

FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF DALLAS
WELCOMES SPECIAL GUEST MINISTER

REV. RUTH MACKENZIE

**“Stepping into Risk
and Landing in Trust”**

Sunday, February 2, 2025
In-person worship at 9:30 and 11 am
Online worship at 9:30 & 11 am and 7 pm CST

I said to myself, "I wouldn't want to be anywhere but here." And it was the day after the election, and I was heartbroken. I had walked around most of the day like a zombie, doing what zombies do, eating lunch, taking the dog on the walk, ignoring the pundits. And now, here I was sitting in this circle of men in a dingy room, a makeshift altar placed in the center of our circle while a fake candle flickered on and off because the battery was just about shot. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else but here, I thought.

I teach a class called Beyond Grief and Loss at a state prison where I run this class. And in prison, everything gets stripped down to its bare essentials. The weather doesn't matter. All formulas of success and failure don't matter. The election doesn't matter. Whoever is a president is a president, it doesn't matter. What does matter is authenticity, trustworthy connections matter, a cellmate that you can get along with, a couple of friends who you can commiserate with, at least one or two family members who have stuck by you, books that keep your mind working matter, a journal, if you're lucky, matters.

And in our grief and loss circle, this is the question that matters. What are you willing to risk to repair your life? Over and over I witness these men do very risky things in a very scary place. Talking about friends cut down in a gunfight and openly weeping, trying to figure out how to tell a beloved mother that you were abused by her brother, that your crime didn't come out of nowhere. Grieving over a tooth lost in a bar fight, or the loss of childhood innocence. Grieving over the real hurt you've done. Holding yourself accountable for the real wounds you have inflicted. And at the same time, holding space, a sense of compassion for yourself.

Trusting there just may be a way through even though the ground is wobbly and you're not quite sure where the doorway is. Over and over again, the men in the grief circle are risking big things in order to feel what clean pain feels like. Not dirty pain where you strew it all over everyone and everything around you, but clean pain. To actually feel it, to hold it tenderly and fiercely, to navigate the trauma of their lives differently. Risk and trust are the two essential food groups for feeding your soul and transforming your life. That is what I bear witness to every week at the prison. I can't stop thinking about these men. They stay with me long after classes are over. They inspire me with their bravery to step into great emotional and spiritual risk and somehow land in trust.

In the grief and loss circle we learned that grief is a sacred pathway to healing. Not something to be avoided, but in fact, embraced. Grief is a way by which we, as human beings, transform our suffering into fertile ground. The men learn to trust what doesn't quite make sense to them, that which seems illogical, ridiculous, crazy by measure of most of our culture, and yet makes for human flourishing. They start to trust themselves in a whole new way. Now, most of us think of trust as something that is built in grand gestures, someone saving your life or someone rushing to a bedside, and certainly that is true. But social science research says that trust is actually built in very small moments.

That's what researcher and social science guru, Brené Brown, says, and Dr. John Gottman, another researcher on relationships. Trust is built in very small moments. Brown gives these examples. When you ask people, who do you trust and why? They say things like, "Yeah. Well, I really trust my boss because she even asked me how my mom's chemotherapy is going." Or, "I trust my neighbor because when something's going on with my kids, no matter what she's doing, she'll come over and she'll help me figure it out." Turns out we really trust people who attend funerals. Think about that. I think that's true, actually. Certainly, trust built in very small moments has proven true in my prison work.

I hand out these small little journals in which the men write during class and then hand them back at the end of each class. And in one of our second or third meetings, a guy leaped through the pages and said, "Hey, you didn't write any comments in my journal", unlike the homework assignments on which I comment all the time. Yeah. I said, "I don't read your journals. I want you to have one place where you can be absolutely honest, so I don't look at them." In a place where everything is scrutinized and examined, bodies strip-searched, all correspondences opened, every aspect of life observed, holding their journals as a sacred correspondence they are having with themselves, their private space, is a small but monumental gesture of trust. "Thank you", he said, catching his voice and we all understood we were landing in trust.

Now, Brown teases out the building blocks of trust as acts of BRAVING, an acronym she developed to describe the tenants of trust. And I would add building our capacity and skill as risk-takers. She talks about these elements of trust as measurable, observable behaviors and describes them with this acronym, BRAVING. Boundaries, I can only build trust with you when you are clear about your boundaries and you hold them, and you understand my boundaries and you respect them. "There is no trust", she says, "Without boundaries." Reliability, you do what you say you're going to do, not

once, but over and over again. And I do what I say I'm going to do over and over and over again. That means being clear about our limitations, about what we can and cannot do.

When we're not honest with ourselves or others about our capacity to follow through, our reliability tank will always be riding on empty. She uses this example, which I am totally guilty of. I meet someone on the street that I haven't seen in a while, and I am genuinely excited about this serendipitous meeting, and I say something like, "It's so great to see you. I'll give you a call and we're going to meet up for coffee soon." Even though I know full well that I am so busy that phone call probably isn't going to happen for four or five months. My enthusiasm gets the better of me and my reliability, my trustworthiness takes a hit. Better to say, "Man, it is so good to see you." And just absorb that awkward pause and leave it at that.

