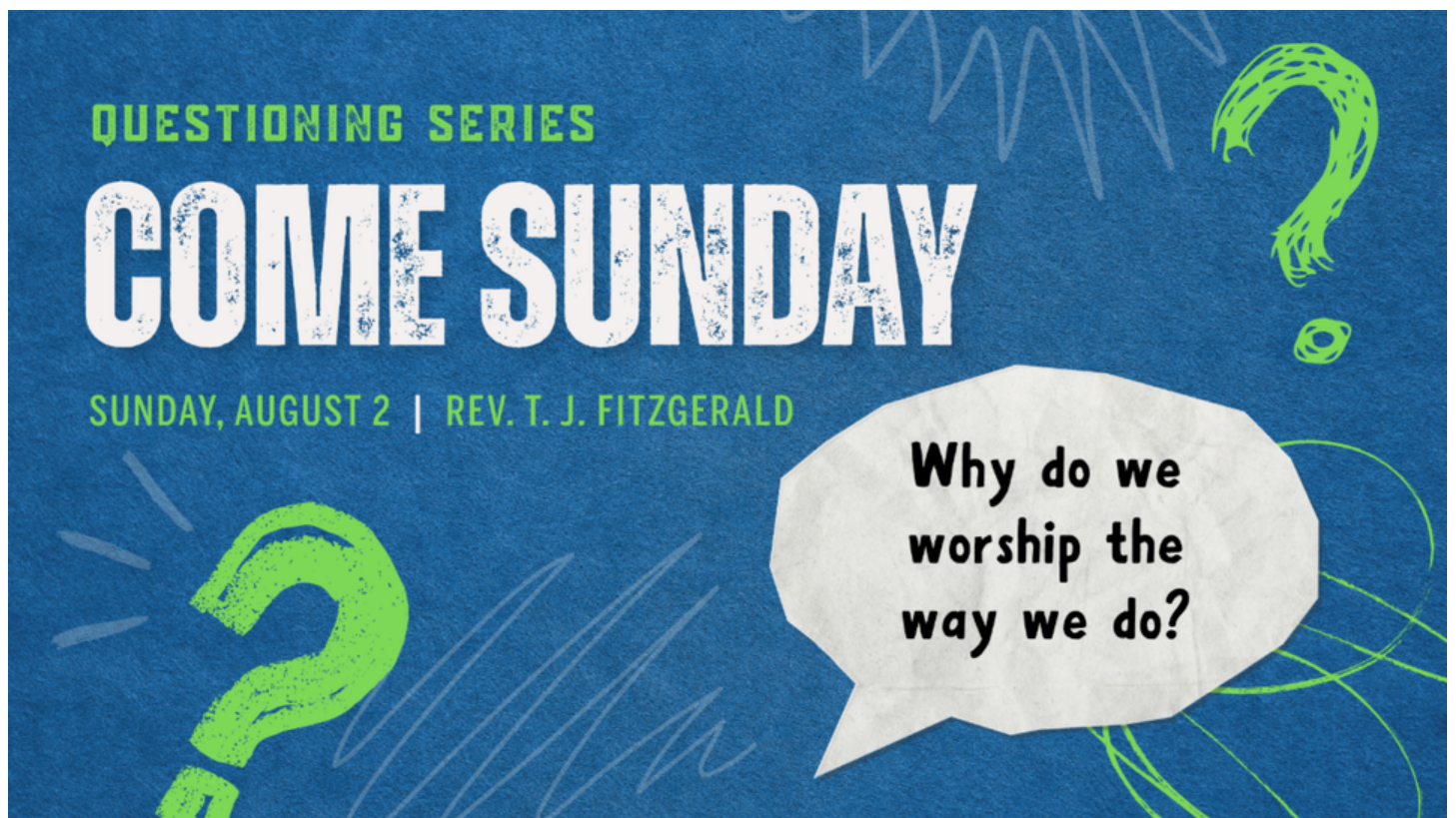




I know I was away a little bit, and one of my favorite things to do when I'm off, when I'm away, is to go to church. I need help, I know. But I like to go with my friends, which I can't really do here. I mean, we're friends, but it's different.

One of the problems with doing that, though, with going to other churches that I like when I'm off is that I already work at the best church I can think of. So it's tough to find one when I'm away. I remember talking to a friend about this once when I was serving our church in Honolulu, and I asked why he never came after years of friendship. I normally don't ask that, but I was just like, "Why wouldn't he just come and see what I do, do my thing, see church?" And he was clearly uncomfortable when I asked, and I thought he was going to say he'd had a bad experience in church and he just couldn't do it or just didn't like church or something like that.

