



The haters are going to love this sermon. All right. So, a little boy and a little girl were at recess. Little boy says to the little girl, "I'm an Episcopalian." That's the joke. No, I'm kidding. And the little girl said, "What's that?" The little girl says. The little boy says, "It's a denomination. It started when we broke away from the Church of England at the same time as America was breaking away from England. I'm an Episcopalian." "Oh", the little girl said, "I'm not an Episcopalian. I'm part of a different abomination." It's a joke. The Episcopalians can take it. They can take it.

It's a joke, actually, not mine. I didn't write it. It's by one of my. I promise. It's by one of my favorite writers, Anthony de Mello. He likes to tell that joke. Anthony de Mello was a Jesuit priest and born in British occupied India. And he lived through the separation of Pakistan from India and watched nationalistic and religious violence along that newly created border in 1947 that took the lives, many don't know this or remember of 15 million people in that time. And that experience in his youth helped shape the way of his work as a priest around denominations, and thinking that way may have also shaped the way he then became a psychotherapist, but that's for him to figure out.

His writing is filled with allusions to Buddhism, Taoism, other things for which the congregation of the doctrine of the faith after he died brought him up on some heresy charges. So, he's one of my favorites. The doctrine of the congregation of the faith heresy list is actually my reading list for this summer. So, if you'd like to take a peek at that. I say this, and I think about this whenever we talk about denominations, because to talk about denominations is really just to talk about division. It's to talk about labels, brands, and identity. It's the beginning of a conversation.

And so, we have to be careful that none of those brands, identities, labels, divisions ever become our faith. We're going to talk about that more because we're in our second week of First Unitarian AMA. Stands for Ask Me Anything. As Reddit would say, those of you who know what I'm talking about, I'm sorry for you. And this week, many of the questions are actually less about this church and more interestingly about Unitarian Universalism, our own little abomination. So, now every

denomination, as I said, is a sign of disagreement, of difference, of perhaps born yes, of passion or inspiration, but difference all the same.

I was taught actually that Unitarian Universalism is not a denomination at all. It is a movement of affiliated faith communities that share common values. It's good to be a little outside the denomination name. And this posture may be defined best because we operate here by covenant more than by any creed. In fact, we don't have a creed. Now, covenants can be mutual where both parties, both people, agree to do something together. There can also be one way where someone just says, "I'm doing something simply because it's who I am and it's what I do. And I will do this for you."

That is also a form of covenant. A creed is more like a contract, a pledge to do and believe something. Sometimes even when new information comes to light, a little bit of a difference. As a non-credal faith, as a covenantal faith, your partaking in this church's life is by covenant. So, is this church's partaking in the wider Unitarian Universalist movement. So, one of our questions was about covenant, so I thought this would be a good place to start. The real question about covenant was how does covenant work at our church? And that's easy. Just fine. Next. That's good. Works just fine.

I think these are my favorite words about covenant. We are a promise-making, promise-breaking, promise-remaking people. And that's just not Unitarians. I think that's humankind pretty much. In our church, we use covenants in small groups that have covenants. We use it in our pledges in ways that we use to support the church, in ways that we sign up to clean up at the lake or to give blood at the blood drive, all of these. And in so many other small and large, countless ways. Because what are we? What is covenant? But acting out our creaturehood of promise and hope.

Humans are creatures of promise and of hope, and covenants, large and small, are ways that we practice making those promises and keeping them. It's a way of holding onto hope in a world that doesn't have as much of it for some of us as it once did. So, more than any creed set in stone, we see covenant as the more honest and the more true way of being together. And covenant is also an answer to another question, how we relate to the Unitarian Universalist Association and the wider UU movement. And we'll get to that one after this one. Just bear that in mind. This question, when did the UUA become a thing? And how is it doing today?

Good question. The short answer is that in 1961, and it's doing just fine. But the word I was taught about the joining of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church in America was a consolidation, not a merger, consolidation. So, welcome to your consolidated movement here at church. I love my consolidated movement. I talk about it all the time. So, we are a movement that went through this consolidation starting in the middle, actually, of the 1800s.

