



Running Through The Kitchen Window

A sermon by Nathan Ryan
Red River Unitarian Universalist Church
Denison, TX
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The Morning Readings:

Religion Beyond Belief
By the Rev. Peter Morales

What these millions are seeking is a religion beyond belief. We can be that religion. We can feed the starving multitudes.

This is our challenge in each and every congregation in our Association. Just as we are relational creatures who need one another to become our true selves, so too do our congregations need one another to become a powerful force for compassion and justice. There is so much more we could be doing.

This is our spiritual and religious challenge: we must know what we love, and then we must let that love guide us. This, my friends, is true religion. It is not really religion without belief. It is religion beyond belief. It is a religion to be lived and experienced. This is the religion our world so desperately needs. This, I am convinced, is what we are called to be.

Mark 6:1-13

New International Version

Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples. When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed. “Where did this man get these things?” they asked. “What’s this wisdom that has been given him? What are these remarkable miracles he is performing? Isn’t this the carpenter? Isn’t this Mary’s son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren’t his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him.

Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home.” He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. He was amazed at their lack of faith.

Then Jesus went around teaching from village to village. Calling the Twelve to him, he began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over impure spirits. These were his instructions: “Take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals but not an extra shirt. Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.”

They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.

The Sermon:

We are all one. Every person on earth is made up of the same stuff. We are all one. Well, actually, when you consider there are different continents, there are actually six groups – Asians, Africans, Europeans, Australians, South and North Americans. And come to think

about it, We North Americans are much different than the others – especially the South Americans and Australians. I mean their water spirals the wrong way and their winter is during all the wrong months. And, actually, We Americans are much different than Canadians and Mexicans. But actually, now that I no longer live in Louisiana, I can tell you that you Texans do things much different than us Louisiana folk. You don't get 3 days off of school for Mardi Gras, for example. But I have been in Dallas long enough to be able to tell you that Dallasites act much differently than most of Texas. But now that I say that, I realize that I'm different than a lot of people in Dallas. For one, I'm Unitarian Universalist. I don't believe Jesus is my only access to salvation. I know that we were born good and miraculously holy, not depraved and destined to hell. But I'm not much like some of you in the congregation either. I mean, I pray twice a day, and I'm a vegan. I don't like scary movies or classic rock. But at least I've still got my wife – Lauren, who I adore greatly. Especially after exchanging our vows, we are one. But, you know, she really loves baking. She measures things out precisely to get the perfect dessert, and that's not me. I'm more of a cooker. I love throwing things into pot and tasting it while it cooks till it's perfect. Well, at least I've got me. I mean at least I'm one with myself. Well....that is except when night-time Nathan decides he can stay up an extra half an hour watching tv, and he'll just pack his lunch for work in the morning. I can tell you this, sleepy-eyed, grouchy morning Nathan hates nighttime Nathan who never leaves him with a lunch packed.

That was a long way to say that while we all have similarities we are deeply and profoundly different from each other. Unitarian Universalism is unique in that we aren't connected by a creed or dogmatic belief structure.

We don't have any presumption that any two of us believe the same thing – maybe even within ourselves we disagree.

And if that's true, that no two of us believe exactly the same thing, then how can we get together to worship? How can we form a religious community if we aren't united by belief? For that matter, if we can't agree on things, then why gather? Why bother? Well, I think I know an answer to that, and I'll try and answer it through these two stories.

It was my brother, Aaron's, tenth birthday party. We were wrapping up a Saturday night sleepover. It was early Sunday morning and his friends' parents hadn't yet picked them up. We had an exciting Sunday ahead of us. The highlight for me was a trip to church. This was an event I loved – surprise, I know, a minister who loved church as a kid. There were a lot of people I really liked there, and I was excited about seeing them. And, of course, if we finished early, my Sunday School teacher would let us play Spoons – which I was really good at.