But he said, "I just don't want to see you jumping around up there and talking in tongues." Well, I was taken a little aback by that. I asked what gave him the idea that every Sunday for years of our friendship, that's what I was doing on Sunday morning. He said, "Well, I grew up in church." I was like, "All right, well, tell me about your church." He goes, "Just like six families were all related, a family church. And the leader was one of my uncles, one of my relatives. And he would get up there, lead worship, and have charismatic expressions of his faith. He'd speak in tongues, and he'd dance and jump up and down." And he just didn't want to see me do that. I was like, "Why? I'm good at it." No, I'm kidding.

So I said, "No, listen, man. At my church, we sing a few hymns. We have lovely music. We have some readings and some prayers. I preach a little bit, and we have coffee." He's like, "Oh." He said, "Oh, okay. Well, that just sounds boring." You cannot win for losing sometimes, friends. You really can't. But I never would have known if I didn't ask. And asking is what we're doing today, as we

talked about with their young people and the story. And what we're going to be doing over the next few weeks is this series where we answer the questions that you have asked.

Months ago, we sent out some links in a few weekend emails and asked also in our orders of service for you to fill out a form and ask whatever question you want of your ministers. And it turns out dozens of you did it. So we're going to do our best the next three weeks to compress those questions down and answer all of the ones we can to the best of our abilities. Between services, some people felt like they missed the boat. I was getting some more questions between services, so we'll see what happens with those.

But today, we're looking at questions around worship, around our faith, and our tradition, and how those play out in our lives. So the first is a very fun one. And the question was, why do our ministers wear robes? Do others? First, I'd say that between maybe 5% and 10%, if that, of Unitarian Universalist ministers robe in worship. So we're in a small group there because we keep it real up in here. Second, I guess I should answer that question by saying, I don't know what a robe is because what I am wearing is a gown. It's a gown.

Put on my gown on Sundays. I left my tiara in the other room. Specifically, this is called a Geneva gown, the way that it's stitched and how it looks here. You can call it a robe, which is fine. It answers to both, robe or gown. But these are academic gowns, actually. Some of the first academics in the world that we think of as an academic in the modern sense were faculty at Oxford and Cambridge in England, and they wore robes to differentiate themselves from the students and other people like that. And there were hoods and things like that that they would wear to signify their academic rank, in the way that our senior minister, Daniel, has three stripes on his gown that signifies that he has received a doctoral degree.

So these also help identify some of those things. So we come out of the Protestant Reformed tradition, which is when John Calvin departed his faith of his upbringing, of his French family, his Catholic faith. And one of the ways that he sought to have a new way of worship and in believing in Geneva, Switzerland was to show how important learning, and preaching, and interpreting the word was. And to show that the ministers wore academic robes instead of what they saw as a sacrificial priest in the Catholic tradition. So trying to draw that distinction about what the role of the person doing this really is.

And it was in that town square in Geneva, however, that Calvin had his final showdown with the indomitable, Michael Servetus, a physician who dogged Calvin by criticizing his work, by scrawling his own little criticisms of the idea of the Trinity that Calvin preached into Calvin's works on the Trinity, and then mailing them to Calvin over and over with all the errors scrawled in the margins. And this led to a heresy charge against Servetus. And Calvin convinced the town authorities there in Geneva, Switzerland to issue the death penalty to our Unitarian ancestor right there in the middle of the town square.

And there's a lesson there because all that Calvin did in his ideas of defending the doctrine of the Trinity and of his faith ended up dogging him for the rest of his life. He was run out of Geneva on a rail. Well, they didn't have trains yet, but you know what I mean. He was run out of his own little built theocracy. And the religious historian, Bruce Gordon, in his definitive work on the life of

Calvin, said that this act and the witnesses who saw it changed all of Europe's opinion about Calvin forever.

And so it was said that as much of a bulldog as Servetus was in life to Calvin, he was even more of a bulldog biting at his heels in his death. So I'm sure it gives Michael Servetus much joy to know this wherever he may be. And all of this wrapped up in a question about my little gown.

