

“What is your ministry?”

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
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What is your ministry? I guess this assumes that you have one, which I believe each of us does. But I'm wondering about now, if some of you might be shaking your heads, musing to yourselves, “Oh no, more shared ministry stuff. Isn't it enough that we honor our pledges, that we volunteer our time, that some of us take on positions of leadership in this parish? Now we're supposed to be ministers! She's the minister, not me!”

Let's back up. Let's back up into what I mean when I talk about shared ministry, about the ministry we're in together, and then what informs my bravado when I ask you as individual parishioners and as an assembled congregation this morning, “What is your ministry?”

We can blame our specifically Christian forebears, especially our Protestant forebears, for this notion of shared ministry. And we can blame something called congregational polity for the focus on shared ministry within our Unitarian Universalist practice. And we can blame that quip of “deeds not creeds” for our emphasis on putting our faith to work in what we do over the ever gristy matter of what we believe.

Shared ministry emerges from a notion called “the priesthood of all believers.” It's grounded in the early Christian understanding that experience of the divine was mediated solely through the figure of Jesus, whom devout Christians understand to be God in the flesh, the son of God, if you will. The early Christian church had no priests. It was informal and egalitarian, with each believer expected to use her or his individual gifts to build up the Christian community, which was pretty wobbly in those days of the Roman Empire. This understanding receives especially strong emphasis in the First Letter of Peter. Believers are implored to “Come to him, to that living stone....and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood.”

Of course a quick trip through the history of the church tells us that this non-hierarchical approach to building “a spiritual house” was honored in the breach. When Martin Luther took up his hammer and nailed his 95 theses – or points of utter frustration – on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg in October of 1517, he had had it with an established church that had reached a point where access to the holy was not only mediated by an exclusive cadre of priests, but mediated for a profit. The Reformation had begun with one angry monk.

And we Unitarians – not even known as Unitarians yet, but already simmering with the ingredients of what has been called the “radical Reformation” – went even further. Thirty-six years almost to the day after Luther had committed his act of defiance, the Spaniard Michael Servetus, was burned at the stake on orders from Luther's colleague, John Calvin, for questioning the authority of the Trinity. Was Michael Servetus ordained? No, Servetus was just one of those living stones, but with a different set of beliefs than what had hardened into the hierarchy of the Christian church. Servetus helped put the “radical” into Reformation.

We who are Unitarians and Universalists and now a blend of both have long been notorious for our radicalism. We've been dubbed heretics as if it were an insult, when a heretic is simply one who exercises choice. To be creatures of choice is core to our practice of faith and doubt.

So it is that we move into the notion of congregational polity, its own special form of choice. Our Unitarian Universalist congregations, including our very own First Parish, exercise this choice, this heresy, with each congregation calling its professional ministers, ordaining us, and governing in a mode of relative independence. Yes, we're a member of the Unitarian Universalist Association, but it's an association of interdependent congregations who connect and collaborate by covenant, not by hierarchical dictum.

A few years ago, a commission of our Association spent several years pondering this notion of congregational polity and came up with a report that spoke to the interdependence that defines us. It was a report written by committee – how else would we UUs take on a non-hierarchical topic? – but I found myself reading it with relish. Within the topic of congregational polity, there's a provocative discussion of religious leadership, which moves into a discussion of shared ministry. I found this passage jumping off the page:

“One key aspect of Unitarian Universalism is our belief that ministry of the congregation does not belong exclusively to ordained clergy, but to everyone.”

The text continues with some commentary that comes to us from an earlier committee's report on ministry in which commissioner Neil Shadle explained:

"Ministry is the vocation of every person of faith, [and] Unitarian Universalism, as a democratic faith, affirms the “priesthood of all believers;” we are all lay ministers, whether or not we choose to be professional religious leaders."

Here we are, coming full circle back to that notion of the “priesthood of all believers.”

But the circle had already expanded, thanks to that great giant of a 20th century theologian, James Luther Adams. Adams taught over the many years of his career at Boston University, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Harvard Divinity School, and Andover-Newton Theological School when Harvard was so graceless as to retire him. He occupied fully the slice of history that was his, commenting, writing, engaging students, and taking on the brokers of power and privilege through the questions that rocked his time. It's not surprising that he stretched the “priesthood of all believers” into the priesthood and prophethood of all believers. Prophets, we might remember, were those annoying flower children of the Old Testament – Jonah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos. Troublemakers all, they called the populace of their day to take seriously stuff like loving your neighbor as yourself and honoring the divine by so doing.