That morning, while waiting for Aaron's friends to be picked up, we decided to play a game of whiffleball in the backyard. It was the end of May in southern Louisiana, and it was just before the sun could heat up the water saturated air. It was a cool and soggy morning where everything smelled like dew.

I was in charge of picking the bases. This was a fairly easy task. Against the side chain-link fence by the herb garden was home plate. The kitchen window was first, the tree in the middle of the yard was second and the wooden fence that backed up to the Pepboys parking lot was third. I don't remember who pitched, but I hope it was Aaron seeing as it was his birthday.

When I was up to bat I actually hit the ball. Now let me stop to tell you all how this is honestly a miracle in and of itself. I was never known for my physical prowess or coordination. When I was a 3rd grade soccer player, I'm pretty sure they made up a position for me as a back-up to the goalie to keep me away from the ball.

But on this day, I hit the ball. And I hit it pretty good. I took off quickly with a plan to just barely graze past first on my way around to second. Well, as often happened to those of us in the clumsy tribe, my plan didn't quite work out. In fact, I ran straight through first base and into the kitchen where my mom was washing dishes.

I rushed into the bathroom with some pretty nasty cuts. My mom helped clean me up and started to get me to the doctor for stitches. "No!" I insisted. Now you should know that I am absolutely petrified of needles, and short of losing my hand, I'm sure that no argument for stitches would have worked. But in the particular case, I remember my argument for a butterfly bandage and against stitches was fueled by my not wanting to miss church. I loved the people who were there, and seeing them was the highlight of my week.

My family had plans for that day. Everything was going smoothly, and then suddenly, I ran straight through the window. This is not much different than life. I'm sure you all know the tired cliché "*when we make plans, God laughs.*" Regardless of how my family had planned, something outside of their control, my lack of coordination, got in the way. This completely changed the rest of that day.

As I see it, this was the day that was made for church. I ran through the window, I was broken, my house was broken, surely my parents were worried, and my brother's birthday was messed

up. We desperately needed healing. I'm willing to bet that I'm not the only one who came to church today broken – maybe after running through a window. I want you to know that you are welcome here. We celebrate you as a holy person in spite of your brokenness. No, scratch that. We celebrate you as a holy person with your brokenness.

What made church so appealing to me in that day of crisis is that I had already known the people there. I had relationships with them, and knew they cared about me. This was the place I went when I needed a comforting and affirming community.

The first and only time met Jeremy he was laying on his hospital bed. He was wearing a navy blue t-shirt and lighter blue shorts. He had dark curly hair and a thick Jamaican accent. He wouldn't make eye contact with me for the longest time. All he would do was stare out the hospital window – which was a pretty dreary sight. All he could see was the side of a building and an air conditioning unit. He looked absolutely wiped out, and the only thing on his bed was a tattered and worn bible open face down on the corner of the bed.

I was asked to come and talk with him as a chaplain of Parkland hospital in Dallas. He had just recovered from an exploratory surgery to evaluate if his cancer could be removed. The doctors had determined it had spread too far, and there was nothing more they could do. When he came to, they asked me to go in and sit with him.

I was extremely nervous, and felt out of my league. What could I say to a man who had just found out that he would die within a few months leaving behind four little children? I tried a few fairly lame attempts to talk with him, to pull him back into the room.

“Hi Jeremy, I’m Nathan, a chaplain here. I heard you might want to talk.” Nothing. “Well, I heard that you just got some pretty bad news, I want you to know I’m here for you.” Nothing. His gaze outside deepened with each failed attempt at connection. After my fourth attempt, I was sure he wanted nothing to do with me. I sat with him for another minute in silence when I noticed the Bible. I asked him what book he was reading. He turned and stared at me for what felt like a long time. “Mark” he responded.

“Would you like for me to read you from Mark” I asked. “Yes please” he responded. Admittedly, I was still new in seminary and my childhood as a Unitarian Universalist didn’t leave me with a tremendous amount of familiarity with the Bible. I knew a little about the Gospel of Mark from class, but I didn’t know which stories were there and which order they were in.

