

**May 29, 2016**

**Sermon by Lynda Sutherland**

**Stand By Me**

Good morning, First Parish UU of Northborough, MA! I love the words that are front and center on your website: ***Whoever you are, whomever you love, however you arrived at this beloved place, you are welcome here.*** I have definitely felt welcomed! I feel honored to be your candidate for minister, and grateful for all the interest and kindness so many of you have shown.

I am really looking forward to Monday's Memorial Day Fair/250<sup>th</sup> celebration for the town of Northborough. This congregation at First Parish church has played such a large role in this community, since before the town was even incorporated. 250 years! That's a lot of history! We'll remember together all those whose lives have made us who and what we are today. And then, you add strawberry shortcake, a plant/book/yardsale, a parade, and a free picnic concert - well, I'm just glad I get to be here!

Tomorrow's celebration, last Friday's potluck, and the upcoming Jazz and Green Tech festival in June, are just a few examples of how this community works and plays together. Like so many of our UU congregations, First Parish UU of Northborough is a group of people who come together in community to do what you can to make the world a better place. You care about the environment. You are very active in Social Justice, helping the hungry, feeding the homeless. Many of you support buying fair trade goods where you can, so that those who raise the crops and create the items we buy can actually make a decent living. You care about peace and the dignity of all human beings. This is a great work.

We do more good in the world when we work together than we could possibly do by ourselves. I am a strong believer in the power of UU congregations to be a blessing in the world.

I tell people that I'm a convert to Unitarian Universalism. Like many people, my beliefs have changed since I was a youngster. I had gotten tired of trying to be something I wasn't – "perfect" – and trying to believe things I no longer could ascribe to – traditional protestant views of God and Jesus. Somewhere about mid-life, I left organized religion behind. But, I missed the sense of community. I *especially* missed singing in a choir.

So, when my aunt told me that *her* church had a wonderful choir, I checked it out. Boy, she was right! 60 voices; the first performance I sang in was Vivaldi's Gloria. "Je-su Christe" - with full orchestra! And the best part? I didn't have to join the church in order to sing with them!

It took me a few months of sitting in services to realize that I never heard any type of creed, statement of faith, or words from the minister about what UUs were supposed to believe. Apparently, here was a church that accepted me without expecting me to ascribe to a doctrine. I hadn't known there was such a thing.

So I joined. And right away the UUiverse blessed me: I fell in love with a lovely alto in the choir! We moved to Decorah, IA when Ginger got a job with Luther College, as professor of social work, in 2009. We were married on the bandstand at Phelps Park on a gorgeous summer day in 2011. Her two children and all 8 of mine are very supportive of our relationship.

Can I tell you how grateful I am for a UU community that fully and unreservedly accepts my marriage? Do you know how special it is to feel completely welcomed for who I am, without anyone worrying about whether my doctrine is correct? I know that many of you do.

I spent 25 years having people watching over my shoulder, calling the Bishop to suggest that I had taught something un-kosher in the Women's Class, etc.; and finally, when my marriage fell apart, they promoted him in the church and "disfellowshipped" me. Because, my Bishop said, "anything is better than divorce." Huh. So I could still be a member, but I was pretty much shunned – I could no longer have the fellowship of a community.

I am a true believer in community. None of us gets into this life alone, and we need each other to get through it. And yet, the price of being in some communities can be pretty high. That is why so many UUs are what you might call 'refugees' from other religious communities. The price of belonging can become more than a person can or wants to pay.

And I am so very thankful that I, like many others, have found the UU denomination to be one whose main belief is that we don't require a statement of belief, from anyone. In fact, if there is one thing that we can say has been a core belief of the UU faith from the beginning, it is that we don't tell each other what to believe.

So – how do we form a community, that “one strong body” we sang about earlier, when we don’t have a unified set of beliefs? What then can hold us together?

**Rev. Peter Morales**, the current president of our national UU Association, says, "I like to call Unitarian Universalism a religion that is beyond belief. We won't ask you to try to believe what you find unbelievable. We do challenge ourselves to be faithful to our highest aspirations and to our most deeply held convictions. We will ask you to love what you love and to be faithful to what you love. We commit ourselves to walk together, to heal what is broken, to support each other in life's journey, to make a difference in our lives and in the world."

This is, in a nutshell, the picture of Beloved Community to which we aspire: challenging *ourselves* to be faithful to *our* highest aspirations and to *our* most deeply held convictions; walking together; supporting each other in life's journey. Through grief and joy, through disagreement and loss, through times of bewilderment and times of clarity. Together.

This is a *creative* effort. We are finding new ways to build strong, supportive communities in the midst of diversity of beliefs and world views. Unitarian Universalists are trail-blazers in the realm of *creatively* finding ways to be in community while honoring differences.