Adams himself had a prophetic gene or two. Why else would he have written so forcefully about what we're called to do as prophets, a ministry that makes most of us entirely uncomfortable? “The prophetic liberal church,” he claimed, “is not a church in which the prophetic function is assigned merely to a few.” Adams had more to say.

“The prophetic liberal church is the church in which persons think and work together to interpret the signs of the times in the light of their faith, to make explicit through discussion the epochal thinking that the times demand. The prophetic liberal church is the church in which all members share the common responsibility to attempt to foresee the consequences of human behavior (both individual and institutional), with the intention of making history in place of merely being pushed around by it.”

And the cherry on top of his sundae?

“Only through the prophetism of all believers can we together foresee doom and mend our common ways.”

If we take seriously the priesthood and prophethood of all believers, if we take seriously shared ministry, I’m guessing that the first act of faith is to hyperventilate. Once we catch our breath, we can take stock, probably sing a hymn or two, pray desperately, “Why me?”, and trust that the coffee and sweets will be really great today. Then again, you know that today’s coffee hour is called a “Faith Works coffee hour.”

Many of you have or are finding your ministry within and through the shared ministry that makes this parish live. Many of you are still wondering, pondering, and yes, resisting the notion that “works” go hand in hand with faith, that “spiritual” goes hand in hand with “practice.”

I believe all of us are here in this Meeting House for a purpose. It’s about faith, but faith isn’t enough. At least that’s what the author of the New Testament book known as The Letter of James proclaimed:

“What gain is there if a person claims to have faith but doesn’t have works?”

Of course he didn’t know enough to let it drop with that. He kept going.

“If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

Can you imagine having James on your committee?

When I get overwhelmed, I start thinking in steps, one step at a time. Let’s try that right now.

What is your ministry? What are you doing right now that speaks to the faith and works of this congregation, that feeds the hungry, that teaches our children, that hollers to the powers that be in our own time to change course, that keeps the kitchen clean and the facilities painted, that helps the flowers grow, that helps us all grow? I believe there are four simple questions to consider when you feel that the attack rabbit of shared ministry is about to pounce once again:

- 1) What am I good at?
- 2) What do I like to do?
- 3) What needs to be done?
- 4) Is there stuff happening in my life right now that suggests I scream for help?

What am I good at? Sometimes what we’re good at is what we least like to do. I’m really good at cleaning a bathroom. I’m really good at turning a messy paper into a fairly coherent document. Do I like to do these things? No. So what am I good at that I like to do? Or even that I kind of like to do? I suppose it would be honest to say that I’m good at chairing committees, and I kind of like to do this, but that’s not what I need to do here, and the last thing I want to do is to usurp your power.

Okay, on to the next question: What needs to be done? Well, I believe both the joy and heartache and celebration and rites of parish ministry need to be done. I believe healing needs to be done.

I could stop here, but there's that fourth question, and it's oh so subjective: Is there stuff happening in my life right now that suggests I scream for help? For me, right now, probably not. Miracle of miracles, all three daughters are doing fairly well right now. With amazing grace, Dan and I have a good marriage. With the luck of the draw, we're both in good health. However, I have had to scream for help in my life, and I know that some of you have had to do this too, even if you first scream silently.

So what is your ministry? Let those four questions swim in your mind for awhile. Let them play out in your heart for awhile. Then step back into your understanding of your own priesthood, your own prophethood. Then step back into the circle of this religious community and ask once again, "What is my ministry?" How will I work my faith?

And your answer? May your answer be some kind of gratitude for that "God on a great day" that I spoke of when we began our worship together this morning. May your answer be some kind of gratitude for that "God on a pretty good day." May your answer be some kind of gratitude for that "God on an ordinary day," even that God on a downright rotten day. Why? Because we're all on this planet together. We're all occupying this slice of history that frames our lives right now. We're all believers that we are here right now. We're all members of this blended family known as humankind behaving in kind. We're all breathing – proof enough that miracles happen – and the course that we choose and chart is our ministry in this miracle in which we find ourselves, no matter what kind of day it is for God.

I love you each and all. Amen

Sources

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