

**With Power and Purpose: Part 2—“What Do We Expect of Each
Other?”**

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

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Today is part two of my sermon series on “Power and Purpose” here at First Unitarian Church. When I was talking to a few folks before I started this series, telling them what I was going to do in the month of February, they jokingly suggested that I should name the series “What have I gotten myself into!?” A tempting title perhaps, but “With Power and Purpose” gets at what I am really trying to do this month. It is an attempt to state what are we about; what business do we have existing as a church? I am sure these are questions many of you have already wrestled with during the interim period, so I appreciate your patience as I contribute my voice and perspective to conversation.

In part one I talked about four values of our congregation: Exploration, Interconnection, Transformation, and Service. Astute listeners, and there are many, will notice that these values are all presented in the form of nouns. Values are things, and the rules of grammar would dictate that they be consistently referred to as nouns. To be honest, I struggled with that. You see one of the things unique to Unitarian Universalist theology, our liberal religious way of thinking, is

that we have a playful attitude toward words. We like to play with our words to see if we can uncover new meaning. Sometimes just changing a preposition will do the trick. Or conjugating a word differently can reveal a new way of looking at something. So today I want to talk about four things that we expect of each other as a congregation: Explore, Connect, Transform, Serve. Simply by conjugating my four values from nouns into an imperative form we see how our values as a religious community, become the things we expect of each other.

My friend Dave Rickard, a consultant for the UUA whom some of you may know, tells a story that he admits is not true, but loves anyway. Maybe he told it to you before. Once upon time there was a church that was looking to grow. So the Board of this church decided at one of its meetings that they would not discuss church business during coffee hour. Instead they all agreed that they would forgo social time with their friends and seek out visitors and new people. The next Sunday the Board members do a pretty good job of going around and greeting others. Maybe their minister had given a rousing sermon on the virtues of radical hospitality. Except for one Board member, the resident curmudgeon who was a dedicated church pillar but liked to march to his own drummer. He was talking to some of the other curmudgeons in the back of the parish hall, having a sort of caucus of curmudgeons I guess. The chair of the Board went up to this man and in a very kind voice said, “Sam, now we all agreed that we would we would not talk to our friends

but would instead greet all of the new people.” Sam turns to the Board Chair and in a gravelly voice says, “Well, I found this church the hard way, and so can they!”

I call this the “Band of Brothers” or “Band of Brothers and Sisters” theory of Unitarian Universalism. Like Henry V and his heavily outnumbered army about to fight the French, we UUs can sometimes feel like the persecuted minority under siege. We must be very wary of who we let in, in order to make sure they are our people, this theory says. “We few, we happy few we band of brothers and sisters for he or she who sheds their proverbial blood with me shall be my brother or sister.” These are inspiring words. They rally the troops, literally in Shakespeare’s case. In a sense it is a great sentiment: we are here united for a common purpose and in that common purpose the bonds of fellowship build our community. Granted, our common purpose as a church is far more peaceful than Henry’s was, but I would like to think that we are just as passionate about our coming together as a congregation as his army was in following him into battle.

The main problem though with the Band of Brother’s theory, or the attitude that says “I found this place the hard way and so can they” is that it has a tendency towards elitism. It is fantastic to have found a meaningful and spiritually nourishing community at church—we band of brothers and sisters. The problem is the “we few, we happy few!” We cannot be closed off from the world, to simply find something good

here and then never let anyone else in. That is not what we are about. My favorite line is the last one of the monologue, “And gentlemen in England now a-bed shall think themselves accursed they were not here, and hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks that fought with us upon St. Crispian’s Day.” That stirs my blood every time I hear it! But it is pretty elitist when applied to a church: we have the goods, and everyone else should be envious of us.

