

Address: Coming out of the spiritual closet

Delivered by David Jordan, Dec. 13 2015

Today's service is entitled "Coming out of the spiritual closet." So, I will begin by doing so . . . I am an uncertain atheist, perhaps more accurately an agnostic. I don't believe there is a god; I don't believe there is a life after death; and as you know if you heard my talk on beliefs I reject certainty and believe that "doubt" is a gift of wisdom. And as you'll discover further into my talk today, I believe that some people in our congregation feel threatened about announcing their faith or spirituality; I don't feel much doubt that my agnosticism or atheism will be accepted by most of this community. It is my experience, from talking with others, that it is those members and friends who have the strongest beliefs in a god or goddess or other spiritual phenomenon who have the greatest fear of being rejected or put down here. And I want to change that!

I draw heavily on a sermon delivered at the UUA 2015 congress by the Rev. Marlin Lavanhar which he called "For just such a time as this" In his talk he starts with a memory of a sermon he delivered 2008 in which he reflected: "It was just two years after I had lost my daughter, who died at the age of 3. I remember talking about her, Sienna, ...and how very raw it still was then. She would be 12 this year if she had lived." (2015) Lavanhar goes on . . ."I'm going to admit something. Sometimes, even now, when I'm visiting a person from my congregation who's dying, if it seems appropriate I'll ask them, 'When you finally die, if it turns out there really is a heaven on the other side of all this, and you see my little girl Sienna, will you give her a big hug for me and tell her that her mom and brother and I are doing alright and we love her?' And I've discovered that it doesn't matter if the person is

a Humanist, a secular-rationalist, a Buddhist or a Theist... There is something in the very humanity of that sincere request (from a broken-hearted father) ...together with the humility of facing our mortality ...that allows us to suspend our disbelief. It allows us to let go of our own literalism. So that we can bathe together in the warmth and tenderness of the deep longing and the love that begged the request. Whatever that is... that sacred place where people can meet... that is beyond belief and that binds us together in our love and our naked humanity... that's the place I want us to go tonight." And where I want us to go today . . .

"Because we are a covenanted people... bound together by a sacred promise. But I'm not sure we've ever really lived into all of what that can mean. Let's say for instance, I tell you that I speak in tongues. Would you laugh at me and think I'm ridiculous? What if I believe in Jesus Christ as the incarnation of God and I read the Bible as a way of deepening my understanding of myself and the world? Can I be a member of your church? I mean, would I really feel welcome? What if I think God is real and prayer is powerful and ritual is effective? Would your church embrace me? Would you? Our churches are based on the premise that there is no test of faith or belief; This allows us to have an incredible diversity of believers at the table. And yet, I've seen the reactions some people get when they share certain beliefs in our congregations."

Lavanhar goes on with an example "a long time, white member of the church walked into my office one day. He is a staunch humanist, a lawyer, about 60 years old. He said, 'Marlin, I want to tell you something that I would have never told anyone in this church and never have. I grew up Pentecostal and to this day I still speak in tongues.'

I tried not to look too surprised. But I was shocked. I asked “How often?” and he said, “Probably about once or twice a week.” He described it as a kind of meditation that allows his mind to rest. Once I got over my initial disbelief & quietly checked my own prejudices, I was struck hardest by realizing that this is a central part of his spiritual life, and he has spent 30 years in our congregation and has never felt he could tell anyone in our church without being judged negatively and maybe even made to feel like an outsider. And he was right. I know, because that’s how I felt myself initially. Of course, he’s the same intelligent, successful, rational, justice-centered man I’ve always known. It made me bump-up against my own prejudices.”

I had a similar experience when a former member at UCN told me he was a spiritualist that helped people talk to their deceased family members. I bumped into my own prejudices and worried that if he was public about his beliefs that he might be scorned or otherwise challenged. I think I responded outwardly with appropriate “curiosity”, but I still wonder if part of the reason he no longer attends stems from reactions he got to his spiritualism.

Lavanhar continues: “It was a pretty stark condemnation of me and my community, that he felt he had to keep his truth, his spirituality, in the closet in order to be welcome in our church. Don’t you wonder, how many are hiding themselves and their spirituality within our congregations? I’ll tell you one thing, we’ll never grow our churches if they’re places where people have to be spiritually closeted.

It goes against everything we say we’re about. It’s like double speak and Fox News, if we say we’re all about freedom of belief, but then we have

an unspoken culture that keeps people in spiritual silos. ...a culture that keeps people afraid to reveal their true selves openly to one another. It's double speak to say we are bound by a covenant that allows us to be united without any test of creed... but then we have a culture that makes many people feel their own personal spiritual journey and beliefs don't fit. And it's equally difficult to grow a church if people also don't feel comfortable admitting their deepest fears and longings... What kind of church is it, that teaches us to act like we do not have deep existential fears and powerful longings. We come scared about losing our jobs, our health, or about our children's futures, about getting old... or wrestling with our addictions and ways we sometimes feel pulled from our marriages or other commitments. Our religion is built on a cultural foundation that values people appearing to be self-initiating, self-reliant, empowered, educated, and well adjusted. All of which are fine things.

