

"Beloved Before You Do"
Reverend Dave Franks
February 7, 2021

A guy wins a free ticket to the Super Bowl and so he's extremely excited.

However, he's not so excited when he gets there and realizes his seat's in the back of the stadium.

So he looks around him for a better seat, and to his surprise he finds an empty seat right next to the field.

He approaches the older guy who's sitting in the seat next to the empty one and asks if the seat is taken.

The man replies, "No."

The young guy is incredibly surprised to hear this and asks, "How could someone pass up a seat like this?"

The older guy replies, "It's my wife's seat. We've been to every Super Bowl together since the day we were married but she's passed away."

"Oh, how sad," the young guy says, taken aback. "I'm sorry to hear that, but couldn't you find a friend or relative to come with you?"

"No," the man replies, "They're all at the funeral."

Yes, when it comes to football, just like that widower, it seems to me, that's just how dedicated some people seem to be on this Sunday.

So, this is Superbowl Sunday. I saw that the cheapest ticket today, being that only 14,500 ticket-buying fans will be in attendance in a Raymond James Stadium today that can hold up to 75,000 fans, is just around \$5,000. And I wonder, if only we were so dedicated, so focused on what it is to be a Beloved Community, to pay such a price to be part of this community we call Unitarian Universalists of Clearwater. What an amazing, winning, people we would be in our lives, in the lives of our families, in Pinellas County, in Florida, in this nation, in the life of Unitarian Universalists everywhere and those other communities of faith who share in Unitarian Universalist values.

I confess, which may not be a surprise to some of you, if not to most of you, I don't follow football very closely. I was telling a friend of mine the other day that I had to look up in Google just what city the Green Bay Packers are located. My friend stopped me, "Dave, ah before you say anything more, the Buccaneers aren't playing the Green Bay Packards. That was last week. They're playing the Kansas City Chiefs." Well, thank goodness they have their city in their name."

But it's not lost on me that there are all kinds of analogies that can be played between football and what it is to be a Beloved Community. I'll not exhaust them, I promise. But the one I will put out there to you is that the team doesn't run out onto the field until they know what they're about, what their capable of, in other words, who they are. Any plans, running or passing plays they come up with, don't happen until they know and claim for themselves that they're capable of running and passing the football down the field.

Okay, enough of a football analogy, I'd like to get this sermon past the goal post in the next 15 – 20 minutes. The point is, to be about our values, our principles in the ways we go about doing

justice with one another, within this community of Unitarian Universalists, and beyond into the world, asks of us to really get to know and claim who we are before we do those things, we believe we are called to do.

I've shared with you in the past some of the conversations I have from time to time with a dear friend of mine, who is a clinical child psychologist. His insights regarding human behavior and psychological development are often enlightening to me, and hopefully some of my theological reflections are equally so to him. This past week he was offered a book deal on the subject matter of helping anxious parents who are dealing with their anxious children. One of these days I'm going to get him in this pulpit.

In our discussion on such a very timely subject, he shared that what he's come to understand through hours upon hours of counseling both children and parents, is that a child's anxiety can at times stem from their parents, teachers, society telling them, no matter how well intentioned, what they need or must do to become who they should be, to be able to make it as they grow into adulthood.

Religion and political parties can be like a parent telling their child, no matter how well intentioned, what they need or must do to become who they should be. What people should do, to ensure they will enter the kingdom of heaven, or what walls they must mount to guarantee their president stays in the Oval Office regardless. Is it any wonder why people begin to feel anxious when the talk around the dinner table begins to center on religion or politics?

When we start doing things, taking actions, no matter how noble we believe them to be, as caring of intent as that anxious parent for their child, without first coming to know, claim who we really

are as persons, we run the risk of doing harm, not only to others but to ourselves.

We don't have to look all that far back in history, especially in this month celebrating Black History, to see evidence of this truth.

This past week I saw that the city of St. Petersburg is welcoming developers to submit plans on what to do with the land on which Tropicana Field lies when it becomes available for development. Nine different proposals were submitted. I'm confident those proposals will have within them a display of high rises condos and apartments, shopping venues, and restaurants. But I had to wonder, what low cost, affordable housing will be made available in those plans for that whole black community that was displaced to build Tropicana Field, a field that was promoted as ensuring jobs for those black citizens whose homes were leveled.