You might not believe this, but in the middle of the 1800s was when we first started checking each other out, kind of seeing some things were the same, looking at other denominations that seemed kind of like ours. And so, the conversation between Unitarianism and Universalism had been going on for 140 years before it ever was finalized together. We just want you to know we take things slow here. We don't make any rash decisions. In the 1930s, though, the youth, always the youth of both movements tried to join together in a formal way. In the 1930s, the mid-1930s.

And though it was defeated then, eventually the two youth groups kept meeting together anyway

because you can't tell the youth anything these days, right kids? That's right. Because they went ahead and did it anyway. And before the UUA was ever formed, liberal religious youth was born in the 1950s. L-R-Y, otherwise known as little round yo-yos. To those of you. Okay, I'm hearing the old generation, you know. And so, before ever the UUA came to be, the youth led the way. As they so often do in so many ways, y'all should listen up. Okay. So, the first really serious meeting, though, between Unitarianism and Universalism came in 1959 in Syracuse, New York.

It was so cold, they just agreed to get it together and they got out of there. No, I'm kidding. So, what happened in 1959 is that they started to lay out a plan and the two groups discerned that plan together. And on May 12th in 1961, both groups decided that they would join together. And on May 12th, 1961, 65 years ago, the Unitarian Universalist Association was born. Now here are two stories you should know about that process. First, many think, many, many think the Unitarians and all their cache that they brought to it, all the transcendentalist awesomeness that they brought to the situation was really helping out the Universalists to carry the day.

But the truth is that the Unitarian Church in America was not quite in financial straits, but they weren't exactly killing it at the time. But that Universalist church in America, those heart-centered, love-preaching folk really loved something else. Sound financial planning. They really, really understood that. Oh yeah, don't let anyone tell you different. It was the planning. It was the finances of the universalist church in America that, when they joined together, created the real bedrock and foundation that could let the new movement thrive. So, that is how some of the beginnings started. But the most important thing to think about was how we got that name, Unitarian Universalist.

Oh, I tell you folks, there was a lot of worry. Am I going to be the noun? Am I going to be the adjective? Are we going to be Unitarian Universalists or Universal? Unitarians was going back and forth. It came time to make the decision, and then war broke out. The grammar war of 1961, there are veterans still in locked wards muttering to themselves, diagramming sentences on the walls. My diagramming sentence jokes don't always land. I can only push you so far into my nerd cave, but no, that's not really how it happened. What actually happened was one of the first Unitarian Universalist miracles and the last Unitarian Universalist miracle.

The two parties showed up and wanted the exact same thing, and there was no disagreement at all whatsoever, and it was done. And that's the truth. They both came up thinking their strategies of, oh, we're going to say Unitarian and maybe Univer... They had these strategies and they just put them forth. They both had decided the same thing. And hence, we have our name today. And today, the UUA is mostly an organizing and service organization. It organizes events and classes and responses that need a national lens. Our national leaders show up at important places and important times and helps keeps this group together.

And the other thing it does is it publishes a lot of things. The UUA owns Beacon Press, which is one of the finest publishers around and one of the only publishers turning a profit in our world today. So, more than half of the revenue of the UUA brings in, it comes directly from donations. And the second-largest source of revenue is publications, sales of books and other publications. That's right. The rest is from other small sources. But at last count, since you asked how we're doing, there's about 850 UU churches in the country. Only about half of them have any minister at all. And of only a handful have three ministers, right, Beth? That's right. We're keeping all the good ones right here. It's good.

Some of our members, actually, who are joining us virtually right now are members of smaller fellowships that are watching this service. And what they do is they view worship here, and then they have their coffee and fellowship after church. So, we're also reaching not just individuals in their homes, but larger congregations that are partnering with us. And honestly, if there's a church out there watching, I know there's one of you watching, doing that regularly. We want to hear more about you. And if you let us know that you're doing that, one of us, not going to say who, is going to maybe come and visit you. It'll be me. Yeah.

Just drop me a line. It'll be fine. Fill out a form. And so, now we come to an important question. What is the relationship between this church and the wider UU movement? Not just the UUA, the wider UU movement. Now, first and foremost, this church really is a leader in learning in the ways that it teaches about our own lived phase. The National and the International Ministry of Faith Development that Beth leads, called Faith Forward, is a tremendous good that touches the lives of UUs all over the country, all over the world. And it is something to be proud of. Thank you, Beth. Yes, absolutely.