The problem is that most people... including most of us... (including me) are more afraid than we let on." After listing a range of fears, Lavanhar concludes . . .

"If coming to church means putting on our Sunday face and hiding all of this from one another and presenting a façade of self-reliance (well, pardon me Mr. Emerson) but who wants to go to that church? I realized that if coming to my congregation means pretending that you don't have any beliefs or longings that fit outside of a narrow, mostly, white, middle-class, progressive norm... Then most people probably don't want to attend my church... Because that's not a church as much as it's a spiritual and emotional closet. We need to have a coming out... in this Association.

As our culture has been learning, coming out is not just for LGBTQ people anymore. We need a coming out in our association for those of us who are poor... or immigrants, /military veterans,/ Christians... Theists... Republicans...(I say "conservatives) and more. The problem is that despite all our inclusiveness, in many ways, we still have a fairly spiritually and emotionally closeted culture. And it's not just about not being welcoming to certain outsiders; it can be pretty lonely and sometimes painful even for insiders.

Do you know the original Cinderella story? Not the Disney version, but the original Grimm fairytale? In it when the prince's courtiers come looking for the one who fits into the glass slipper, the step-sisters each try desperately to fit in. The first one cuts-off her toes and the other her heel to try to fit in. Imagine the pain of trying to stuff a bloody foot into a glass slipper. It's painful to cut off parts of oneself in order to try to fit in... whether it's a slipper or a church. But if we're not careful, that's exactly what we end up doing when our culture sends people into closets... in order to feel like they belong. We say our churches are places where people can bring their whole selves, but I'm not convinced that's always true. We can change that! I'm hoping we will.

I'm inspired by the story of Queen Esther from the Hebrew Scriptures.

The story begins when the king of Persia sees Esther, a gorgeous and charming young Jewish girl who captures the king's heart. Esther is an orphan who was raised by her cousin Mordicai, who warns her not to mention to anyone at the court that she's a Jew. Esther follows his advice (and hides her truth & her religion) and is soon crowned queen of the empire. Although

Mordicai spends a lot of time socializing at the king's court and people know that he's a Jew, they don't know he's related to Esther or that she is also a Jew.

One day Mordicai raises the wrath of the king's corrupt chief officer, Haman by refusing to bow down before him. Haman clearly has some anger management issues and in his fury he convinces the king to let him announce a royal decree to kill all of the Jews in the empire. Upon hearing this Mordicai tears his clothes and puts on sackcloth and ashes. Before long we find Mordicai standing at the gates of the palace telling one of the court eunuchs to let Esther know what's happening to the Jews.

. . . . the eunuch takes Mordicai's message to Esther, telling her that she must implore the king to intercede on behalf of the Jews. Esther tells the eunuch to relay back to Mordicai that, 'if any person (even her), enters the royal presence in the inner court without first being summoned, there is but one law which applies: that person shall be put to death, unless of course the king extends the golden scepter to the individual, and only then may that person live.' And more importantly, Esther says, 'I have not even been summoned to see the king for 30 days.' In other words, she's worried that she may have fallen out of favor with the king and this would give him the perfect excuse to do away with her.

Mordicai is not just asking her to serve on a committee or something... he's asking her to put her life on the line. But when Mordicai is told what Esther has said he sends this reply, 'Do not imagine Esther, that because you are in the royal palace, you alone of all the Jews will escape. If you remain silent at such a time as this, relief and deliverance for the Jews will appear

from another quarter; but you and your father's family will perish. Perhaps it is for just such a time as this that you have become queen?"

Esther heard the reply and found the courage to go talk to the king. She says, 'in defiance of the law, I shall go to the king; if I perish, I perish.' In the end, the Jews were saved because of Esther's courage and her religion was saved because of her willingness to reveal her truth. She saved her people with her willingness to be vulnerable and to risk rejection.

And that's what you and I can and need to start doing more of. Being courageous and real... with each other... Who knows, you may be here for just such a time as this. I believe you and I are here and are uniquely called for this moment. And that "now's the time" for you and me to step out and stop being so afraid of one another and of our own truth." He suggests, "There are (I say there may be) a lot of things that people are closeted about in our congregation(s) /military service/..... , Christian theology, immigration status, class background, gender-identity, political leanings... the love of prayer... having spent time in prison... mental illnesses, (etc.)so many things.

I'm willing to bet that most of us have something about ourselves that we would be scared to tell the people in our congregation... but that if we did tell and we found they still love and respect us, it would be incredibly healing for us and would free others to do the same. Now that sounds like a church I'd like to attend!

A place where I can be held in love for who I really am and despite what I believe or don't believe.

