

THE MYTHS OF MINISTRY

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The myths of ministry derive from stereotypes of ministers, and priests and rabbis. They obscure the realities of true ministry. By “myth” in this sermon, I mean an untrue story that gives a false understanding of our lives. The myths of ministry trouble me because (to paraphrase Dangerfield) both you and I “don't get no respect.”

For instance, when there was a big interfaith gathering on Bainbridge, a priest, a rabbi and a minister walked into a bar. The bartender looked up and said, "Is this a joke?" And once a little boy was acting up in church during the sermon, and his mom tried to hush him. She said "You have to be quiet in church. Do you understand why?"

"Yea," the boy replied, "People are sleeping."

I have heard that American literature depicts only three types of clergy, the saintly, the corrupt, and the ineffectual. I hope you have not slotted me into one of those categories! But the real problem with the myths of ministry is not how they affect people's view of me. The real problem is that they undermine the real truth of your role, the extent to which your lives embody ministry. There are many myths; I will explore six of them with you today.

The first and greatest of all the myths is that ministry is something done only by professionals and paid for by the lay folk. It is as if I should place a warning label before every sermon "Don't try this at home." Likewise, one year I went to a conference, and at the same time, a member of the church unexpectedly went to the hospital. After a day or so she complained to her friends that no one from the church had visited. I learned this from email, and I asked the Caring Committee what was going on. When I returned, I stopped by the hospital and told her about my trip. I mentioned that I had heard her complaint, but I noted that seven people from the church had visited her and one of those had visited every day.

She waved that off saying, “Oh, those are just my friends.”

I said, “My relationship with you is important, in a way I represent the church, but your UU friends are the church.”

Rightly understood, the ministry of a church is anything done in service of that congregation. My key point is this: ministry is anything done *consciously* to fulfill the mission of a congregation, or religion. If for example, you are setting up chairs because it is useful, or somebody told you to, it is not ministry. But, if you set up chairs because having good seating is part of helping people open their hearts in worship, develop compassion, serve justice and nurture a loving spirit, then setting up chairs is a ministry. Loving babies, making dinners, encouraging singing, all can be ministry if you do these as an expression of your commitment to Cedars, our Principles, and our Mission. I was so happy when I went to the Interfaith gathering at Eagle Harbor congregation this past week, and there were three other UUs there. I may

represent the church, but only you can embody the congregation's involvement with the interfaith organization. In the end, my success is judged not by what I am able to do, but by what I enable or inspire you to do. My work must impact your thinking and how you live your daily lives. Your lives matter.

The second myth of Ministry is that Ministers are only able to do their "special work" because they are not normal people. This may be true, but in fact, no one is normal. The physicist Freeman Dyson said a few years back that he was surprised to get the Templeton prize in religion. He thought that a prize in religion could only go to exceptional saints and prophets and he was certainly neither of those. What is more, even ordinary people can do extraordinary things. To put it another way, we focus on the ordinary in a way that emphasizes the extraordinary. Or, as Mother Theresa said, we can, "Do ordinary things with extraordinary love."

More importantly, we are all limited and foolish in one way or another. Even very smart people can do really stupid things. My elder colleague, Richard Gilbert pointed this out in a sermon titled, "Just Hang Out and Be Religious."

"When ministers are charged with [the spiritual nurture] of congregations, congregations should be charged as well, to the mutual ministry. Today, I am eloquent in the pulpit and brilliant... next week I stumble and bumble through my uncertainty and need your forgiveness. Today I am a great rock of comfort in a weary land; tomorrow I am blown about as the sands of the desert, and I need the oasis of your strength. Today I dazzle you with my perspicacity; tomorrow I forget our appointment.

Blessed are they who minister and blessed are they who are ministered unto Blessed the task of the Minister, blessed the task of the congregation- for ultimately they are the one and the same."