Now, what we are here, what we are talking about in this discussion about a death that occurred brings us to another question that was asked that plays out in worship here, but also in memorials of this church. What do we say about death here, and how does it calm us? It'll be easy. We'll do a summer series about questions. It'll be fun. You all coming in hot with these questions. Well, honestly, there is so much we say about death here.

I just did a memorial right here on this chancel yesterday afternoon for someone who had a very hard life, for someone who chose to end her life, her young life. And what we said about that death yesterday right here had everything to do. Everything to do with what her family felt should be said about her. How they saw the meaning of her life and the potential her life had to still do good in the lives of others, in the lives of this church who are struggling perhaps the way that she struggled, who are left loving her even now that she is gone. So much of the message the family wanted was that there is hope. They wanted people to know that there is a future for you even at the darkest points of your struggle.

And so, top of mind, what we say about death here is how its presence in life helps us to live our better lives. How it gives our lives meaning is what we say about death here. We don't preach. We don't hold or teach a shared idea of eternity here as a doctrine. I often think back to my longtime minister of my home congregation in New York, Forest Church. He was fond of saying that most ideas of heaven he hears sound like punishment for a good behavior. The winged angelic procession, and as lovely as harps are, I don't want to hear them for the rest of eternity.

But if heaven is adorned and, I don't know, crushed purple velvet and Prince and Jimi Hendrix are going to pay a set for a while, then we're talking. All right, let's talk about heaven. Calms me down to think about that. All this is to say that what we say most about death and what comes after is that we don't know for sure. No one knows for sure that it's a question. But I share this. I share with you now one of the readings that I love the most about death. It's from a physicist, Aaron Freeman, who wrote a piece called You Want a Physicist to Speak At Your Funeral.

You want a physicist to speak at your funeral. You want the physicist to talk to your grieving family about the conservation of energy so they'll understand that your energy has not died. You want the physicist to remind your sobbing mother about the first law of thermodynamics, that no energy gets created in the universe and none is ever destroyed. You want your mother to know that all your energy, every vibration, every BTU of heat, every wave of every particle that was her beloved child remains with her in this world. You want the physicist to tell your weeping father that amid energies of the cosmos, you gave as good as you got.

And at one point, you'd hope that the physicist would step down from the pulpit, walk to your brokenhearted spouse there in the pew and tell him that all the photons that ever bounced off your face, all the particles whose paths were interrupted by your smile, by the touch of your hair,

hundreds of trillions of particles have raced off like children their ways forever changed by you. And your widow rocks in the arms of a loving family. May the physicist let her know that all the photons that bounced from you were gathered in the particle detectors that were her eyes, and those photons created within her constellations of electromagnetically charged neurons whose energy will go on forever.

You can hope your family will examine the evidence and satisfy themselves that the science is sound, and they'll be comforted to know your energy is still around according to the law of the conservation of energy. Not a bit of you is gone. You're just less orderly. Amen.

But now comes the question as cheerful and as true, true as everything I just said is. How does it calm us was the question. Well, if we are grieving the death of a loved one, I hope you'll take our navigating grief class offered twice a year. I hope that you will come Tuesday to meet with Reverend Daniel and with Karen Stanton to talk about grieving. We take grieving very seriously at this church. Who here has taken our navigating grief class? Yeah. Talk to those people.

Because in that process, you'll learn a lot, a lot about the anxiety around death and how it comes because we do not get a chance as a people, as individuals in this culture to grieve properly, to grieve fully. Our society does not make the space. It just doesn't. And it is only grief truly that can calm us because the grief from death is the wage we pay for the love we have been given. Much of our own fears about death and what happens when we die come from what we've been told, what we choose to believe about what happens when others die.

So working now on developing a good practice of grief can help you to calm yourself about your own passing and others' passing, too. And this brings us to our next question. Is there a place for belief in a supernatural God? For some, questions about death are really, after all, questions about God, right? And for some, whether there is space here for belief in this supernatural God. Well, the short answer is that there is room for belief in many things, in your own faith and beliefs here. Whether that might translate into me, or Daniel, or Beth agreeing with your particular set of beliefs from up here is a separate question.

Hear this. There does not have to be agreement with an idea for there to be space to hold an idea. I'm going to say that again because we don't hear it enough in this world. There does not have to be agreement with an idea for there to be space to hold an idea. And I think this is actually more important to understand and to wrestle with at that core value than are the merits even of a belief in a supernatural God or not.

