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All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church  
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“Glass Ceilings and Locker Rooms”

Let me begin by appreciating the flexibility of Anthony and the choir this morning. I am sorry to have switched the service around, and made you set aside the pieces that I know you have been working to prepare for today. They are very cool, and we will re-schedule them, I promise. But once in a while, history intervenes in our plans, no matter how carefully we lay them out. As a very smart and powerful lady said earlier this week, ...I have to tell you that I can't stop thinking about this. It has shaken me to my core in a way that I couldn't have predicted. So while I'd love nothing more than to pretend like this isn't happening, and to come out here and do my normal speech, it would be dishonest and disingenuous for me to just move on to the next thing like this was all just a bad dream. This is not something that we can ignore. It's not something that we can just sweep under the rug as just another disturbing footnote in a sad election season.

That's right, Michelle. "Preach it, First Lady!" as someone in the crowd called out on Thursday. And it would be dishonest and disingenuous for *me* as a spiritual leader to go ahead with the service we had planned for this Sunday morning, and try to pretend that the women, and men, of this community are not sitting here with full and aching hearts, remembering all the things that so many of us have to remember – hash tag Yes All Women. Things that have been dredged out of the recesses of our life stories, leaving some of us shaken, and angry, and disgusted, and ashamed, and afraid, and sad – just like they did when they happened, whether that was decades ago, or just last month or last week.

So let's talk – and I will assume that none of us has been living under a rock, or a cone of silence, for the past week, and try to keep it together enough to protect our tax exempt status by not letting this become a partisan political rant here on the threshold of our November presidential election. In any case, you don't need my instructions to decide who to vote for, and we have much deeper and more urgent matters than that to discuss at the moment. What we have, in fact, is a possible cultural watershed; a tipping point when our society might shift its operating consensus about how we understand who we are together, in a way that leaves us a little bit changed in our reckoning of the common good. What we have is a conversation, out in the open, thanks to comments made by, and accusations leveled at, one of our candidates; a conversation about the minor acts of sexual assault that women are routinely subjected to, and expected to deal with, as part of our daily lives in this culture.

Hear me, now; this is important. When I say 'minor acts of sexual assault,' I do not mean that these experiences are trivial – they are not trivial; they shape our way of being in the world, and our shared understanding of what it means to be a woman. And yet, the violent sexual crime of actual rape – horrible and traumatizing and far too frequent as it is – is not what I mean. I'm talking about the low-level background noise of unwanted touches, unsolicited words, gestures, whistles, and leers that we have learned to ignore, get over, and try not to let bother us in order to function as competent adults in our shared social context. I mean the supposed jokes, and suggestive instructions, and smirking double entendres, and purportedly accidental bumps and grabby hugs by which some men express dominance and gratify their impulses toward women, that we have to deal

with and put up with in order to keep the wheels of civil interaction turning. The encounters that are not frightening enough or humiliating enough to be worth making a scene over, so we laugh it off, move away, change the subject, bring another person into conversation, create a distraction – anything but call it out, or try to name it in the moment; anything but claim our discomfort and its true source.

For a long time now – for most of my lifetime – it seems to me that women have negotiated ourselves into a Faustian bargain; that in return for the acknowledgement that rape **might** be considered a crime for which the perpetrator, rather than the victim, was held responsible, we would agree not to complain about the other stuff; that if men could be expected to control their scariest potential violence, they could get away with the lightweight violations, the ones they could claim ‘meant no harm,’ and we would not complain. At least not loudly, not publically. And I wonder if that bargain is now, thanks to recent events, on the table for re-negotiation.