Because of this truth, the third myth is false, that ministers are people who tell you what to believe. I know of ministers who are glad to tell you what to believe. But I also know that many people in their religious practice will simply ignore their leaders and choose for themselves what they believe. Decades ago a friend of mine was talking to a devout Catholic relative about birth-control. After a while, the UU said, "You know the Pope is against all that." The Catholic responded with absolute certainty, "No he isn't." She had simply decided for herself what was true, what mattered, and assumed the leader of her faith was as wise as she was.

We know from experience that a chosen belief is always more powerful than a given one. Above all, we know that every belief is prone to error and incompleteness. Thus, UUs have chosen to be free of doctrine and creed and to replace them with the open process of self-discovery and shared exploration through dialogue. We also communicate what we believe less by word and more by action and example. As the religious educator, Jean Starr Williams put it "Religion is something that is caught not taught." With us, it does not matter if you believe in Jesus, Buddha, the Power of Nature or "The Force," except to the extent that such belief helps or hinders you from living by the truth of unity and love. We do not, neither you nor I, tell others what to believe. Instead, we show others what we believe, and tell why we believe, and

we share what we doubt and why. Then we encourage others to do the same. But when and where do we do this?

Well, that brings us to the fourth myth. Some say that a minister only works for an hour on Sunday mornings. However, I have also heard that minister visit your home unannounced on Sundays. I have never, ever done this. I usually call first; even to visit someone in the hospital. But, maybe you do this. Do you drop by a friend's house for a surprise visit? When you hear someone in the church is in trouble do you call them up and offer help? Do you meet someone from this congregation unexpectedly during the week, the grocery store or at a community meeting, and then end up connecting sitting together, catching up on your lives? If so, then we are doing the work of the church; making connections and community and sharing a meaningful identity. At anytime, anywhere, we can do the work of this congregation.

Once, a preacher noticed a man at Sunday worship who rarely came to services. So, the minister walked over. After a few pleasantries, she said: "You know that part of being in service to the church is to participate in the services of worship." "Shhh," the man replied, "Don't let anyone know: but I'm usually in the secret service."

Maybe he was trying to get out of a lecture, but perhaps he understood that the secret service is doing the work of the church out in the world. Of course, the sermon and worship are the centers of our common life. Our classes and discussions are important. But if while listening to a sermon is the only time you are "in church" then you are a poor minister. Even the way we run our committee meetings can be ministries, affirming human worth, saying that our time is valuable and the work important. Even worship is not necessarily limited to Sunday mornings. Whenever we meet we and affirm our UU identity, or simply light a candle together, we can recall our moments of high resolve and our shared sources of inspiration.

The unbound power of ministry is enunciated in this anonymous piece, "There Is Ministry."

Ministry occurs in places and circumstances, likely and unlikely;
in churches, not often, but sometimes;
in prisons, and hospices, and hospitals;
 by cribs and cradles;
 in factories, offices, and stores;
In courtrooms and cocktail lounges
 and clinics and garages;
 in hovels, mansions, and at bus stops and diners;
Wherever there is a meeting that summons out our better selves,
 wherever our lostness is found, our fragments are reunited,
 our wounds begin healing, our spines strengthened
 and our muscles grow strong for the task,
-there is ministry.

Notice that courtrooms are not mentioned in this list. This brings us to the fifth myth that Ministers judge people. The image is either one of a glaring judge in priestly robes like a

disapproving mother, or some energetic preacher, spittle flying, and violently condemning the depravity of others. People, especially from outside of UU congregations, will apologize to me for errors that I would never consider sins. When I volunteered for the service agency, *Rebuilding Together*, I once was on a roof with a man at least twenty years older than I. When the nail gun jammed, he cursed sharply. Then looked at me and said, "Oh, Sorry father."

Once, I heard of a priest who was going home on a subway in New York after having spent much of a night in the hospital with a family. Across from him sits down a man who has been partying. He smells of alcohol, and an open bottle protrudes from one coat pocket. His clothes and hair are ruffled and, though he wears a wedding ring, there at least two colors of lipstick on his cheeks. He is reading a newspaper and, every once in a while, he reaches down to rub his knee. Finally, he looks up from his paper and asks "Excuse me father but do you know what causes arthritis?" The priest responds with cold condemnation, "Certainly! In men, it is caused by staying up late, getting drunk, hanging out with undisciplined women and breaking your vows!" "Really?!" the man replies with some surprise and then returns to his paper. After a while, the priest regrets his actions. He sees the man rub his knee again. Now, feeling humble, he says, "I am sorry I came on so strong there." The man nods. The Priest asks, "How long have you had arthritis?" The man is briefly confused. "What, oh this. No, I just bumped my knee on a table. But I was reading an article here that said the Archbishop has arthritis."

