

The Fire of Commitment

A sermon by Rev. Fred Small
First Parish in Cambridge, Massachusetts
Sunday, October 26, 2008

For the longest time, my mother was worried about me.

Like mothers everywhere, she wanted her son to be truly happy. Like many mothers, she couldn't imagine her son being truly happy until he was married. And her son didn't marry until he was 43 years old.

The truth was, I wanted to get married.

But the life of an itinerant folksinger is rocky soil for romance. Working weekend nights and frequent out-of-state travel are tough on intimacy. While I had my share of giddy crushes and serious relationships, none of them lasted.

When I finally met Julie, I was ready to settle down. But even when I knew in my heart I had found the love of my life, I still had an issue with commitment.

My long bachelorhood, I discovered, was not really about logistical inconvenience. It was about fear: fear of losing my freedom, my autonomy, fear of settling for less than I thought I deserved, fear of accepting someone else's imperfection and therefore my own.

I was more certain about marrying Julie than I'd ever been about anything. And yet as our wedding approached, I suffered acute claustrophobia. I felt pressure on my chest. I imagined a massive wrought iron gate clanging shut on the beautiful unruly voluptuous garden of my life.

I was terrified.

On June 22, 1996, in a tiny chapel overlooking Penobscot Bay in Maine, Julie and I were married. And instead of a gate clanging shut, a door swung open.

Julie and I walked together into a field of possibility and creativity and courage and joy, because we knew whatever happened we could count on each other, and we always have.

Marriage isn't for everyone. But commitment is.

Commitment to something—a person, a cause, a community—is part of growing up, of becoming a fully formed human being. Commitment matters. It changes us. And it changes those around us.

This morning I invite you to make a commitment neither as momentous nor as binding as marriage, but a sacred commitment nonetheless—a commitment with consequences both for you and for this congregation. I invite you to make a commitment to First Parish in Cambridge.

Membership is not something to be rushed into. Membership means you're ready to settle down. If you've been church-shopping, membership means you're ready to buy.

Membership means you feel that this congregation is your community—if the language of spirit speaks to you, your spiritual home— maybe not forever, but for now.

If that's how you feel, it's time to join.

First Parish in Cambridge today has 270 members. But that's only a fraction of those who worship here, sing in the choir, volunteer on our committees and service projects, and send their children to religious education. Among us there are nearly as many nonmembers as members.

Today I'm inviting everyone who participates regularly in our congregational life to join as members.

Of course, the nature of an invitation is that it can be graciously declined. But I hope you'll consider it.

Because we need you.

Unitarian Universalism needs your commitment. This congregation needs your commitment. And, I will argue, you need your commitment.

Unitarian Universalism needs your commitment to authenticate and amplify its voice in the public square.

When the Southern Baptist Convention casts doubt upon global warming, it represents 16 million Southern Baptists. When Roman Catholic bishops denounce birth control, they claim the authority of 60 million Catholics. When Mormons flood California with 18 million dollars to ban same-sex marriage—three out of every four dollars contributed—their sheer numbers tilt the political playing field.

So when Unitarian Universalist Association President Bill Sinkford champions marriage equality, endorses comprehensive sexuality education, or denounces police raids on immigrant workers, the news media may be forgiven their collective yawn. When our president represents fewer than 165,000 adult Unitarian Universalists, why should anyone pay attention?

But recent polling by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life suggests there are nearly 700,000 Americans who identify as Unitarian Universalist. If that's true, more than three fourths of Unitarian Universalists don't bother to join a congregation. Until they do, the promise of Unitarian Universalism as a voice in the world for peace, justice, and compassion rings hollow.

First Parish in Cambridge needs your commitment.

We need you to share our Unitarian Universalist values with our children and youth. We need you to sing in the choir. We need you to show up on Sunday mornings to usher, greet newcomers, and host coffee hour. We need you to feed the hungry men and women who depend on a hot meal here every Tuesday. We need you to pay for our elevator and heating system and a new religious educator and associate minister. We need you to take the lead in peacemaking, justice-making, and healing the earth.

But I don't have to be a member to do that, you might protest. And you'd be right—in theory.

But in practice, membership matters.

The folks who volunteer most faithfully, who step up to serve as chair, who come the earliest and stay the latest—they're most likely members.

We don't keep records of volunteer time, but we do of stewardship. For the current annual fund, members made an average pledge over \$1300. Nonmembers who pledged offered an average of just \$827. So members pledge fifty percent more than nonmembers. And 146 nonmembers active in our congregation did not pledge at all. Now, maybe they put cash in the plate. But without a pledge, the congregation can't count on their support when we budget. We can't plan on it.

