



Sermon

All the hymns we sang today come from a tradition called Taize. In the 1930s, Roger Louis Schutz-Marsauche, the son of a Swiss Protestant Minister, came to believe that unity between Protestant and Catholic was essential for peace and justice, and he made the decision to open an ecumenical monastery. This was incredibly radical for its day. He chose the village of Taize in France and opened his monastery.

The theology that emerged in Taize emphasizes simplicity and the unity of all peoples. Their music, like their theology, is simple and uncluttered, usually a few phrases repeated over and over. The lyrics are written in many languages so that all can participate.

One of the criticisms of the Taize movement by evangelical Christians is that it focuses more on unity between people than reconciliation with God. The response from the Taize movement is that unity between people is reconciliation with God. The search for God is not about right belief. God is found by seeking peace within ourselves and with our brothers and sisters. When we enter into a readiness for deep communion with all of life, that is God filling us. God is not a thing or a being separate from us. The sacred is an embodied experience, the holy is the connection we have with all of life, and when we commit ourselves to that connection, the holy or the sacred or god will fill us.

When Father Roger opened his monastery in 1940, the reality of World War II made it clear to Father Roger how they would live their mission of unity and peace. Their monastery would be a refuge for those fleeing for their lives. For the most part, they welcomed in Jews fleeing Nazism and members of the French Resistance. When the war ended, and two camps of German prisoners of war were set up just down the road, again, their mission was clear. Father Roger saw the need for reconciliation and compassion and he invited these men to worship and eat at Taize. But then, the refugees and the soldiers went home.

The end of World War II brought the Taize Community to a crossroads. What would it mean now, in a Europe that was rebuilding, for the Taize community to live its commitment to unity and peace? Their soul searching led them to an answer. They would remain a refuge, but a refuge of a different kind. This was still a divided Europe, deeply wounded. There was still tremendous distrust between Protestant and Catholic. There were still many ways that humans turned on each other – the Cold War had begun, and the growing materialism and consumerism that came with economic growth seemed just as threatening to unity and peace as actual war. The Taize Community would open their doors in radical hospitality to all the world's young people and invite them to commit to the same mission of unity and peace.

In the last sixty years, the Taize Community has become one of the most well known pilgrimages in the world, hosting more than 100 000 pilgrims a year from every nation on this planet. Every evening they attend worship by the thousands. There is no evangelizing, there is only prayer and the singing of the music that is now beloved around the world. The Taize Community doesn't preach unity; it lives it.

The Taize Religious Order re-envisioned who they were by remaining faithful to who they were. Their mission didn't change, but how they lived it did.

When I made the decision to enter ordained ministry 12 years ago, I was clear in my mission. My ministry would support the transformation of lives, and through that, I hoped to do my part for the transformation of

our world. Regardless of where my ministry has taken place – whether in a small 25 member graying fellowship in cosmopolitan Toronto, as the chaplain in an inner city hospital, in gritty New Orleans, in Bible Belt suburban St. Louis, or as a volunteer clergy counselor through Faith Aloud, that has not changed. What has changed is how I have needed to live that mission. It has always depended on the context in which I find myself.

When I came to this congregation in August of 2005, this congregation was at a crossroads. Your mission hadn't changed in many years. You wanted to be the voice of liberal religion in West County, and in order to do that, you had to grow your presence. You determined that you needed good facilities and solid ministerial leadership to live your mission. First you achieved your dream of building this beautiful sanctuary. Many of you gave a lot of money and a lot of hours to make that happen. You then launched into your next goal, achieving full time ministry. You hired Rev. Ruth Gnagey, who said she would give you two years half time to help you with your goal. Your next step was finding a half time settled minister who would be willing to commit to you and grow the position. This is when I applied for the job, and then I had the phone interview with your Ministerial Search Team.

There is one particular exchange that I remember most clearly. I asked the Search Team, "So, you say you want to grow. You say you want full time ministry. Every church says it wants to grow and most aren't. They aren't ready to make the sacrifices that will be needed to achieve their goal. You're also not the only small church that says it wants a full time minister. Most small churches don't really understand how much work that will take, both financial and cultural. How do I know that this congregation really understands what it means to commit to this goal? You're asking me to make a huge commitment. Are you ready to make the commitment?" Well, you could have heard a pin drop! I thought to myself, "Oh Krista, you just messed this one up! You and your big mouth!" And then, long-time member Victor Paglisotti spoke in his particular understated way, and those of you who know Victor can probably imagine exactly how he said the following words: "Krista, that is a fair question. What I can say to you, is that I wouldn't underestimate this congregation's commitment to full time ministry. This is very important to us. We are ready to do the work." That's when I knew I wanted the job. I wanted to come here.

I then spent a lot of time researching what kind of minister I needed to be to serve a small ambitious congregation of 78 members faithfully and effectively. I knew what my mission was – the transformation of lives. It hadn't changed in six years, but my context was changing, just like the context of the Taize community changed when the refugees and the prisoners of war went home. I had formed as a minister and as a Unitarian Universalist in cosmopolitan, liberal, multicultural, largely secular Toronto. What was it going to mean to live my mission in suburban St. Louis?

