

Sanctuary, Sweaters and Safety Pins

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On this *very* auspicious morning I want to think about what we mean by church. What is it that we are we doing together? What does it mean to be a church? What is it about church that makes sense in your life? Or doesn't? What are the signs that say who we are or...as Douglas Steere says, "*Whose* are we?" How do we show who we are as church to the world? Thinking about that, and browsing the internet, which is how I do a lot of sermon prep, in addition to podcasts, books I'm reading, and conversations from the week, I came across some church signs—you know, other churches' versions of our wayside pulpit sign. Here in New England we lean toward inspirational quotes lifted from famous writers and thinkers; "thoughts for the week" to ponder in passing. But in other parts of the country, they just go for it, putting it all out there. And some of the results, are pretty awkward. Here are some of my favorites:

From the St. Paul United Church of Christ: "Best Sausage Supper in St Louis, Come and Eat Pastor Thomas Ressler"

Church of the Cross has a thought: "Don't Let Worries Hurt You, Let the Church Help"

While Calvary Temple Church says: "We Love Hurting People"

Then there's St Nicholas Episcopal Church's invitation: "For Those of You Who Have Children but Don't Know it, We have a Nursery Downstairs."

Rosalie Baptist Church has a message from God: "Behold, I am Making All Things 'ew'."

And, First Pentecostal Church says: "Tired of Being a Loser? Turn to God"

Here are a couple of Easter messages...

The New Olivet Baptist Church: "Sunday's Message: Jesus said, Bring Me that Ass"

Hilltop Presbyterian just lays it all out there: "Welcome Back for the first of your two visits this year!"

And, finally, my personal favorites:

Community Church:

"Now is a good time to visit our pastor is on vacation." And...

Mt Pleasant Bible Church: "Do You Know What Hell is? Come Hear Our Preacher"

I’m sure that, like us, many drivers and passersby get good laughs out of those awkward signs but, who knows, maybe those laughs cause them to check out the kind of church that isn’t as concerned with perfect phrasing as with reaching out with an eye-catching message. And I know I like *my* spirituality tinged with humor...

So, back to what *we* mean by church. I actually spent my whole week here thinking about that—and what a wonderful week it was, full of love and curiosity, laughter and celebration—lots of great singing, including several rounds of Happy Birthday; chats and play with kids of all ages, walks around the res, conversations about theology, and lively debates about church history. And the Maypole yesterday—what a treat that was! I have loved every minute and all of the ways you showed me who you are. But I keep circling back to my conversation with the Racial Justice Action and Immigrant Justice Committees and something that Alfred said, and I’m paraphrasing: “We have so much here, we are doing so much good work, but other people need that work, too. We need to take it out of the building, take it to the people.” Can I get an “amen”? That is shared leadership, my people, shared ministry—and it is the way forward, I believe. I want to suggest three metaphors for how we do church like that, and those are: sanctuary, sweaters and safety pins.

First, sanctuary: what does that mean to us? This beautiful space, yes. We will continue to work on stewarding this sanctuary for the next generations. How will we keep it vibrant and healthy, structurally sound, and make it accessible to all? That will be an ongoing conversation. But sanctuary is so much more than physical space, right? As it says in the song, *we are a living sanctuary*. Each of us individually, all of us collectively. I know we *feel* that, in meetings and potlucks, marches and celebrations—whenever we are gathered in the spirit of “church,” *that* is sanctuary. In Bedford, we are offering sanctuary to an immigrant at risk of deportation; we refer to her as “Maria.” But it’s quite clear that physical space alone is not enough to provide the safety Maria needs to live there. The real sanctuary is our love, our care for her, the volunteers sitting vigil, the invitations to join in cooking and singing, simply being together. Setting aside time from our lives to sit and keep watch. It’s a powerful witness. We are sanctuary by showing up and putting our bodies on the line.