This is also a *community* effort. Together, we are stronger than the sum of our parts. Walking together is sometimes the only way to keep going on this journey. So many things happen in life that can overwhelm us. So many things that can make us feel like the flowers in this little verse by Robert Frost:

*The rain to the wind said,  
"You push and I'll pelt."  
They so smote the garden bed  
That the flowers actually knelt,  
And lay lodged - though not dead.  
I know how the flowers felt.*

Sometimes life just keeps throwing things at us. Relationship difficulties, job stress, health issues, loss of a loved one, making ends meet; every one of us is liable to be touched by grief, sorrow, or depression of some sort. Engaging in Social Action, trying to make a positive difference in the world, holds its own kind of distress, when it seems like it's sometimes one step forward and one step back – or even two. When sometimes we just feel like giving up, how do we face it all

and manage to bounce back? How do we get our little delicate flower petals up out of that sticky mud?

This is where the real strength of a congregation shines. Because we are more than a group of people who share a passion for justice and want to work together for a better world. We are a *community*. We *care* about one another. When illness or financial woes or stress or, bless us, old age, push our faces into the dirt and we feel we just can't *breathe*, let alone try to rise back up and bless the world with our flower beauty again, we have others to gently wipe away the weight of mud from on top of us, to help us rinse off the grime, to prop us up with a stick if needed so we can get our faces back into the healing air and sunlight. When the forces of the battle with injustice have knocked us flat, and we don't know if we can go on, or even if it would do any good, we come back together here, in our Sunday service, and take an hour to remember the bigger picture. No matter how grim things may seem, right now right here we have people who love us just as we are. Who mourn with our sorrows. Who rejoice with us in our joys. Who celebrate life with us. Who stay at the table with us, even when we disagree, even when feelings get hurt. Together we sing, and meditate on what is worthwhile in life. Together we fill our depleted cups and go forth strengthened for another day, another week, another opportunity to spread light and love in the world.

And you know, when we have a particular need, when life has hit us and we are down in the mud, that's when we really need someone to have our back. It's tempting sometimes to just try to carry on bravely and try to ignore the fact that we are hurting, or if we can't ignore it, to just suffer in silence. This is a very individualistic culture, and we get the message early on that if we are weak, if we are hurting, if we need help, there is somehow something wrong with us. This can be especially true if what hurts isn't visible. A broken leg, everyone understands, and jumps to help you up the stairs and find a chair to elevate your foot on.

But what about those hurts that don't show? How about those whose grief seems to hang on, no matter how hard they may try to "get on with life?" How about people who suffer from chronic conditions that cause pain and fatigue, but don't leave any marks on the outside?

I have a friend who dragged himself through life for several years, hardly having the energy to put one foot in front of the other; he was finally diagnosed with lyme disease. He told me he had suffered most from the inner voice he heard in

his head that said “You lazy bum! There’s no reason to feel so tired; what is *wrong* with you?” When he finally confided in a friend about what he was going through, she said, “Dude, please go to the doctor.” Now, after a course of medication, he feels like he has his life back.

I understand how hard it is to ask for help. As a young mom, I went through a time when I was terribly overwhelmed, and it was starting to interfere in my ability to be a good mother. The day I almost shook my baby when I couldn’t get him to stop crying, I remember realizing that I needed to call someone for help. I *knew* with all my being that I needed help! But it took me several hours to make that phone call, to a good friend who actually offered to make the doctor appointment for me and drive me there. One of her teenagers watched my kids while we did that. I got on an anti-depressant and started some counseling that was very helpful. But I shudder to think what might have happened if I had not asked. Beloved Community must be a place where we feel we can share our needs, as well as our sorrows and joys.

Lean on me when you’re not strong; I’ll be your friend, I’ll help you carry on. That’s community. And so is the other half of the equation: it won’t be long till I’m gonna need somebody to lean on. The joyous give and take of community keeps us going, guards our back, lightens our load, and offers us the chance to do the same for others. We are blessed in receiving and in giving.

Now, what does all this mean to us, as we strive to be faithful to our *highest* aspirations, and to our most *deeply held* convictions? We need community. We need community to help us develop our convictions; our 7 principles were the work of community, and they have become a guiding star for UUs. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth is our 3<sup>rd</sup> Principle, because we have found that spiritual growth happens in relationship to one another, in community with one another. Together in community, we study, we discuss, we talk and listen, we share our successes - and hopefully, our mistakes, too; it’s important to learn from our own *and* each other’s mistakes. Together in community, we bring our minds back to that which we value most. Together in community, we learn how to give and take, to apologize, to forgive, to open our minds to new ideas and open our hearts to the beauty and the needs of our world. Together in community, we explore ways we can live out our UU faith, in our everyday lives, among our families and friends, in our congregation, and in the wider community.

Because like all humans, we are a work in progress. There is always room to grow, to learn, to experiment, to change course. Here, in the presence of people with differing beliefs, differing life situations, differing talents and habits, may we find that kind of Beloved Community ever more fully. May we “commit ourselves to walk together, to heal what is broken, and to support each other in life’s journey.” May it be so.

**Closing words** from [\*Susan Karlson\*](#)

We leave blessed by our connections to one another, to the spirit of life. Walk lightly that you see the life that is below your feet. Spread your arms as if you had wings and could dance through the air. Feel the joy of the breath in your lungs and the fire in your heart. Live to love and be a blessing on this earth.