Let me also be clear that in claiming that all women **have** a problem, I do not intend to suggest that all men **are** a problem – that is very certainly not the case. Donald Trump has sought to minimize the offensiveness of his recorded description of how he imposes himself on women he finds desirable by claiming that it constituted ‘locker room banter.’ Many men, many of whom themselves found his comments deplorable, including a number of professional athletes, have pushed back against this notion, asserting that ‘this kind of talk’ is not something they observe in their experience of locker rooms. And I have read and heard women say that such statements as these somehow discount the reality of our experience, which is that these things do happen to us, over and over again, and we are not making it up. So I want us to exercise a little of our much-proclaimed reason, here in this highly emotional conversation, and recognize the important truth that these two claims are not mutually exclusive. I cannot speak to the facts about how men talk to each other in a locker room environment, but I am willing to entertain the possibility that while crude language and lewd topics may be common, boasting about the practice of sexual assault is actually not, and perhaps would not be welcomed if it were to be offered. I would be glad to think that this is indeed the case, and I am glad that there are men who believe it is important to assert that it is so. However, nothing about that assertion disputes the claim being made by women, in which I concur, that the behavior Trump describes happens, and is tolerated, routinely in the world of our experience.

And here is the essential thing – that experience has a cost. That strategic evasion, that non-confrontation, that ‘never mind, don’t think about it,’ that ‘he’s just a jerk, pay him no attention,’ eats away a little bit at our confidence, at our light in the world, at our sense of inherent worth and dignity, especially the dignity part. And I submit that every woman in this room knows that icky, pit-of-the-stomach feeling that comes when somebody does what they do, with words or with touches, to claim a piece of you, and get off, one way or another, at your expense and you have no choice about it. That feeling takes away joy, and safety, and freedom; it changes the complexion of the day, throws a shadow of disgust and shame and dread over whatever part of your own business you were minding before it happened. And not only that, the memory of it brings that same set of sensations swirling back, stealing our joy and safety and dignity all over again

because we swallowed it in the first place. And **that**, folks, is the source of the firestorm initiated by a few minutes of eleven year old audio tape; Donald Trump managed to re-traumatize all American women together at the same time, to make us all remember the ickiest moments of our lives and turn to each other, and to the nation, and say, “Really? Do we really think this is okay? Are we really putting up with this? And are we really willing to teach our daughters to put up with it too?” Because if not them, why us? And if it is outrageous for other women to be subjected to exploitive, dehumanizing, assaultive behavior, why should I feel ashamed and paralyzed when it happens to me?

Now, let me suggest that if you don’t know what the big deal is; if you’re not familiar with the kinds of experiences I’m talking about; if you don’t believe it’s all that common, you should check out the stories at hashtag Yes All Women. I could tell you my own stories, and stories that other women have shared with me, but that would just subject everyone here to yet another helping of ickyness, another round of revulsion and powerlessness, so I’m not going to do that. What I am going to do is to urge all of us to challenge the conventions of silence and dismissal – and I mean all of us, men and women alike, including the trans and bi folks who likely know what I’m talking about even more intensely. And in this sometimes difficult process, I offer you the shield of faith, in case it might be useful. It helps our teenagers sometimes, when we give them the option of saying to their peers, “I can’t be part of picking on a person because they’re gay; it’s against my religion,” just as their Jewish friends might respond if offered a ham sandwich. Well, **you** can use it too; “I can’t let you let you touch me like that; it’s against my religion,” – because it is. “I can’t listen to these jokes; it’s against my religion,” – you will be telling the simple truth. Or try “I can’t watch you treat a woman that way; it’s against my religion.” There can be no more accurate witness to what Unitarian Universalism is; it might even help outsiders to answer for themselves the invariable question, What do UUs believe?

Women, what we need to wrap our minds around is that low level sexual predators count on that moment of confusion and paralysis after the joke or the grope when we run through the litany of questions in our heads: “Did that really just happen? Did he mean what that sounded like? Did I do something to invite this? Is it worth making a scene about? Will I end up looking hysterical and ridiculous? How vulnerable am I here?” By which time the crowd has shifted, the conversation has moved on, the immediate moment has passed, and you would have to make an even bigger deal out of it if you tried to call it out. We need to trust icky, and announce icky, which is a statement about ourselves, and not necessarily an accusation. “Wow, that didn’t feel good,” or “You know, I’m not okay with that question,” or “That comment is intrusive” or “uncalled for” or “gross,” depending on the context. The only way the social consensus about what is appropriate is going to change, is if we begin to define by shared observation the behavior that is no longer tolerated. Personally, I like to channel the Dowager Duchess of Grantham in such moments – because who would cross Dame Maggie Smith? -- and the frosty phrase “Let’s change the subject, shall we?” should alert everyone present that a newly shifted line of what is acceptable may have been crossed.