We are also a leader in advocacy. We found and we help to grow organizations that can help to address challenges to the worth and dignity of our neighbors in a form of entrepreneurial ways of addressing justice concerns. Our commitment as a founding member to the Sacred Alliance of Communities for Reproductive Dignity or Sacred. Our founding of the Truth Pregnancy Resource Center. Founding of Wholly Informed Sex Ed that teaches sex ed around Dallas and in wider communities and more.

These ways of bringing thoughts and values and what is important to us to others helps to address the inequities that are present in the treatment of our human family and to teach us how we can better shape our own lives and our communities to align with values that help everyone in our wider community to flourish in their lives. That is what we want to do. And we regularly lend our pulpit right here to leaders of the UU movement. The UUA president has preached here recently. The head of the UU Service Committee, an international human rights organization based on UU values has preached here. And even our local UU staff member was here just a few months ago.

We try to share and to be in good covenantal relationship with the wider UU movement and the UUA. So, it is alive and well. Now here is the question we've all been waiting for. When did you all turn so LGBT? Oh, you noticed? Who's asking? No, I'm kidding. Look, sorry. At the core of our faith is the inherent worth and dignity of all. We call it at this church, original blessing, not original sin. The core of our faith. Many churches, many faiths don't take it as seriously as we do. I'm just going to be honest. They talk about it and we live it. That's the short answer, but here's the truth. They really want more people and more people and more people to come. I get it.

And they want those people, they see them truly all as God's children. I believe that. They want them to be welcomed. They want them to be loved. They want them to be present and they want them to give. Mm-hmm. And many of these faiths, they have a real tradition of welcome. It feels good. You go in, it's warm, feels good, all unfolding, loud music. And for our siblings who don't identify as straight, this all can seem wonderful at first. Right up until you volunteer to teach Sunday school. Or you try to join a fellowship that isn't open to you. Or heaven forbid, you try to get ordained. See, that's when the rug gets pulled out from under you.

That's when the tiny little texts of terror in Romans and in elsewhere with their horrible translations of Greek are trotted out. But say the same thing over and over, that folks who are told their whole lives, they are not a complete person and shouldn't be your full self are also told you cannot participate and be a full person here at this church either. That's what's happening. And we are not immune friends at this church. In 1967 after the consolidation, the entire membership of the UU churches were pulled. 80% of UUs thought that homosexuality should be discouraged. We were discouraged enough. We didn't need to do that. So, yeah, things happen fast.

As recently as the 1980s, even here at this church, there was a lot of discussion about becoming a fully welcoming church in the '80s. Yeah. Some people left because we did become a welcoming church. And some people joined because we did. It was a hurtful and painful debate. And those of you who made it through, I see you nodding and you remember it. No matter where you were on it, I am glad you are here still. And wherever anyone else went, I am glad they are there. But thank you for sticking with this church through the process.

But then after our decision here in the wider world in the '80s and the early '90s, the wider UU movement along with the world of medicine and psychology started to change their view of homosexuality as a choice, albeit a fabulous one, but a choice. Nonetheless, they started to see it as a core of when someone is born, who they are. And when the world saw how vile an administration was treating gay people suffering during the AIDS crisis, many in our movement said enough is enough. But more than that in this movement, many people said never again. That's right. And that cut two ways. I know that the embrace of full identities meant that some people left this faith.

They decided that covenant making was not for them here, but it brought others through these doors. And I am grateful for that forever. So, the real question for me in faith when we're talking about this question, when did we all become so gay? Gotcha. Welcome. Welcome. Whenever someone is considering any faith church as a home is asking the questions whether women, openly gay and openly trans people are not only able to be ordained, but are ordained clergy and are having successful ministries. We are proud to say that in Carrollton, our colleague Chris, a trans minister, is having a hugely successful ministry in Texas. And we give joy every day for it. Yeah. Hi, Chris.

