarantee access to heaven.  
Why would they have a problem with that?  
One reason might have been  
that not everyone is able to act in such a way  
that is an 'acceptable' demonstration of their faith.

Unitarians and Universalists have faith but no one creed we all share.  
Instead, we have shared principles  
that define how we want to treat ourselves and others.  
And, like James, we lean toward action.  
Deeds not creeds, we say.  
We don't ignore faith,  
we ask that people develop and sustain it in beloved community.  
We see it as a lifelong journey.  
Our goal is not the grave.  
We seek to be a people and a place  
where faith and works are one.  
That is the bottom line of everything we believe in.  
We seek to be transformed and transformative.  
Constantly endeavoring to change ourselves for the better.

But on mornings like this, it can be hard.  
I can't even do the things I like to do in winter, you say – it's too cold.  
My hands ache, my shoulders ache, my heart aches.  
This bitter cold reminds me  
of all the lives that will be endangered or lost because of it.  
I'm tired, I'm worn out, you say, and I just want the comfort of friends.  
Does that mean I don't belong here?  
Is there no place for me here, just the way I am?

If course there is,  
the locks on the doors of this church are not frozen.  
But you must bring whatever energy you have, no matter how fleeting,  
to warm the inside of this church.  
Together, with enough heat and we'll warm the outside as well.

Church is a place where we get to practice what it means to be human.  
What do we practice here?  
Being human doesn't just mean striving for happiness or contentment.  
We are meaning-making creatures and that's what we practice here.

In her book *The Power of Meaning*<sup>1</sup>,

*“Emily Esfahani Smith realized that constantly evaluating our own happiness is actually contributing to feelings of hopelessness and depression. Happiness is a fickle emotion, fleeting, based on a moment or an experience. What’s really making us feel sad is not a lack of happiness, it’s lack of meaning, she said. ... [A]fter five years of interviewing hundreds of people, she discovered that meaning can be derived in four forms: belonging, purpose, transcendence and storytelling.*

*The first is exactly what it sounds like — prioritizing the people in your life who truly love and care about you.*

*The second is having purpose. Most people find purpose through work because it’s how we feel like we’re adding value or contributing. But, she said, “that also means disengagement at work, unemployment, low labor force participation, these aren’t just economic problems, they are existential ones too. Without something worthwhile to do, people flounder.” So finding something to drive you forward, whether it’s work or something else, is a crucial slice of having meaning.*

*Transcendence is about finding something that can take you outside of yourself, that can make you feel like you’re part of something bigger. For some that’s art or church, she said. It could be walking in nature or doing yoga.*

*With storytelling, that’s all about our personal narratives. What is the story we tell ourselves about ourselves?*

*“We’re the author of our stories,” she said, “and we can change how we’re telling them. Your life isn’t just a list of events.”*

The Washington Post

Inspired Life/Perspective

*Prioritizing these three things will improve your life — and maybe even save it*

By Colby Itkowitz April 28, 2017

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2017/04/28/prioritizing-these-three-things-will-improve-your-life-and-maybe-even-save-it/?utm\\_term=.8609d35192ae](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2017/04/28/prioritizing-these-three-things-will-improve-your-life-and-maybe-even-save-it/?utm_term=.8609d35192ae)

It occurred to me that these four things –  
belonging, purpose, transcendence and storytelling –  
are what we look for in a faithful life,  
and what we could and should find in church.

So I ask you to consider these questions for yourself:  
What will I want to respond to, even though I'm tired and cold?  
What pulls at my heartstrings?  
What will give me the breath to warm the coals of my spirit?

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<sup>1</sup> *The Power of Meaning: Crafting a Life That Matters* by Emily Esfahani Smith, Crown Publishing © 2017.

Sustain me and mine.

What will I make room for in my heart? What can open up my heart?

Can my heart ache for another's? To what will I give my heart?

What can I do when my fires are at a low ebb?

It is alright to seek belonging –

to practice kindness and responsibility in the confines of relationship.

That can be enough.

It is alright to seek purpose –

to try to add value in what we do and our circumstances –

even in some small way.

That can be enough.

It is alright to seek transcendence,

to look for something

that can take us outside of ourselves

and make us feel like we belong to something greater.

That can be enough.

It is alright to consider the important stories,

our own understanding of our lives and say –

what if I told a different story?

What if I looked at my life in a different way with new insights?

That can be enough.

And if, by gathering together,

we can inspire one another to greater insight and action,

that would be more than enough.

Church is where we practice being human.

It is we who light the fire and keep it going,

for ourselves and each other.

Now that you have had the time to think about what sustains you,

Ask yourself, If I had enough support,

what would I want to do about it?

What is the change I would want to be?

And tell us.