And men, we need you to have our backs on this, in a specific kind of way. We don’t need Sir Galahad riding to our rescue, so the key is to check it out. When you hear

a comment or see a touch that seems borderline to you, ask the woman in question how she's doing. "Hey, was that crack alright with you?" "Do you have enough breathing space over there?" Own your questions and your feelings; "These comments are bothering me. I wonder how it feels to Debbie?" I know it can appear tricky, but you don't protect someone's dignity by assuming what they feel, or by taking on their fight before you are invited to. At the same time, as Zaron Burnett observes, it is always legitimate to challenge the behavior of other men on your own behalf; "Hey, you are making **me** look like an idiot. Back off." Or "Chill out." Imagine what a different national conversation we might be having if Billy Bush had responded to Trump's confidences by saying, "That's some creepy bullshit, Donald. Why should women have to let you do that?"

The other thing you can do is to believe us and support us when we tell you about incidents that leave us feeling violated and demeaned. First of all, don't speculate about what you would feel in that situation; the high likelihood is that you have never been, and by definition could not be, in that situation. And don't start out by identifying with the perpetrator. "Oh, he probably didn't mean anything by it," does not constitute a helpful response. Also, take seriously the meme I saw on Facebook recently: "If you don't personally know any women who have been sexually assaulted, what that means is that the women you know don't trust you." Should you find yourself casting about for a meaningful reply when a woman does trust you enough to tell you the truth about her experience, try this: "I'm so sorry this happened to you. Can I be helpful?"

So, as long as I'm in the business of giving preachy advice, here's the most important piece. We all need to agree, men and women both, that it never a woman's fault when a man grants himself the right to touch her, to comment on her body, to demand her sexual attention, or to unilaterally sexualize their interaction with his conversation or gestures. It's creepy, it's icky, it's assault, and it's not okay. Not anymore. We're done. It may be that this means that some well-meaning men are going to have to reconsider a few of their innocent conversational habits or social gambits, some of which may not have been as innocent as they were pleased to believe. So be it. It's not the fault of women; it never has been, and we are not over-reacting. For that, perhaps, we actually owe Mr. Trump and his vulgar demonstration of male entitlement a certain gratitude.

On the other hand, as Timothy Egan observes in a recent New York Times editorial, "The core lessons that bind a civilized society are in play in the last days of this election. Civility, always a tenuous thing, cannot be quickly restored in a society that has learned to hate in public, at full throttle." Civility, always a tenuous thing... this is the destructive legacy of a campaign that has exemplified exclusion, derision, and the defense of privilege as core strategies. We are going to have work to do picking up the pieces, those of us who value respect, compassion, justice, and human dignity in the public sphere. We are going to have to make an effort to reconstruct a cultural consensus of mutual trust and accountability; one that is going to have to be built on a more level playing field that does not countenance the dehumanizing and abuse of women in the service of men's sexual dominance. That's not the whole structure, just one plank in it,

but I'm hopeful that if we pay attention to the experiences highlighted during this past week, it's an essential plank that we cannot now discard.

It's an ongoing struggle, of course; has been, all my life. 30 years ago now, Unitarian Universalist women began demanding a liturgy and hymnody that would uphold and honor our gender identity and our bodies as direct images of the holy. It wasn't that we wanted to discard all the poetry of god as father, but we knew that we would never enter into equal leadership or power with men until feminine qualities were celebrated as divine, and female language was also applied in reference to god. So the creative challenge was set forth, and we started to imagine what it would mean to sing to, and about, god as a reflection of women. I wrote *Lady of the Season's Laughter* as an anthem for that movement; a claim that in a constantly changing world, the source of compassion might be the one thing that we could always trust. Three decades later, even in the wake of this toxic presidential campaign, I still believe that our hope for human good rests in the steady mercy of our hearts for one another; that our labors for justice and dignity will come safe to the birth of a better world; that together, women and men and everybody, it is we who write history's fairer page. Will you stand and sing with me?