Accountability, when you mess up, you own it. You apologize, you make amends. And you extend the same grace to me that when I mess up, you allow me to apologize and make amends. The vault, what you share with me I hold in confidence. I'll often say, when speaking with friends who know both my spouse and me, "I hold what you say in confidence. That means this stays between you and me. And if you want Rebecca to know, you'll just need to tell her yourself." Another aspect of the vault that Brown points out is making sure that you don't participate in gossip or trying to build connections with someone by being negative or gossiping about somebody else. "Hey, did you hear about Monique and her divorce? What a mess. I think her husband's cheating on her." This kind of talk may feel good in the moment, it may feel like connection, but it's actually fraudulent trust.

Integrity, I cannot trust you unless you act from a place of integrity and you encourage me to do the same. In Brown's definition, integrity is choosing courage over comfort, doing the right thing over what's fun or fast or convenient. And practicing your values, not just professing your values. Non-judgment, I can only build trust with you if you accompany me when I fall apart, when my heart aches and I'm needing help, and you meet me with non-judgment. And I show up the same way for you. Brown points out that this is super hard for most of us because most of us are much more comfortable being the helper than the helpee. That your self-worth comes from being the helper, but always assuming the position of the helper does not foster trust. Trust is built on mutual vulnerability, on being human with one another in our struggles and our shortcomings, and having someone to turn to who will meet us in non-judgment. Always being the helper does not build trust. Ouch, that one hurts.

Generosity. Our relationship is not a trustworthy relationship unless you can assume the most generous things about my actions or my words, and you check in with me. She gives this example. It's been a month since your father's death and you've talked about this with your friend as something you're dreading and struggling with, and he knows it's a big deal for you. Yet, there is no phone call or text or anything on the anniversary date. So, you give your friend a call and say, "Hey, I know you've got a lot on your plate, but I wanted you to know that that one month anniversary of my dad's death has passed and I didn't hear from you. I know you're holding a lot and I need you to know I missed it... That you missed it, and it's been on my mind." That's a generous kind of trust.

These are the tenets of trust. They are the measurable, observable ways we can understand trust. So, maybe instead of saying, I don't trust you anymore, or I don't trust that organization, you can break it down a bit and actually get at what broke trust and how might trust be repaired. You know you keep telling me you're going to do something and you don't follow through? It eats away at my trust. You're not reliable to me. Now, you may be asking yourself right now, what does this have to do with anything? The world has been turned on its head, cruelty is worshiped, dominance is glorified, everything is on sale, vulnerability is dangerous. Things that we assumed are agreed upon norms of governance are being twisted into some kind of funhouse mirror images of themselves.

What is there to trust? Where do we go from here? In the prison environment I can make some of the same observation. The world gets turned on its head, cruelty is everywhere, everything is on sale, dominance is glorified, vulnerability is dangerous. The rules for living on inside and living on the outside are some kind of funhouse mirror images of themselves. And so, I'm paying attention to the risks taken and the small moments of trust that actually make a difference and transform lives. I'm trying to be attentive to what builds a trustworthy community. How can I be an attentive and generous companion to prevent a thread or two of the social fabric from unraveling?

I'm trusting the small scale gestures that can have large scale impact. I'm often trusting in that which does not make sense, that seems illogical, ridiculous, crazy by the measures of most of our culture. That the small is huge and the tiny is vast. I ask myself, I ask the men, I ask you, what are you willing to risk to repair your life? What are you willing to risk to repair communities? What are you willing to risk to repair democracy? How will you, how will we move forward despite the wobbly groundlessness of we don't know? I, for one, will risk grief. I will welcome it into my heart as often as it arrives. For grief is my human capacity to transform suffering into the fertile ground of spiritual depth and for doing the next necessary right thing. Being in relationship with grief creates a strong back and a tender heart for what was, what is and what is unfolding, and we will need that, my friends.

I will be using the tenets of BRAVING writ large to assess, where will I place my trust in communities and leaders? Are there clear boundaries? Are they reliable? Accountable? Do they understand trustworthy communications? Do they come from a place of integrity? Are they grounded in generosity? This place, First Church, is a trustworthy community. I experienced it two years ago in the time I spent with you, and I feel it now. You are BRAVING in all kinds of ways, and I speak about you all the time to my people up north. I say, "Hey, no bad-mouthing Texas. There is a lot of great people down there just doing a lot of heavy lifting. So, yay Texas."

I know I can't do everything, but I will put my energy, my money, my actions towards social and political frameworks that make for human flourishing. And I will use this framework of BRAVING to take stock of what and how and the why of what I'm doing. Do I have clear boundaries? Am I reliable? Am I generous? I will do my best not to succumb to cynicism and numbness. But instead, center love and choose to put my tangible, trustworthy energy there. Trust what you cannot see, the poet says. And I will add, lean into your BRAVING. May it be so. And amen.