Now I know that I can be judgmental, like anybody. We, of course, must make some judgments. We must note injustice and confront the powers and structures of evil and ill in this world. We can offer advice to those who seem to be putting their wellbeing or ethical integrity at risk. If our offer of advice is accepted, then we should offer that advice as well as support. But ultimately, our job is not to judge people, but to love them. The job of a Unitarian Universalist, your job, and mine, is to love and seek to understand. UU minister Edward Frost filled this out in a poem titled "My Word:"

I love those who are angry with me
Because they care deeply about something, they feel I may have hurt.
I love those who criticize me
Because they need something, they think I can give.
I love "wifty" people
Because their minds are usually in a nicer place
Than where we think we really are.
I love shy people because they are more like me, really,
Than the blustery and self-assured
Whom I love because I know how they really feel.
I love the know-it-alls
Because they know they don't know what is really important.
I love those who talk too much
Because I know how much they fear the silence.
And I love the quiet ones
Because they are usually listening.
[Finally], I love those who love me- in spite of what they know.

This high principle of love works to counter the sixth myth of ministry, the idea that ministers are those who are the bosses of their congregations. Each of us can be a leader. Each can take charge of some part of this organization. Of course, I am responsible for much. I play a key executive role. But I am rarely "in control" of anything, least of all the whole congregation. Leadership is a style of participation, not an official role. Any one at any moment could act as a leader, set a new course, and remind others of what we are supposed to be doing. Leadership is ultimately nothing more than influence. To be a leader is to influence others. It has many sources. What influence do you have on the quality of programs of the church, or on the shared vision of what we create together?

Each of us has a role to play in the ministry of the church. To explain this, I want to tell you what happened recently when the Catholic Pope, Francis, was touring a city. He is sort of an ultimate image of a minister and the myths of ministry. As he approaches his limousine he is moved by some desire to drive, like a regular person, and he tells the driver to get in the back because he, the Pope, is getting behind the wheel. Well, the guy reluctantly agrees and off they go. As many new drivers, after an initial uncertainty, the Pope is thrilled with the feelings of power, and when they reach the highway, he pours on the gas. Suddenly the red and blue lights of a highway patrol car are flashing, and he pulls the limousine over. The officer steps up to the car and looks in, but then hesitates and says "Just a moment I need to call in and report that I made a stop." The trooper calls in and asks for the chief. "Chief, chief, I have a REALLY important person pulled over, and I don't know how to handle it." "It's, not the Congressman, again is it?" asks the chief. "No Sir!" replies the officer, "this guy's more important." "Is it the Governor?" asks the chief. "No! Even more important!" is the reply. "Is it the PRESIDENT??" Asks the chief. "No! Even more important than that!" "Well then who the heck is it?" screams the chief. "That's just it Sir, I don't know, *but he's got the Pope as his chauffeur.*"

I am just the chauffeur here. You are the really important people, the important ministers. Beyond the study and writing and choosing and coordinating that goes into each service I have much more work to do (in administration, in education, in pastoral care, in community service, in forming the wider U.U. association) and so do you. It is ministry when you have a good meeting and when you keep talking afterward late into the night. Similarly, I have seen you serve one another in a conversation at a chance meeting in a grocery store; or in postings on Facebook. I see ministry in how you discipline your children. I see it when you share your gardening or art or talents with other UUs. It is ministry when you stand silently with one other UU and look out on the water, or into the darkness and the beckoning stars. I am just a part of all that. I am a minister to ministers, to all of who live not by the myths of ministry, but by its transforming truths and abiding good work.