All this week I have been finishing a powerful memoir by Michelle Kuo, called *Reading with Patrick*. Has anyone else here read it? It was a very emotional read for me, I can hardly even talk about it yet, but I want to try. Kuo, who is Taiwanese-American, and raised middle class, joined Teach for America, out of her need to understand and deal with her feelings about race and racism. She ended up teaching in the deep South—Arkansas, the Mississippi Delta—in a school that had been basically abandoned by the local district, due to white flight. Kuo was deeply unprepared for what she found there, overwhelmed, not just by the educational needs, but also the appalling living situations of many of her students and their families. She ended up leaving after a couple of hard years to pursue law school, then later learned, through friends who still lived there, that one of her favorite students, Patrick, had ended up in jail on a murder charge.

Long story short (though I highly recommend this book – it could be a great all-church

read) Kuo returns to the Delta and spends a year visiting Patrick in a slum of a jail, trying to figure out how to help with his case, but also how to give him hope and reconnect him to the world. Ultimately, that reconnection comes through reading together, beginning with the C.S. Lewis fantasy, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, and progressing to James Baldwin, Toni Morrison and other powerful African-American writers. And also, to Kuo’s delight, Patrick connected strongly to poetry of all kinds. The Mary Oliver poem, *Mysteries Yes*, that I read at the beginning of the service, is one of his favorites. That line, “How grass can be *nourishing* in the mouths of the lambs,” he loved that. They memorized poetry together. Kuo gave him homework, he read and wrote. And then, after a year, she left for the law firm job that was waiting for her, and everything they had reclaimed together, it all fell apart. There’s a lot more to the story, but what we’re talking about is church and sanctuary. And it wasn’t just the books and poetry that healed Patrick, that returned to him his humanity, his dignity, it was Kuo’s presence. The fact that she put her body there. She showed up. And that, my friends, is exactly what we’re called to do in this thing we call “church.” To show up for each other, in love and witness. To put our bodies in the places where they are needed. Because we can. That’s taking it out of the building, as Alfred said, and *that* is church.

Now, here’s my story about sweaters... You’ve heard how, as a little girl, I loved worship. Well, our family attended a summer church near my grandparents’ house at the ocean—a tiny white frame building that held maybe 100 people. The minister was one of the best preachers I heard growing up and a couple of his sermons stayed with me, including one called “Don’t Cut Off the Buttons.” He talked about a woman giving away clothing to charity, and seeing buttons on a sweater that were particularly nice. And thinking “I might use those on another sweater, I think I’ll just cut them off before I put it in the bag.” The meaning, of course, was don’t hold back part of yourself when you give, don’t just give halfway, give it all. I took that to heart. And it’s another part of my idea of how we do church. When we extend ourselves to each other, to a cause, to the community, to make this world a better place, when we’re that kind of church, we can’t do it halfway. Not all of us will be able to march or demonstrate or even bake cookies, but whatever we can do, let’s do it full out. Let’s not cut the buttons off that sweater, let’s give it our all, even if it means giving away something that feels precious to us. Maybe especially then. If it hurts a little bit, if it feels like a sacrifice, then we’re probably in the right place.

Two weeks ago, Rev. Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir came to First Parish in Bedford; they’re an activist singing group from NYC. On Saturday afternoon, they sang at a rally at the Stop Back Bay pipeline; Rev. Billy preached. Then they performed on Saturday night at the church and Sunday morning they led worship. It was *all* church, by the way, every minute of it. John, our senior minister, had offered home hospitality for the 31 members of the choir, before checking with the congregation, because...he’s John. By the end of the week, he was sweating it, he still needed beds. At first, I had offered two double beds, saying we could have a couple of people. But, by Friday, I upped that, saying, “Well, we have a single futon we could pull out, and a couch, so...” Somehow, I failed to mention this to Zoe. On Saturday night, I arrived home, quietly announcing to my sleeping wife, “Ummm, honey...we now have five people coming, but I’ll make all

the beds!” And the thing is, they were totally delightful—we had the gay men’s chorus, plus a young woman. One of the men had been at the Stonewall riots in 1969. He was 20, he heard about it on the street, picked up rocks and ran toward the police, as so many did that night. Talk about putting your body on the line. The choir’s performances were amazing, but having them stay with us was the real blessing. I’m so happy that we didn’t cut off the buttons, didn’t limit our love and our giving.

