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“Why Is She Doing this to Us?”

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Public accolades can be a daunting thing, if you're an introvert like me. It's an act of will to stand still and smile and say "Thank you," rather than say "You can't mean *me*," and run and hide. At the same time, it makes me very happy to be able to share these special events with you, dearly beloved; the 35th anniversary of my ordination to the ministry, and the award of an honorary Doctor of Divinity in recognition of my work for Unitarian Universalism during those years. At the risk of engaging in overkill, but in the interest of full disclosure, I will tell you also that the organization of UU Humanists has named me Humanist of the Year for 2015, an award that will be presented at General Assembly in Portland at the end of June. From the beginning of my career, I have believed that we become the ministers that our congregations make us, and so I give grateful thanks to and for you, as well as the folks in Minneapolis, and in Naperville, Illinois. I bring you these honors somewhat like a toddler with a fistful of dandelions; they are what has come to hand in the course of my journey; a small token, perhaps irrelevant to what you actually need from me, but I hope you may be pleased.

Anniversaries and awards are all very fine, but we would do well to remember that they mean little, or may even be unhelpful if we decide to rest on them. They are best as landmarks; signposts on a journey that goes on, as we continue to learn and grow together. This is not, I hope, the culmination of my career; I have ten more years if all goes well, to keep trying to get it right; to be the institutional leader and spiritual guide that I might yet become; to grow in wisdom, courage, and compassion. Which does not happen in isolation, not on the path that I have chosen, and committed myself to 35 years ago this afternoon. And this brings me to the question that supplies the title for this sermon. I do not know who originally spoke these words – I hear both injured puzzlement and exasperation in them – they were quoted to me by someone else: "Why is she doing this to us?"

I think it is a fair question, and one that deserves a thoughtful answer. It would be easier, of course, if I could get the original speaker to specify exactly what he or she meant by ‘this’; but let me take a few educated guesses. In one form or another, I suspect that ‘this’ has to do with ‘making us uncomfortable.’ And it is perfectly true that I have done, and am doing, and intend to continue doing, things that I know full well create some level of disequilibrium and anxiety, both for this institution as a whole, as well as groups and individuals within it. Let me be clear that this is not wanton, or out of malice; rather, it is my job. It is what I signed on for when I spoke my ordination vows 35 years ago; it is part of what your search committee asked me to do, and part of the covenant that we entered into at my installation as minister here, back in 2013. It is, in fact, part of what any competent, authentic minister must do; challenging the complacency of people and congregations is at the very heart of our calling, if we are to be true to the holy creativity and ideals that we seek to serve.

So let’s look at a few of the things that may have been what our unknown questioner had in mind by ‘doing this to us,’ recognizing that it might be more than one, or even all of the above, or something else entirely, that I haven’t thought of. You can let me know later what I missed. One possibility is the call for radical, or even sacrificial, hospitality. I have asked, and I will continue to ask, everyone who is at home here, who is an invested owner of this community, to set aside your own comfort and preferences in order to better welcome people who might become part of us, but aren’t yet.

- I ask you to give priority to greeting, welcoming, and attending to visitors – oh, no; strangers, people you don’t already know! – rather than being absorbed into cozy conversations with your existing friends.
- I ask you to spend money on things that *you* don’t need, but that help other people feel that we want them here, and care about their experience. You already know where the restrooms are; you would

even tell someone if they asked you. But hospitality says there should be easily visible signs, so that visitors don't have to ask.

- You already know who to sit with at Sunday plus lunch; hospitality says it's *your* job to help a newcomer find a spot, to make room for them at your table – or at the very least, to understand that you *really can not* sit at the table reserved for visitors.
- You may think babies always belong in the nursery, but hospitality says that families are welcome in the service together, if that is what works for them.
- You might find all the information you need in the monthly printed newsletter, but hospitality means that we spend money on our web site, and invest in social media, and use Twitter in the service, even if it's something you aren't used to.

I believe that this community collectively, and each one of us individually, has a moral responsibility to make our message and our values accessible to others through our practice of hospitality, even when that means that we must change our accustomed habits, develop new skills, or allow someone else's preferences to prevail. Without the practice of radical, sacrificial hospitality, this congregation has no future.

Another source of discomfort might be our on-going conversation about learning to understand white privilege in the racialized society of 21st century America. The stark injustices that continue to injure the lives of our black friends and neighbors and members here at All Souls – and indeed, in too many cases, to end those lives – do not yield to well-intentioned liberal sympathy that ends up maintaining the existing power structures. Our task is to become aware of how that power structure operates, and how it benefits members of the dominant white culture, whether we want it to or not. One of the most pernicious of these privileges is the very fact that this conversation itself is optional for white folks. Any time it makes us too uncomfortable, we can turn our attention to something else; it is not, after all, our lives and our children that are constantly at risk. Every time we as a community

primarily of people of privilege push back against those realities, we chip away at the protections of our own comfort. We open wider the crack that reveals a fundamental unfairness and suffering deeply embedded in our culture; the more clearly we see that pain, the less easy it is to close our eyes and hearts again, and go back to being secure in our unawareness. At least, it was still possible to do that at this time last year; after Ferguson, and Baltimore, and everywhere in between, it has become willful and culpable blindness to think that this issue is anything other than a national crisis. It is unlikely that we will ever again find the satisfying self-righteousness that walked with us as white allies over the Edmund Pettus bridge fifty years ago; looking at racism squarely today means encountering the anger of others, the wince of self-reproach, and the powerlessness of collective shame. By definition, it cannot and will not be comfortable, and yet for the salvation of our own humanity, as well as the conscience of this nation, it must be done. And we – and you, and I – must do it, as distressing as it is, and will continue to be.