Little did we know then that it would take five years to solidify the financial and cultural support for full time ministry. Little did I know what a toll that journey would take on you. Little did I know what a toll that journey would take on me and how strong I would need to become. I learned how deeply the intensity of this vocation would affect my family. I learned how deeply you start caring for a congregation when you serve it for many years. I learned how not to cry at the Coming of Age and Bridging Ceremonies. I learned how tender I become when conducting wedding services or child dedications when I know some of the intimate struggles you have gone through to be able to love, or to become parents. I have learned how delicately I need to hold the stories you share with me in membership intake meetings and pastoral care sessions. The stories that you tell are sacred. I learned that I need to take care of myself before and after conducting memorial services. I came into ministry with the mission of being a transformative agent for others, but I see that the one who has been transformed is me. I have been transformed by your struggles and your hopes and your challenges and the ways you live your faith. My time as your minister has made me into a fuller human being and I feel that I have been the one who is blessed.

The Unitarian Universalist tradition has a practice of providing ministers with sabbaticals at least every five years and sabbatical provisions are written into my letter of agreement. I receive one month of sabbatical for every full year of ministry. When I first entered into ministry I saw this as a luxury. But now I know different. Parish ministry has an extremely high burnout rate and a high attrition rate. There is a reason why health care premiums for ministers are so high. Parish ministers have one of the highest rates of stress related illnesses, including heart attack and stroke, substance abuse and depression. I now understand why. This is very hard often isolating work with very irregular hours and many demands. Sometimes I realize that I've forgotten all about my mission and my work has been about checking off tasks on a list and getting through all the meetings and writing those sermons on Saturday night. I realize that I haven't taken the walk I promised myself for three days and I've forgotten how to pray and I haven't picked up my guitar or touched a piano or sung one tune all day, all things that are part of my spiritual practice. Sometimes I don't feel very spiritual or very inspirational. Sometimes I feel like I'm going through the motions, and I've been reassured by my colleagues that this is not unusual at all.

Sabbaticals are necessary for both congregations and ministers. We invest a lot of time and spiritual energy and money in each other, and sabbaticals protect that investment. They significantly decrease the rate of burnout. They support ministers in re-envisioning their ministry for the next five years.

The rule of thumb is that the success of a long pastorate is in reinventing your ministry every five years. Well, we're in year 7 now and I can see that if I'm going to continue being effective as your minister I have to re-envision my ministry with you. We have grown from 78 members to 120. Our children's programming has doubled. When you add up members, pledging friends, returning visitors and children and youth, we are a congregation of over 200 souls. This means that the research I did before coming here to ensure that I was the minister you needed, has become obsolete. Some of the ways I do ministry have become obsolete. I need a new toolkit to be the minister that you need.

Added to that, we are in the very beginning stages of preparing for a capital campaign to increase our building capacity. We will know we are ready for a capital campaign when we have at least one successful annual stewardship drive. The difference between a capital campaign and a stewardship drive is that a capital campaign funds a special project (like this sanctuary), and the stewardship drive funds our operating expenses. If you don't adequately fund your operating expenses, a church has no business even considering a capital campaign. So that is our main focus this year - executing a highly successful annual stewardship drive.

The consultants we brought here in August pointed out that we have very few people at the top ranges of giving, and whole lot of people at the bottom and this is leaving us very vulnerable. It is jeopardizing our ability to simply fund our ministries, so we have to work on improving our levels of giving for those in the bottom ranges or we will never have a successful capital campaign.

This sabbatical is going to benefit me and you because it will help ensure that I continue to be the minister that you need. Not the minister that makes you comfortable, and not the kind of minister that makes me comfortable either. If we are going to continue living our mission, which is the transformation of lives and the transformation of our world, we have to be willing to go the next step.

So I will be on sabbatical from January to March for the purposes of my own renewal so that I will be refreshed and ready for the tasks that await us, and don't you think that life at this church is going to slow down while I'm gone! I am not the center of this community. You are, and you need to continue being there for each other and for your congregation. We are building the Annual Stewardship Team as we speak and if

you are want to help it be a smashing success, let us know and there will be a spot for you on that team. If you are asked to be on that team, please know it is because we see the potential in you. Please do what you can to say yes. We will start meeting in December so you can work with me before I go.

I am also in the middle of preparing 12 courageous members of this congregation to offer the sermon of their lives! They're gonna be good and you don't want to miss them! Our Pastoral Care Team is ramping it up so be assured that there will be support for your pastoral care needs. And if the worst happens, if there is a death, or some life-threatening calamity, I will come back and be there for you. If I can't get back right away, we have a local minister, Rev. Michael Hennon, on call to help out until I can get back.

I guess you could say that I'm going on a pilgrimage. I am taking time away to get perspective, to reconnect to the divine as I understand it, to reground myself in gratitude, and to renew my connection to the spirit so that when I come back, there will be more of me to give.

There's a Taize song that goes like this: Come and pray in us, Holy Spirit. Come and pray in us. Come and visit us, Holy Spirit, Spirit come, Spirit come. This has always been my prayer for you. It is also my prayer for myself. In all that we do, may the spirit pray in us, and may we be a transformative blessing to each other. Amen and blessed be.