The thing I learned from my psychologist friend about those anxious parents and children is that it is not until the child's parent encourages their child to discover who they are that the child then begins to know what it is they need to do. What is that encouragement the parent can offer to their child so that they may discover who they are and in so doing, know what they can do? I believe it is for that child to really know that who they are, truly are, is loved. Beloved not for doing, or having done, what they are told to do but for who they are. Affording them the time to believe that, to have faith in who they are as beloved.

What we, as a beloved community, are who we are, truly are, is loved. Beloved not for doing, or having done, what our values and principles, our boards, or pastors, told us to do but for who we are. And so it is imperative that we go about the task, the journey, the delight in learning just who we are – Beloved. It is in that. Believing that, to have faith in who we are as beloved that

we discover what we are to do which doesn't guarantee we will do no harm, but it does lessen the possibility of doing so.

A few months ago an article came across my desk, and it got there I believe by one of you. Sorry I can't remember which one of you may have sent it to me. If this sermon ends on a decent note, I may end up finding that several of you sent it to me. Anyway, it's an article we can all claim as to what it is to know who we truly can be as a beloved community.

The article is about the story of Rev. Junia Joplin, a Canadian born Transgender Woman, who at an early age knew, that she wanted to be a minister and she wanted to be a girl. She made the news months ago because she came out to her church on June 14, 2020, (my birthday the way) and the church council was in the decision process on whether to keep her as their minister. The article states that as a man "she chose the door marked 'minister,' because, she thought, wanting to be a girl was a dream for other people. She grew up, and went off to seminary in Richmond, Virginia. She started preaching there. She was really, really good at it."

Junia relates, "After 30 years of choosing vocation over gender, now I have to choose gender over vocation." Not at all unlike having chosen vocation over orientation to finally having to choose orientation over vocation, but that's my story. So I'll continue with her story. She says, "It's not a scenario where I get to be a full person in either way. I don't want to be in a position where some denomination can say, 'We hired this trans woman. We're paying her for 20 hours a week. She can't pay her rent, but aren't we inclusive?' I can't say that I wouldn't do that, just because what choice would I have? But I don't want to be a prop. I don't want to be a novelty."

Rev. Elizabeth Lott, Junia's friend, says "The church has always been a patriarchal institution, which extends to trans identities, in

harmful ways. When a trans man minister comes out to his congregation, he is much more likely to keep his job than a trans woman minister who comes out to her congregation.

She goes on to say, "...that pastors are often more progressive than their congregations, something that often manifests in those pastors pulling their punches with sermons that tiptoe right up to endorsing social justice movements, then back away from the cliff's edge. Those pastors, often white, straight, cis, and male, have the luxury of distance from the need for that social justice. Junia won't."

"Everything [changed] for Junia on Sunday, but it may be that that opens up something for her, because once she's able to inhabit who she fully is, she's going to be able to free other people to do the same."

The other night I was curious as to what the outcome was for Junia.

July 27th TVO Article

"The church itself has closed most of its social-media outlets but did state that it had "journeyed for the past month through a process of attempting to discern God's will resulting from June's announcement of June 14, 2020 that she is a transgender woman. After a month of prayerful discernment and discussions between June and the congregation, it was determined, for theological reasons, that it is not in God's will that June remain as our pastor."

Those theological reasons, however, seem to be incredibly thin and even undetectable. "They spent five weeks debating about me without me being able to give any input," says Joplin. "I had no way of knowing who my accusers were, who my opponents

were. I still don't. But it doesn't change anything about my decision — I need to be visible, because others walking a similar path have been denied that visibility."

See what can happen when a person, when any of us, start with who we are, free ourselves to be ourselves, that we are then able to do that thing that is authentic and frees other people to do the same.? I believe, I hope, that's how it's come to be that I am in your pulpit.

Reverend Roberta and the Transition Team are offering a set of programs for four Thursday evenings, the first being last Thursday, focused on how the past has evolved into the present here at UUC. I encourage you to avail yourself of at least one of those Thursday evenings. To get to who we are it is helpful at times to know from where we've been.

Beloved Community, let your hearts not be troubled, nor let them be afraid. Be not anxious of what tomorrow may bring.

Regardless of what we've been told we should or must do, let us start with who we are, and we shall then come to know more clearly what it is we are to do so that others walking a similar path may be free to do the same.

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