Finally, the safety pins. Two years ago this country elected a president who had openly threatened marginalized people from a wide variety of groups. In a campaign full of bizarre and surreal bullying and name-calling, LGBTQ folks, Muslims, African-Americans, immigrants, women were all targeted and the list goes on and on. After the election, wearing a safety pin as a visible sign of being an ally to any groups or individuals feeling threatened became all the rage. But almost immediately (and justifiably) there was blowback. You don’t get to simply declare your allyhood by wearing a pin, it doesn’t work that way. As UU’s, we believe in the worth and dignity of all human beings, all life, but if we’re doing church on this, we need to know what we’re talking about. We need to learn about the oppression and wrongs suffered by the groups we plan to support. We need to listen to their stories, as intently and lovingly as you listened to my story last Sunday. We need to let our hearts break for the Patricks of the world. As meditation teacher Tara Brach puts it, “it’s not enough to be like-minded, we need to be like-*hearted*.” That is church too, my friends.

Sanctuary, sweaters and safety pins—this is what makes church, I think. Putting our bodies on the line, showing up for justice, for our beliefs. Giving all of ourselves, our hearts and whatever we have to give. Working on ourselves, our privilege and prejudice, facing hard truths about bigotry and hatred, so we can be useful and trustworthy allies to all people. But there’s one more thing, as Michele reminded me last night. There has to be joy! There has to be singing and dancing and celebration of our victories, however brief or fleeting. There’s a story about the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh teaching at the San Francisco Zen community. He told them: “You guys get up too early, you should get up a little later, and your practice is just too rigorous, it’s too grim. I have two instructions for you this week: one is to breathe and the other is to smile.”

There needs to be love, at the center of it all. As Ruby Sales, the theologian and activist puts it: “We are so quick to remember what we hate...what we’re angry about... what’s needed is...to remember what we love. We wouldn’t be angry, we wouldn’t hate, if embedded in it wasn’t a cherishing of something. We need to go to the heart of that so that our actions can come from what we cherish and truly be transformative.”

We all love a story with a happy ending, don’t we? I so wish I could tell you that Patrick’s life is going really well now. The truth is, at the end of the book, we don’t really know. He came out of jail as a felon, back into an area of this country with limited job opportunities, in any case. From those days of reading literature and poetry Patrick had had a glimpse of himself as fully worthy and human and that is something. Kuo has this to say about their time together: “I have to believe that two people can make a powerful impression on one another, especially in a certain kind of place, where so many have left,

and in a certain time, when we are coming of age, not worn down or hardened. In these times and places we are fragile and ready.”

Here is how Patrick himself puts it, in a poem he wrote in April 2010. This is,

I taught myself to feel free.

I taught myself to feel free and alive
To wake up thankful to be here
And to know everything is a blessing
From my food, my family, and visits.
When the old man moans in his room
And the white guys tell sad stories,
I insist I'm fine.
I have perfect health and happiness.
I instantly realize the peaceful insects
Flying across the room noiseless.
And the bright light bulb
That shine like the sun for me
Every day
Inside the county jail downtown.
Only to a newcomer is it all startling.
If you ask me I'm not here
Just in my own world.

May all the Patricks of the world, in all of the fragile and ready places, be granted peace and justice. And may we take this church, the church we dream of, the one we all can be for each other, out into the world, so that our light shines to lead the way, with love, with presence and wisdom, and with joy.

Amen and blessed be.

Call to Worship:

Mysteries, Yes by Mary Oliver

Truly, we live with mysteries too marvelous
to be understood.

How grass can be nourishing in the
mouths of the lambs.

How rivers and stones are forever
in allegiance with gravity
while we ourselves dream of rising.

How two hands touch and the bonds
will never be broken.

How people come, from delight or the
scars of damage,
to the comfort of a poem.

Let me keep my distance, always, from those
who think they have the answers.

Let me keep company always with those who say
“Look!” and laugh in astonishment,
and bow their heads.