We also need your voice in our democratic governance. Without your voting membership, crucial congregational decisions—the course we chart, the ministers we call, the projects we spend your money on—are made without your wisdom or your consent.

Membership means ownership. It means taking responsibility for our shared religious life. It means a shift in consciousness from being a consumer of church to being an owner-operator.

We need your ownership. We need your membership.

And so do you.

Commitment is an act of spiritual growth. First, because it demands reflective discernment whether the person, cause, or community is worthy of our commitment. And second, because commitment changes us.

Commitment both fortifies and humbles the self. It gives meaning to both the first and seventh principles of Unitarian Universalism, lifting up our “inherent worth and dignity” and “the interdependent web . . . of which we are a part.”

Theologian Howard Thurman called commitment a fundamental act of human sovereignty, a choice that beckons, defines, and is available to every human being, no matter our circumstance, no matter how gifted or deprived. Commitment expresses and reminds us of the power of choice each of us wields in every moment to define ourselves and our reality even if we can't control them.

“One option is always available to me,” Thurman declared. “I can choose the things for which I shall stand and work and live. To yield this right, is to fail utterly my own self and all others upon whom I must depend. The highest role of freedom is the choice . . . that will make my life not only a benediction breathing peace but also a vital force of redemption to all I touch.” Commitment gives birth to a new sense of priority and “vast creative energies.”

But commitment also in the very best sense puts us in our place, because our place is in community with others, without whom we struggle in painful isolation and self-deluding self-reliance. Commitment reminds us that our life is not our own but dependent upon and inextricably bound together with the lives of others. The commitments we choose, like the wild geese in Mary Oliver's poem, announce our “place in the family of things.”

Some of you may have heard that joining First Parish is difficult. Don't believe it.

If you're at least eighteen years old, to become a member in good standing you just have to do three things: (1) come to a membership orientation, (2) write a note to the Standing Committee, (3) make a pledge and contribution in your name—in any amount.

That's it.

The Standing Committee votes to accept your membership, and you'll be honored at the next Recognition Sunday.

And now, to make it even easier, there's a Membership Intention card. At the top it says, “Yes, I'd like to join First Parish in Cambridge.” If you fill in your name and contact information, the Membership Committee will be in touch with you about next steps. You can pick up a card this morning as you leave the meetinghouse and fill it out before you go home.

The first of five membership orientations will be this afternoon from 3 to 5 pm. Everyone's invited! The Membership Committee will be at coffee hour to answer any questions you may have.

Now, some of you may be reluctant to join because right now you don't have the time or money or energy you'd like to give the congregation. You want to be a responsible member, not a flaky one.

I respect that. And it's true, we do ask members for their time, money, and energy.

But we also understand that every member moves through seasons of involvement, sometimes leading, sometimes following, sometimes giving more, sometimes less, sometimes just receiving. We have both high expectations and deep compassion.

Membership is not a quid pro quo. It's a passage of the heart.

If this your community, if you feel at home here, join us. Don't wait for a more propitious time, when you're richer or stronger or better. Come as you are. We embrace you.

Some of you may be reluctant to join because you've had bad experience with organizations, especially religious ones. Some of you may cherish your independence. Some of you may have reservations about or quarrels with First Parish. These are legitimate and understandable reasons for hesitation.

But let not your hesitation harden into avoidance. I invite you to ponder your motives, probe your feelings, test your rationales. Talk it over with family and friends. Talk to me or Meg Anzalone or a member of the Membership Committee or Standing Committee. Then make a choice—yea or nay—that speaks your integrity and your relationship to this congregation.

Of course, some of you may not have joined simply because no one ever asked you to.

I'm asking you to.

I know I've been asking a lot from the pulpit this month. And I just got here!

Next Sunday, I promise, I'll stop being such a noodle.

At least for a couple of Sundays.

From time immemorial, human beings have asked ourselves: Who am I?

But hidden within this question is another: *Whose* am I?

My colleague Victoria Safford poses still others: *Who needs you? Who loves you? To whom are you accountable? To whom do you answer? Whose life is altered by your choices? With whose life, whose lives, is your own all bound up, inextricably, in obvious or invisible ways?*

And Stafford asks more: *Whose song is traveling toward you from far away to deepen your days? What countries may we, must we, sing into? What lines should we all be crossing? How wide is the circle of your caring, the circumference of humanity, the bright ring of life, the holy perimeter, within which you live and move?*

May we hold these questions in our awareness, ponder them in our hearts—and kindle the fire of commitment in our souls.

Amen.