

What Is This Church For?

by Rev. Don Garrett

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In my prior two sermons on the purpose of religion, we identified some basic themes for why religion in general, and churches in particular, are useful.

The first was the observation that the evolution of human potential was incomplete. Just as babies are born with undeveloped potential that needs to be nurtured and guided to maturity in regard to fulfilling basic relational and survival needs, there are even deeper needs that remain unfulfilled without the proper guidance, needs for which religion was devised to nurture.

We know that humans are the heirs to a radical advance in intelligence and adaptability which has given our species an astounding ability to dominate virtually all the ecosystems on our planet. What is less appreciated is that we are also heirs to an equally profound advance in affiliation, the ability to connect with one another, to experience a fundamentally transcendent unity within and beyond ourselves. These two aspects of our potential can be expressed by two emotions: anxiety and love.

We noted that, as human society began to grow, the need to regulate human behavior became a vital part of our capacity to live together in stable social systems. Two different mechanisms emerged to for this, each based on one of these basic emotions: anxiety and love. Anxiety is controlled by the rule of law. This is an extrinsic, or external, system of behavior regulation. On the other hand, love is nurtured by religion, by the church. It creates an intrinsic, or internal, means of behavior regulation. Law teaches us to behave out of fear. Religion, properly speaking, teaches us to behave out of love. Law presumes a lack of compassion. Religion presumes that compassion is a natural human capacity to be valued, nurtured and developed.

We noted that the purpose of church was to shape society's values, and that all truly religious values are rooted in love, compassion, and understanding.

The development of true compassion requires something very rare in our world: the absence of anxiety, of urgency, of fear. The secular world is rife with anxieties. Its primary strategy is the identification of problems and their solution. This is a process of elevating anxiety in order to reduce anxiety.

Religion, church, on the other hand, is based on a radically different approach based on developing our capacities for compassion, understanding, and love. First and foremost, it requires creating an environment of safety and trust, a place where our habitual anxieties can be relaxed through peaceful means. This is vital because the important work of completing the evolutionary journey through the development of understanding, compassion, and love can only begin when we feel safe enough to take the risks involved in opening our hearts to the unknown.

We all want to change the world for the better. Why, then should we listen to the 29th chapter of the *Tao Te Ching*, when it says, “Do you want to improve the world? I don’t think it can be done. The world is sacred. It can’t be improved. If you tamper with it, you’ll ruin it. If you treat it like an object, you’ll lose it. There is a time for being ahead, a time for being behind; a time for being in motion, a time for being at rest; a time for being vigorous, a time for being exhausted; a time for being safe, a time for being in danger. The Master sees things as they are, without trying to control them. She lets them go their own way, and resides at the center of the circle.”

But isn’t this essentially the same wisdom that comes to us through the book of Ecclesiastes, where it tells us that there is nothing new under the sun and that there’s a time for everything – a time to be born, a time to die; a time to plant, a time to harvest; a time to laugh, a time to weep; a time to mourn, a time to dance; a time for war, a time for peace. And, as the musical version added, “I swear it’s not too late.”

Religion can be grossly misused to justify hatred whenever its root values of love and compassion are overcome by fear and anxiety. This makes true religion easy to identify: it is free of anxiety and brimming with love and compassion. Despite religion’s misuse for the advocacy of violence, whenever we find the most effective advocates for peace, we always find religious values at their base.

This is why the *Tao Te Ching* seeks to relieve people of the fearful need to change the world. Fear can't change the world, only love can change the world.

The thing that made the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s work so powerful was that it was essentially, profoundly, spiritual work. Whenever he planned a non-violent protest march, there was always a time of retreat beforehand for what he called "purification," where everyone who was to march needed to reach a point of loving compassion for those who might attack them, the ability to respond to violence and hatred with love and compassion, literally to turn the other cheek.

As King wrote in an article for the 1957 *Christian Century* magazine, there were four points to nonviolent resistance.

The first was resistance. "This method is passive physically but strongly active spiritually; it is nonaggressive physically but dynamically aggressive spiritually. The second point is that nonviolent resistance does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win his friendship and understanding. A third characteristic of this method is that the attack is directed against forces of evil rather than against persons who were caught in those forces." As King said in Montgomery, Alabama, "The tension in this city is not between white people and Negro people. The tension is at bottom between justice and injustice, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. . . We are out to defeat injustice and not white persons who may happen to be unjust." The fourth point may be the one most central to our consideration today, in that "nonviolent resistance avoids not only external physical violence but also internal violence of spirit. At the center of nonviolence stands the principle of love. In struggling for human dignity the oppressed people of the world must not allow themselves to become bitter or indulge in hate campaigns. To retaliate with hate and bitterness would do nothing but intensify the hate in the world. Along the way of life, someone must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate. This can be done only by projecting the ethics of love to the center of our lives."

