

## ***The Big Question***

--a homily before our annual "blending the waters" ritual--

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My friend called me the other day. We went to theological school together. She's in her tenth year serving a church in New England; I'm in my ninth year here in Des Moines. We've both been at ministry for a while.

She'd wanted to talk to me about some of the interesting things we've been doing here, especially some of our newer programs and leadership opportunities. We ministers are always looking for ways of doing things better, of finding ways to more fully engage our members in the life of their church and in the growth of their souls.

So I shared some of what we've got going on, and she shared what her church has been doing. Then as the conversation was winding down, her voice changed a little, and she said, "Mark, can I ask you a big question?"

"Sure," I answered.

"Do you ever wonder...well..." she said trying to find the right words, "why we bother with all of this?"

"I think I know what you mean," I said, "But can you say more?"  
(note, this is a good stalling technique when you are being asked a tough question)

"Well," she said, "Don't you just wonder sometimes what the point of all this is? It just seems that, in the church, we never quite get where we want to go. We're always reaching for something and never quite grasping it, and, well, it's easy to get frustrated. Why do we do this?"

I surprised myself with how quickly and assertively I answered. Maybe I needed to convince myself, because, let's face it, sometimes we all wonder what the point is, don't we? I told her how I saw the church as a laboratory of human interaction, a laboratory where we get to test new ideas and reflect together on big questions, a place where we are encouraged to grow our souls by engaging with others attempting to do the same thing. A place where we can practice being compassionate, and open and humble so that we might eventually learn important things about this life we share and our places in it, things that would be harder

to learn by ourselves.

I rambled on for a few more minutes, but that's the gist. And I felt pretty good about it, too. But I've been thinking a lot about her question this week, as our staff and membership have been busily preparing to fully dive in to the church year and our three-service schedule, and the joy of having an intern to work with and learn with, and the beginning of our Sunday school classes and Wednesday programming and enrollment in the next round of Small Group Ministry, and our board's switch to policy governance, and all the wonderful social justice initiatives we've got going. And I think in my "church as laboratory" answer, I missed something important, something fundamental even. I mean the idea of the church as a laboratory is fine, but sometimes, in laboratories, the compounds that are created and mixed cause explosions, or at least stinky by-products. In laboratories, sometimes people try to make these dangerous combinations, on purpose, just to see what will happen. And sometimes, in laboratories, we spend so much time trying to prove our own theories and ideas, that we lose interest in the theories and ideas of others.

Maybe my laboratory metaphor wasn't so great after all.

Did most of us really enter the doors of this church to do experiments or to prove theories? Is that really the point?

I'm thinking that most of us came here, to this church that has served as a religious home for people in Des Moines for over 130 years, not just to mix things together and see what would come of it, but to stand on the banks of the stream of life flowing through this place, to take in the scene, and to risk putting our toes, if not our full selves, in the water, to see if there might be a place for us in the flow. Or maybe we came here to reflect on our lives, to gain a new perspective or perhaps to remind ourselves of what we once knew, or to restore a sense of hopefulness about the possibilities of living and loving. And sometimes, we have to admit, we came here because somebody brought us and we couldn't get out of it.

But no matter how we first got here, I think the important question to ask ourselves is why do we keep coming back? Why do we stay in this church, even though we are not expected to believe in God, however each of us may define or deny the concept. Why do we stay in this church, even though some of us don't necessarily pray, or meditate, or even believe that life is anything other than a random consequence of a random event at some random time? Why do we stay, even when we might not

always agree with the minister, or the words or ideas of a hymn or reading, or maybe the metaphors claimed to be at the heart of a ritual like the water blending ritual we will practice today?

So why do we stay?

I was talking to another colleague this week, someone who has worked with many churches in her career as a UU minister and consultant. She told me a story about one church she was helping through some conflict. Apparently there was a lot of tension in the congregation between those with a humanist perspective on religion, who wanted there to be great caution and care taken when the people in the church used words like God and worship, and those with a more theistically open perspective, who hoped for more flexibility with language, who wanted the church to appeal to people across a broader stretch of the god/no-god continuum.

By the way, if there is anything that can make a minister ask "What is the point?" it is a divisive debate over the idea of God...a debate that never produces a clear winner, only impassioned bullies, frustrated onlookers, and offended losers.

My friend said she gathered the members of this divided congregation in a room and asked them to explain why they came to church. What were they looking for when they walked through the doors?

The answers she received would be familiar to many of you.

*I came to be around like-minded people.*

*I came to explore ideas.*

*I came for my kids, so they could be a part of a church.*

*I came to participate in social justice efforts.*

*I came for community, and so on.*

And then, after many had spoken, a woman offered her answer...the final answer...the one that hushed the crowd.

The woman said:

"I came here in the hope that you would know me...and love me anyway."

*I came here in the hope that you would know me...and love me anyway.*

Haven't we all, one way or another, come here to be known...and loved anyway?

Isn't it that yearning that makes our free church, a place where we are

not expected to think alike to love alike, a religious home worth our trouble, a place worth our time and our treasure, a place where we can truly grow our souls? Because it is here, when we are at our best anyway and willing to risk, and to be accounted for and committed to relational curiosity, that we can be known in all of our imperfect, even contradictory, glory...we can be known...and be loved anyway.

For me, it is in that knowing each other that the door to the divine is opened, and it is in the loving anyway, despite all the reasons not to, that the holy is made real.

And that is why I bother with this messy, complicated, beautiful enterprise we call church and why it matters to me that you do, too.

Because it is in our knowing each other that the door to the divine is opened, and it is in our loving each other anyway that the holy is made real.

Today we will participate in a ritual that we've been sharing each September of my ministry here and many years before that. It is a ritual that will take place in hundreds of UU churches this month. While the ritual varies a bit for each congregation, our tradition is that each of us brings water from the summer...whether from vacation, from a special place around town, or from home. Wherever the water comes from, it should represent something of significance to us, often times a special memory, feeling or hope.

Then, we are invited to bring our water forward, share a few words about what it represents and then pour it into a common bowl. (Don't worry if you didn't bring water, or forgot we were doing this today. we've got you covered.)

At the heart of this simple ceremony is the understanding that each of us, by virtue of our humanity, has traveled places uniquely our own, and the water we bring represents far more than a vacation or a location. It represents something important about ourselves and what we bring as individuals to our community we call the First Unitarian Church of Des Moines.

And when we come "gently homeward" to this place each September, even if this is our first time, and we blend our water, symbolically creating and re-creating the river of life that is our church, we come to understand that the river is not some place to visit as we would the theatre or the shopping mall. No, this river is not a "place" at all. The river is the act of

gathering, and risking, and trusting, made possible by our presence. It is the blending of the greater water of life, of which each of us is merely a drop. The river is us. The river, then, the church, if you will, (or at least the church I dream about) is the uncommon expression of our common yearning, a yearning that transcends all of our differences in theology or politics or class or race or gender or even our opinions about joys and concerns. A yearning that makes the whole liberal religious enterprise not only worth it, but essential to my life...and maybe yours, too. The yearning to be known...and to be loved anyway. That's why I bother. How about you?