

“The Free Pulpit”

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The free pulpit is something we as Unitarian Universalists hold dear. It is central to how we operate and yet it's cloaked in a kind of surly ambiguity. Is it just free speech with a grand place to put your notes and the assumption of an audience? The simple answer to that is no. But let's talk about why and what it is, if not free speech with a side of church architecture.

The story starts a long time ago, before this country was founded. In the year 1568, King John Sigismund of Transylvania, the only Unitarian of all the European monarchs, signed something called the “Edict of Torda.” The edict said this about the free pulpit: “Preachers everywhere are to preach the gospel according to their understanding of it...Let no superintendent or anyone else act violently or abusively to a preacher.”

Fast forward three quarters of a century, when the white settlers fled England and landed in the colonies of New England. In 1637 those settlers, who lived in what would become Dedham, Massachusetts, wanted to start a church. Rev. Erika Hewitt describes it this way: “what they longed for was sincere religious association based in love, and founded in freedom.

The idea of a free church took shape among the people—a church whose individual congregations were controlled by no outside authority; a radically lay-led church gathered by mutual consent rather than mutual belief, founded in covenant rather than creed, and governed by the congregation itself. Ten years later, this basis for gathering and governing was described in the Cambridge Platform, which remains a defining document for...Unitarian Universalists” writes Hewitt.

That foundational agreement established a pair of commitments, which are bound to each other: freedom of the pulpit and freedom of the pew. They exist in a tension that aims to create balance, like two weights on the scales of justice.

In simple terms, they mean this: freedom of the pulpit dictates that no one can control, limit, or influence the minister's call to tell the truth both in their preaching and in the rest of their work. And freedom of the pew dictates that no congregant is required to agree with the minister. And because the congregation is

self-governing, it is not obligated to keep the minister. See, this relationship between clergy and congregation is voluntary, it is a commitment we make freely.

And just as the pew is a symbol of the congregation's part in this balanced relationship, the pulpit is the symbol of the minister's part in the relationship. For, as has become abundantly clear in the last year, church is not a place, this thing we're building is not made of wood and plaster.

And the call to stand apart and tell the truth, that's not about a place or a piece of furniture either. It's a way of existing in relationship with my integrity, my spiritual center, my heart, my imagination of what could be and my clarity about what is. That isn't bound by place or Sunday morning.

The UU Church of Waynesboro describes it this way on their website:

“These freedoms require that ministers commit to preach their truth in the light of love and that congregations not merely seek agreement from their minister but also accept the minister's responsibility to challenge them – all in the context of the individual's right of conscience and the mutuality of love.

When Tara came and preached for us in September, she spoke of how the word “freedom” comes from the word freya, meaning friend. Quite the opposite of meaning ruthless unbound individualism, freedom is about the fullness of being in relationship, the opposite of isolation. Freedom is the exhale of knowing your community will show up for you when you need them.

So, no, the free pulpit is not a place we stand to speak our minds without recourse, not a fancy kind of free speech housed behind polished mahogany. It's a relationship held in balance, born of courage and a commitment to a faithful and honest life. This is the commitment of ministry, one that we make to the congregations we serve, to our colleagues, and ourselves. As I said when you ordained me a month ago:

With a deep sense of gratitude, joy and humility, I take up the ministry to which you ordain me. It is a mantle that is both heavy and honorable. Mindful of its responsibilities and privileges, I promise to serve faithfully, knowing that ministry is something we do together. I will live each day of my life ever mindful of this charge and the trust you have placed in me.

It is a mantle that is both heavy and honorable. And just as congregations can

remove members who do significant harm, the UUA can remove ministers who do significant harm. Because remember, freedom is about relationship building, it's about the spaciousness that comes with being loved and known.

Being a Unitarian Universalist minister means being held to professional ethics standards, collegial covenants, and the certification process run by the UUA that we call fellowship. Quite the opposite of being something without boundaries, the free pulpit is held in strictest covenant. As the minister's association writes in our professional guidelines "the pulpit carries institutional power and credibility that should not be lightly dismissed."

Here's why I think this is important to underscore: ministers can do profound harm. We're granted a kind of symbolic and institutional power that gives us extraordinary access to people's lives and it comes with the expectation that we can be trusted. This means that the harm that we do is magnified by our power. It means, for example, that ministers cannot have romantic relationships with congregants because consent is not possible in this power differential.

It is a dangerous thing to confuse the role of minister and congregation, to pretend that being congregational means that the minister has no specific authority or exclusive role. It's when we forget the boundary, forget the commitment, that harm can occur, and those two freedoms: of pulpit and of pew cease to hold each other in balance.

So no, the free pulpit is not freedom of speech with a dose of church furniture. It is something both more profound and more pervasive than that. It is a commitment to live squarely within the bounds of love and integrity, to know my congregation and to tell the truth.

As I read in the beginning of our service
Commitment includes three Latin word roots:
com – together, mit – to send, and ment – a result.
This shapes an idea that commitment is not
experienced in isolation but with others and with all
parts of ourselves.

The free pulpit is not license to say whatever one wants without consequence. The pulpit isn't the news, it's not the history channel, it's not a diary, it's a category unto itself. It's a commitment to be in relationship with truth telling, both with our congregation and with ourselves.

But we are also universalists and our truth is not one of damnation and terror. So it's a certain kind of truth. A truth born of a spiritual commitment to our covenant, to our sense of what is good and kind and sacred. It's a commitment to tell the truth in order to heal the world, not to harm it. A commitment to tell the truth so that we might build a more loving community. As ministers our most fundamental commitment is to do no harm. That is the foundation upon which everything else must be built, or it will all crumble

Similarly, your being part of this congregation is not something you step into and out of when you come through our doors - physically or digitally. This collective of caring and leadership and being in community, it's not a thing that comes and goes, at least I hope it doesn't.

Likewise, freedom of the pew and being a body that governs itself means that the congregation - the gathered community - is responsible for who is given this access, this power, this mantle of ministry. Remember, it's you who ordained me. No one else. Yes, the UUA vetted me and Yale trained me, etc etc. But only a congregation has the authority to ordain a minister, to sanctify our commitment to the free pulpit by exercising your freedom of the pew. Our commitments exist in balance.

When people ask me how to write a sermon, my response is generally: show up with your whole self and tell the truth. Which is to say: this kind of speaking is born from one's center, one's courage, one's inner compass.

As the Rev. William Ellery Channing said in our reading:

I call that mind free which resists the bondage of habit, which does not mechanically copy the past, nor lives on its old virtues:

But which listens for new and higher monitions of consciences, and rejoices to pour itself forth in fresh and higher exertions.

I call that mind free which sets no bounds to its love, which, wherever they are seen, delights in virtue and sympathizes with suffering

This is the commitment I make to you. I will show up with my whole self and tell the truth. For that is the free pulpit.

And I ask in return that you hold dear your commitment to the free pew. That you listen to the call of your own integrity, your free mind. That your care for this community, your leadership, and your spiritual seeking not be limited to Sunday morning.

Because we're not talking about the furniture, the pulpit and the pews, we're talking about a pair of commitments that hold our congregation and each other in loving balance.

Amen.