I started worrying about reading him the Bible. What if he sees me as an authority on scripture? If I read to him from the resurrection story, am I giving him hope that he will live on after death? If I read from the miracle stories will he believe that God will heal him? What if he doesn’t heal, will I have given him false hope?

All of these thoughts shot through my head in less than a few seconds. I collected myself and simply asked “Where do you want me to start?” “It doesn’t matter, just anywhere is fine.”

The bible’s print was tiny, and the pages were so thing it was hard to make out the words in the dim hospital lighting. I picked it up on the page he already had it opened to: Mark 6:6

Then Jesus went around teaching from village to village. Calling the Twelve to him, he began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over impure spirits. These were his

instructions: “Take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in your belts.⁹ Wear sandals but not an extra shirt.¹⁰ Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town.¹¹ And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.” They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.

Honestly, I had no idea what I was reading until I had read it. Each line was a surprise for me, and I didn’t have time to over-analyze it. I was fighting off tears trying to make it through Mark. In the middle of the reading, two doctors came in and offered to talk with Jeremy about his prognosis. He asked them to leave and come back tomorrow because a chaplain was reading to him from the Bible.

Now look, friends, I’d be lying if I told you that this wasn’t a totally different view of the Bible than anything I’d ever experienced. My only relationship with the bible has always been neck up. The only context in which I knew scripture was when I thought about it, analyzed it to figure out what was literarily relevant, what they were actually meaning to say and all of that. I’d never known the Bible as something that can give us comfort at our darkest hour. When Jeremy ran through his kitchen window, this is what he turned to for comfort.

It’s no surprise that I tried to give him what had always provided me with religious comfort – community, relationship. I tried to heal him how I knew how, through my Unitarian Universalist upbringing. But for him what gave him comfort was just hearing the Bible read to him. And this made me wonder. What to turn to when I run through the kitchen window that last time? What

will give comfort when my body has given all it can give? Where will I turn?

As I meet you in this sanctuary today, we live in a fractured and segmented world. Many of us come here broken and wanting to be healed knowing that in the end, our bodies will fail, and we will leave this earth with nothing but the love we have freely given.

The advent of the internet has made it possible for us to be paradoxically more connected, and at the same time more isolated than any period in our history. It is too easy to live in camps of us and them. This tendency is perpetuated by our fear and our pain – and we all experience that – that goes on during our lives.

The beauty of Unitarian Universalism is that we don't mandate specific beliefs, specific groups. In fact the president of our association, Peter Morales, goes so far as to call belief the enemy of religion. He says that the concept of religion being about belief is a very modern and a very western idea. Most religions throughout history are more focused on how you act than your specific belief. Take Buddhism, for example. It has no specific belief mandate, but, rather, a practice for how to get in touch with the holy. While I'm not sure I will go as far as claiming belief to be religion's enemy, I do agree with him when he says:

True religion is about what we love, not about what we think. True religion is about being faithful to what we love. The key religious questions you and I must answer are these: What do we love so much that we are moved to tears? What gives us unspeakable joy? What gives us peace beyond understanding? What do we love so much that it calls us to action? What do we care about so deeply that we willingly, joyfully, devote our lives to it?

Right now, my friends, is the time for us to start practicing this true religion. I'm not so concerned whether or not you derive your inspiration from the Bible, from nature, or from meditation. We all have a two-dimensional understanding of a three-dimensional mystery, of god. We are gathered to be together through our joys and our struggles. We are here with you as you add your piece to our grand puzzle. We are here with you as you grow your spirit. When you run through that kitchen window, when your plans are messed up, when you are in your dark time, know that you are not alone. You are loved, and we are here to comfort you. This my, my friends, beyond what your specific belief is, is why we gather. It is why we are here.

Amen