But still on average, trans clergy, even in our faith, have shorter tenures at churches than any other groups, right? There is still work to do. So, maybe the question isn't when did we become so LGBT, but how can we become more LGBTQIA+ understanding, embracing, and loving? That's the real question for me. And then we have another question. How much do we teach traditional Jewish and Christian values? Now that's an interesting question. I want to ask, what does traditional mean? Usually when someone says traditional, they mean a set of historically accepted truths and teachings. Then often mean the good old days. But I have news for you in case someone has told you.

There is no such thing as the good old days for everybody. And this is historians teaching now, not just me. This is no such thing as the good old days. And certainly no one would argue that Judaism and Christianity and I'll add Islam, the three Abrahamic traditions, or as my philosophy of religion professor called them, the JCI tradition, aren't traditional faiths. They've been around a long time. But this tradition does have its core teachings that come from many of the shared writings, particular to these faiths or the writings shared among them. But we must remember where we

started, that these traditions also share what they share is how much they change.

Change is more a tradition in those faiths than the traditional ideas people think those faiths hold is. That is the whole reason there are sects. That is the whole reason there are denominations. Sometimes, people like to talk to Buddhism as this wonderful faith, and it is, that has this kind of unified idea. Y'all, do you know how many sects there are of Buddhism? Thousands of sex. And some of them are literally created over disagreements over a preposition. I mean, I can get behind that. I get it. As your diagrammer of sentences, I get it.

Even the Eastern Christian tradition and other Western Christian traditions are locked in this thing called the Filioque debate between in one of their creeds about of one substance of the father or is the father. This is not written. You're just getting the wealth of my nerd cave that is coming out to you right now. But literally, there are enormous denominations fighting over those things and are created over them. So, where was I? Now, these painful splits, they split families apart. They split churches apart. They play out on the world stage, as we heard at the beginning, to the tune of war at times. That is what we are talking about.

And that is the risk of holding any tradition so tightly that you'll kill over it. So, when someone asks how much we hold to traditional teachings, I think it's more fair to say that we do learn from the traditions, but we also acknowledge that the work of scholars, of theology, the work of historians, the work of archeologists, the work of other disciplines to help discern factual truth from the real spiritual truths that are at the core of those teachings. Remember that Jesus was not a Christian. He was a rabbi, a Jewish man. And we focus more how we might live the values shared by the stories about Jesus here than we concern ourselves with traditions that arose just to venerate Jesus or other saints, except Dolly Parton may her holy presence reign forever.

And St. Beyonce, sorry, I forgot you. You guys are the best. We focus more on the core of Christian messages, which is radical community changing love. So, I think it might be helpful to summarize, and you all have put up with so much today. The many different wide ways I have spanned in what I have done here, which is a little elevator speech for us. We teach an elevator class speech as part of Faith Forward. It's about to start. It's about to start. You should sign up for the Elevator Speech. And you too might have something like this to say about our faith. Covenant, which formed the foundation of the earliest Jewish communities, helped to shape the laws of this land.

And the mercy and community concern shared throughout the Christian scriptures teach us that our UU faith, our super gay UU faith, labors as much in these walls and in these hearts as it does in the walls and the hearts of UU communities and believers everywhere to make and make and break and then remake the promise of this bold faith to build up all in our midst with a dignity that is not deserved, that is not earned, but that is holy and blessed and each one of us from creation. That the very best we can be in this world is to love one another and to love ourselves. I hope that these questions and my responses have sparked more curiosity.

And I hope that this week, you will write down all of those questions and send them to Beth. She will answer them all next week in the sermon.

So, the same little boy and girl came in from recess and it was time for show and tell. And the teacher had asked everyone to bring something with them to show the class about their faith. And so, the little Episcopalian boy held up his book of common prayer and said, "I'm an

Episcopalian. This is my book of common prayer. We use it to understand our faith better." And he sat down. And his friend, the little girl got up and sort of turned around and started setting something up on the desk.

And she finished and everyone was kind of peeking around like, "What is she doing?" And she stepped aside and it was a coffee maker. And the teacher said, "But I asked you to bring something about your faith tradition to tell us." And she said, "I'm Unitarian and this is a coffee maker." May it ever be so, blessed be, and amen.