We are Unitarian Universalists; and perhaps we need to emphasize that last word a bit more: Universalists. We are here for everyone, not just a small band. That is why we make it a point to say those words of welcome every Sunday during worship. Note that those words of welcome are not some prelude or some ambiguous add on to the beginning of our worship service, but rather after the invocation. Welcoming is a part of our worship. It is a religious act we make together. It is funny to hear the reaction from our established members to those words. Some of those groups we name we do a very good job of welcoming, and others perhaps not so well. Why say them if we are not really welcoming to all those groups? I say those words because they are a statement of our ideals. These are the people we welcome, sometimes we might fall down in our practice of welcoming, we might not live up to the ideals we espouse. It is hard being human, having to live in the real world of actuality and not the world of idealism. But is it still important, particularly in worship, to name and put before ourselves

what those ideals are so that we can continue to perfect our practice of them. We welcome you.

What do we expect of each other? Is it that we will make room for the stranger in our midst believing that the purpose of our church is to be a voice and presence for Unitarian Universalism and liberal religion in the world, or do we expect them to find it the hard way like we did? Expectations can be subtle and silent things. Often when we talk about our expectations of each other we think of institutional expectations: that make a pledge of a certain amount, that we serve on a committee or taskforce, that we attend services, that we behave in respectful and loving ways toward one another. That is what we typically think of, and it is a conversation that makes some people uncomfortable. I think it is an uncomfortable topic because so often our expectations are unspoken and in an effort to never offend or upset anyone, we leave our institutional expectations unsaid and silent. So that when we do speak them, people get worried that their thoughts about how much to pledge, how much time to volunteer, which activities they need to cram into an already busy schedule; people get worried that their thoughts and expectations on these topics don't match the church's expectations of them. The only way we can overcome this is by being clear and compassionate about our church's expectations and our expectations of each other.

All that is well and good, but I think there is more to what we expect of each other than just how much we give of our time and money. Those things are important, and trust me you will be hearing my thoughts on that subject in the coming weeks. But before we consider our expectations around institutional needs, I want to highlight that there are even deeper, more important, and even less talked about expectations of being a member of First Unitarian Church. These I would term “Spiritual Expectations.” What do we expect? We expect you to explore your religious identity, we expect you to connect to others, we expect you to transform and to be transformed, and we expect you to serve in world in whatever capacity you are able.

My friend Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs has a great way of illustrating these subtle spiritual expectations. At Unity Church in St. Paul Minnesota there are three expectations of members. That you have a personal spiritual practice that connects you to your theology. That you participate in some way in a small group experience, a covenant group or an affinity group. And that your spiritual life move out into the world in some way, either through an outreach program at the church or somewhere else. Its not pledging or giving money. They do that, and yes they do name institutional expectations when it comes time for it. But those are second tier expectations. They are named as important but not the most important. The church, Eller-Isaacs says, should not be an end in itself. The church is a means to an end. For Unity their end is to

help people live lives of “integrity, service, and joy.” That is the power and the purpose of their church: make the things we value most in the world real and tangible in the embodiment of our congregation. Believe it or not, we do that too, although we just don’t name it that clearly. So let me name it that clearly.

We are a church that expects you to explore. This is another way of saying, “You are responsible for your own spiritual hygiene.” No one will do the work for you of creating a meaningful life. Ours is an active faith. Obviously this cannot be a completely individual effort. First Unitarian Church of Wilmington is a place that will give you the resources to explore what you believe and how those beliefs could and should impact your life. We do this through worship, through adult education classes, through small groups that nourish and enrich our lives as we share our journeys with others and they share their journey with us. It also comes about just by the connections we make with each other. You learn so much just by getting to know the amazing people who come here. And those of us who have already found a place at First Unitarian Church learn so much, and are enriched in our spiritual journeys, when we learn and get to know the new folks coming in. That is the real moral of the story of the curmudgeonly Board member who would not talk to new people. He failed to expand and explore. That is what we expect of each other. It is a spiritual practice.