I know that there are people here who believe that Jesus rose from the dead and that Jesus is God and that God can work miracles. I know that. And though these beliefs are not in the core Unitarian theology, Unitarian tradition says that we respect the rights of others to hold beliefs distinct from ours with the important caveat that the person holding those beliefs is not harming others or the wider community with them.

This is one of the unique spiritual gifts of this church. When we are at our best truly as a faith, we can make space for different, even conflicting ideas, and work together still for a good, for a way, for a world that benefits all and leaves none out. It is the harder, deeper spiritual work to do that than to live an abject conformity elsewhere. I promise you.

Also, remember this in our reading about science. What our human ancestors thought were miracles, today, many of those miracles are just science. So it is with spiritual humility that we name what we call supernatural today. And yet do not undermine the human potential of funding science and scientists and not defunding science and scientists so that one day what might appear supernatural to us, to our ancestors to come, will be simple science. In fact, I'm a futurist, and I believe that is possible.

So then comes the question, we've studied all of this, we've talked about all of these things, but what do all these concepts we talk about here mean in other faiths? How are they translated? How is this close to the mainstream out there? How do these compare with other faiths? Is it close to the mainstream?

I want to say this first about religious leadership and the gowns that we're wearing. I think that your ministers who hold the sacred duty to companion this church, whether as senior minister, as the other ministers here, those of us who bear all that we bear for you and do it professionally, inspiring with the kinds of passion I have seen in other few places and with the tremendous love that your staff and your ministers offer you is on par with what it means to wear this robe and be rightly set apart from others because of it. I'm just telling you what I think.

So I think that core element of religious leadership in this church is mainstream, is like many others. I believe that is at the core of many churches of many faiths, that the people who lead them have the best intentions for you at their heart. At least I pray that for their sake. But hear this truth. It is good churches that make good ministers. I'm going to say it again because you need to hear it. Good churches make good ministers. So as important as it is what we do for you, what you do for each other, what you do for this world, how you treat one another, and what you make of this world from what you learn here, that it might be the best world is a tradition woven into every act that we take together as a community.

And that is why I think this is the best church. What we shared about how we speak about what it means to die might not be in line with other faiths. I know that might have a more concrete teaching about it, but this, I will say, I think what we say about death, how we look with humility at it, that we don't have final answers is in keeping with the mainstream of society at large. And I think you find that more often here than in some other churches because, in truth, there is no such thing on earth as a mainstream faith. There really isn't.

Just ask my friend who wanted to see me dancing around and talking in tongues. No such thing. And finally, the idea, once again, of making space for ideas different than our own. In a place that means a great deal to each of us, like we do here. I wonder every day whether this remains mainstream in this country or in this world anymore. I wonder if we have created so many bubbles and so many divisions and so many walls that we stand on other sides of, whether we even have lost the ability, those muscles to strain and hold intention, different ideas that we may not like. But the beauty of this place is that we welcome those ideas into a place as sacred and as holy as we hold this.

And that idea of difference, instead of conformity, is one of the most powerful pieces of our faith life together. And I don't think that is mainstream anymore. I wonder, in fact, if it's becoming more

radical every day. And so I believe that is important, which is why places that hold sacred, this tension between what different people believe and defend your rights to believe them are so important. And that's why places that teach the truth, that comfort comes through grief, through hard work, through a time of struggle, not around, not over, not through, not with simple answers or not under, not with simple answers, but with the work of going through are so important. Places that holds you through that process are so important.

The world, if you hadn't noticed, is hard on us right now. On people who love freedom, on people who count on the blessings of liberty in their lives. Daniel spoke last week about the reflexive vengeance we witness in the news on the roadways in Dallas-Fort Worth and sadly sometimes in our own lives, which is why there may not be a more important time or a more important reason for there to be someone up in front of you dressed in black. Because as the great Saint Johnny Cash of Arkansas said, "I wear it for the sick and lonely old, for the reckless ones whose bad trip left them cold. I wear the black in mourning for the lives that could have been. And I wear it for the thousands who have died believing that the Lord was on their side. I wear it for another hundred thousand who have died believing that we all were on their side.

Well, there's things that will never be right, I know, and things need changing everywhere I go. But until we start to make a move to make a few things right, you'll never see me wear a suit of white. And I'd love to wear a rainbow every day." Preach it, Johnny. "And tell the world that everything's okay, but I'll try to carry off a little darkness on my back until things are brighter. I'm the one in black.

Here endeth the lesson. May it ever be so blessed be an amen.