Yet another possible source of anxiety might be, Why is she making us talk about selling our building, or significantly renovating it? Our location is familiar, *we* know where to park, we are used to the quirks of this facility; we are comfortable here; it's home. And I would propose that the point of a church is precisely not to make you feel safe and comfortable, but rather to inspire and challenge you, as an individual, and as a community, to be unsatisfied; to want more abundant life and greater justice and larger meaning and more generous service and deeper compassion, for ourselves and each other and the world. A church building should never represent the slightly shabby security of home; it should embody the splendor of our ideals, and the magnificence that the human spirit is capable of achieving; the breathtaking adventure that we are called to risk in pursuit of our full dignity and destiny. While this location is charming, it does not demand anything of us in response to a larger community; we will have to choose to reach beyond these walls to engage the needs of this city and offer moral leadership, if we believe that our values are of use to anyone

besides ourselves. Shakespeare once spoke of ‘sermons in stones’ -- that is what the architecture of a church ought to be; a visible invitation to our better selves, that outsiders can also read, and that reminds us, week by week, less of who we are, than of who we might yet be. Former generations took risks and made sacrifices so that we would have this facility as the soil from which to grow into a greatness beyond theirs. We betray them, and the movement we represent, if we seek only to make ourselves comfortable here today. I am going to continue urging us to build for a future far beyond our own, to serve a community far beyond our own, in the name of a humanity far larger than our own, guided by a vision and a covenant handed down from the legacy of our best aspirations. We need plumbing and heating that works, of course, that is as ecologically responsible as we can possibly make it, but we must also be about something more than efficiency and square foot costs; we must engage with beauty, meaning, inspiration, nobility, strength, balance, and hope in order to create a space worthy of our own most elevated moments, and the future of those who will follow us.

Finally, there remains my conviction that many of those who were here five years ago have yet to process adequately a lot of residual feelings about the conflict that then engulfed this congregation, particularly the ways that various members responded to the sense of crisis. There is valuable learning yet to be realized from that painful episode, and there is emotional energy still tied up and paralyzed by this unfinished business. Like a family that is keeping a dark secret from itself, everyone knows something, no one knows everything, and talking about it is considered terribly dangerous. What I know about healing from trauma is that it has not happened until the victim is able to remember the event consciously and accurately at will, without reliving it. It is clear to me that we are not there yet. Assuredly we have moved on; time has passed, a feeling of normality has returned, we have new projects and goals for the future. All of this is good; exactly as it should be. In many ways, this distance gives us a safer perspective from which to explore the questions that would allow us to integrate and heal the

unresolved pain. The down side is that this distance also facilitates denial, and a conspiracy of silence. So let me say this another time, as I have said it consistently for the past three years: I came here with the explicit understanding that we *would* do this work; I was clear with the search committee; I was clear with the congregation in my candidating sermons. I will not ask any one person to do what they are unwilling to do, but I will continue to invite all of us to lean into the discomfort of remembering, of talking, and above all of listening to one another.

The potential for learning is not ours alone. This spring, with my encouragement, advice, and support, Jordinn has begun a project of interviewing a wide cross section of leaders and members about their recollections of these events. She is, I think, already a sadder and wiser candidate for ministry because of that experience. The word that best describes the tone of these conversations is poignant; people long for reconciliation, for vindication, to figure out what went wrong. And still it remains true that we were not all at the same movie, and in many cases, we cannot even bring ourselves to imagine what someone else's movie might have been like. As long as that remains the case, we are not finished with this. So here's a proposition: If you want to try to persuade me that we really are done, you tell me, with equal charity, the two most radically different versions of the story that you can muster, and what you have learned from the experience. And then get someone else to do the same thing.

Meanwhile, Jordinn I are planning for the next level of conversations when she returns from her summer classes in September. From among those who have indicated that they would be willing to engage this work further, we will draw together small groups for carefully structured and guided listening opportunities. The helpful truth that I know from family systems therapy is that not every member of the system has to be directly engaged in order for this kind of work to be effective; the relief, the freedom, the safety, the unsilencing, the lifting of shame, flow outward from the center; health travels through the same organic connections that toxicity does. Stay tuned.

Dearly Beloved, why am I doing this to you? In the end it is because I do truly still believe, after all these 35 years, or indeed these 60 years, in the healing capacity of the human spirit, and in the power of covenant community to change the world. We have something far more important to do here than to make each other comfortable. To give comfort, in the afflictions of life, yes; to let each other off the hook of what we might each become, or the good we might do together? Never in a million years.

For whether there be commendations, they shall fail; whether there be awards, they shall cease; whether there be honorary degrees, they shall vanish away. For we start by seeing ourselves and each other as if in a distorted mirror, knowing only part of the story; it is only after the covenant community of memory and promise has been most terribly tested that we may hope to know in truth and love, even as in love and truth, we shall be known. And so, once again, I speak these words of my ordination covenant, calling upon your witness, and that of all that is sacred in life:

I do pledge myself, so far as in me lies,
Worthily to maintain the freedom of the pulpits I shall occupy;
To speak the truth in love,
Without obligation to persons or position;
Diligently to fulfill the several offices of worship, administration, and instruction,
According to the customs of our fellowship;
And in all things to promote piety and righteousness, peace & love.
May we so live and labor together
That the light of truth, and the life of grace,
May be revealed in us to all the world.

Will you rise, and lift your voice with mine in song?