We need to learn that arguing doesn't change the world's values. Only through sharing our deeply held and fully lived values of the heart can the world be truly changed. This echoes the words of the Buddha, who said, "Never does

hatred cease by hating in return; only through love can hatred come to an end. Victory breeds hatred, the conquered dwell in sorrow and resentment. They who give up all thought of victory or defeat, may be calm and live happily at peace. Let us overcome violence by gentleness; let us overcome evil by good; let us overcome the miserly by generosity; let us overcome the liar by truth.”

Unitarian Universalists, like most white Americans, share a paradigm of privilege. We inhabit a mythos that presumes agency, a mythos by which we worship our power to control the circumstances of our lives. This paradigm, this mythos has led to a great many advances in our ability to survive in comfort but has done little to advance the depth of our experience, it has done little to lead us into the holy peace that can live at the center of every heart, every relationship, every community if it is truly sought.

No matter how successful we are in controlling the world, there is always a dimension of existence in which we are powerless. This powerlessness has been framed variously by religions through the ages, some of which, like sin, have lost their relevance in our modern world. But if we can look carefully at our lives we can't but notice that there are many things we can't control. The late Rev. Forrest Church said that religion is what humans do with the knowledge that they will die. This kind of religion is reality-based. The Buddhists have a meditation called “The Five Remembrances” that focuses the mind on some of the basic realities we would often prefer not to see.

“I am of the nature to grow old. There is no way to escape growing old. I am of the nature to have ill-health. There is no way to escape having ill-health. I am of the nature to die. There is no way to escape death. All that is dear to me and everyone I love are of the nature to change. There is no way to escape being separated from them. I inherit the results of my actions in body, speech, and mind. My actions are the ground on which I stand.”

This is reality, folks. And reality is dangerous. I've adapted an Annie Dillard quote from her book, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*: “Why do we people in churches seem like the cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute?”

“The tourists are having coffee and doughnuts on Deck C. Presumably someone is minding the ship, correcting the course, avoiding icebergs and shoals, fueling the engines, watching the radar screen, noting weather reports radioed in from shore. No one would dream of asking the tourists to do these things. Alas, among the tourists on Deck C, drinking coffee and eating doughnuts, we find the captain, and all the ship’s officers, and all the ship’s crew. The officers chat; they swear; they wink a bit at slightly raw jokes, just like regular people. The crew members have funny accents. The wind seems to be picking up.

“On the whole, I do not find [churches] to be sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.”

Reality is so dangerous that we spend most of our time and energy on fantasies about how we control it. But there is a cost to resisting our scary vulnerabilities: those vulnerabilities conceal the greatest rewards in life: peace, fulfillment, contentment, joy, and love. Sure, we get glimpses of these things from time to time when cracks open up in our busy-ness. But religion – church – is here to help us look deeply into our hearts and find the profound treasures there, treasures that can change our lives, our beloved community, and the world.

The ideal beloved church community would provide a safe place to experience our vulnerabilities, our weaknesses, and accept those areas of life in which we are powerless. Churches provide a place to learn, practice, and develop the spiritual strengths that await us as we fulfill the destiny of completing the human evolutionary journey into our greatest potential. This is a big job. This is an important job. This is also a dangerous job. Wear a crash helmet and a life jacket.

So, I ask you, what is this church for? Is it up to the task of helping us all to reach the far shore of human potential? Does it provide the tools to do the job? Does it provide the specialized training you would need to access the very depths

of your hearts? Would you use them if they were here? If not, then membership in this church would be a like belonging to fitness club but only going to the café and an occasional lecture on the benefits of exercise.

Are we content to lounge on the church deck on the cruise ship of life or are we ready for the hard work and sweat of the Zumba class of spiritual growth?

At least we ask you to do at least one hard thing every year – we ask you to engage in the spiritual practice of generosity by pledging to support the church for the coming year. We invite you to explore your anxieties about money so that you can experience the healing effects of giving meaning to your substance and substance to your meaning by making a meaningful financial commitment to this church.

But, as you give, I also invite you to ask, “What is this church for?” Does it take its place in the work of the church universal in empowering the fulfillment of our human potential for the transformation of lives, community, and the world? Do we insist that it challenge us to engage in the hard work of encountering our vulnerabilities and transforming our fears into compassion?

This is not a rhetorical question. This question demands an answer. And our Board has recognized the need for an answer by charging a Core Mission Task Force to work, together with the congregation, to develop a clear and concise statement of our church’s purpose. This task force is made up of members of the Church Planning Committee and the Committee on Ministry, but they can’t do this work alone. We need everyone to be involved.

The Core Mission Task Force began its work yesterday with a retreat and will be meeting to plan the broadest possible participation. They’ve already identified the beginning, though. It will be a congregational retreat following the April first service to hear and discuss your ideas about this church’s purpose for being.

Please come and participate. There will be more opportunities for input, but let’s all begin this important journey together.