We are a church that expects you to connect. In our modern reading, which in a way was ancient too, Alice Blair Wesley does a beautiful job of tracing the common thread from our Puritan ancestors all the way to modern Unitarian Universalists. That thread is “the spirit of mutual love” that is more commonly referred to as “covenant.” There is much that I can, and eventually will say about the notion of covenant, because it is the centerpiece of Unitarian Universalism; that thing that makes us unique. Covenant are relationships, but they are special in that they are relationships that we have made promises around. The most common covenantal relationship is a marriage. Marriage is a relationship defined by wedding vows: promises two people make to each other. “I vow to love, honor and obey.” My wife insisted that I make that last vow to her, “I will obey!” These promises define the relationship; they are the contours of our commitment. They are what we refer to again and again when it is hard to be in relationship to each other, “remember what you promised me!” “Yes honey, I will take out the garbage!”

What promises do we make towards each other in our relationship together as a band of brothers and sisters? What covenants do we have as members of this Unitarian Universalist Church? Believe it or not there is one very important one next to you on the pew or folded in your hand. Read again the Unison Affirmation that we say every Sunday during worship. Sort of sounds like weddings vows in a way, doesn't it?

These are the promises we make during worship, every week. Rob Eller-Isaacs has said that covenants are the sacraments of Unitarian Universalism; they are the way in which we understand and connect to the Holy. We are a promise making, promise living, promise breaking, promise re-making, people. It is what we do, and what we expect of each other. We expect to connect to each other through our covenant, our strands of mutual love.

We are a church that expects you to transform. Our lives are not static. We are always changing. The question is really is that change intentional or accidental. Ours is an active faith. Not only is transformation possible, it is expected of us. To transform is to understand that we are not perfect. Promises can be made, but those are our ideals. We cannot always live up to them. This does not necessarily make us loathsome sinners in the eyes of God, as some traditions would have it. I think that is a leap in logic. Rather it is just a basic acceptance of human finitude. We are not all-powerful. We mess up sometimes. There are parts of us that we need to transform. There are parts of us that we are less than thrilled about. And it is not a violation of Humanist principles to forgo our rugged individualism as ask our church for help. “Transform” in this imperative sense has two meanings. Transform yourself—take those parts of your life that you wish were better, and work towards making them better knowing that you probably won’t be perfect. But it also means “transform” in the sense of help others

transform. Be a friend and guide and a helping hand to people who desire transformation. Our church expects you to transform in both senses of the term.

Finally, we are a church that expects you to serve. There an old slogan the Unitarians had, one of those bumper sticker saying that people still remember. It was “Deeds, not Creeds.” That is a good one; mostly because it rhymes. It speaks to the pragmatic nature of our church. Your creeds, your statements of belief, are great for you. They have a good deal of meaning for all of us as individuals, but it is our deeds, the things we do, that moves those individual beliefs into the real life promises of our covenant. Our faith must be made real through what we do. Jesus said it is “by their fruits you shall know them.” Meaning people can talk a great game, but look at what they do. Actually this works very well to Unitarian Universalism because all stripes of UUs from the atheist to the Christian, from the Buddhist to the Pagan, and even to the seeker who is still a bit unsure of what they believe, they can be united in how they serve. Habitat for Humanity or Emmanuel Dining Room does not have a creedal test you must pass before you can do good in the world. Indeed, Emmanuel Dining Room is a place run by the Catholic Church that feeds homeless people. Many of our members both cook and serve these meals. Deeds, not creeds. We expect you to serve the world somehow. Serve it in any way that calls to your deepest passions and desires as a human being. Do not sit enraptured by your

own wonderful thoughts. Have your actions resonate with them. Bring deeds and creeds into harmony together. Serve.

These are the things we expect of each other: explore, connect, transform, serve. They are our values in the imperative form. Our values make a demand upon us. The promises we make together as a church emerge out of those values. Let us widen the circle evermore, every Sunday, every committee meeting, every small group meeting, open your band of brothers and sisters to let the stranger in. I promise you, you will be surprised by what you find. May we, with everflowing cups remember with advantages what feats and promises we make to each other. For then “Crispian, Crispian shall ne’er go by, from this day to the ending of the world, be we in it shall be remembered.” Amen
Blessed Be.