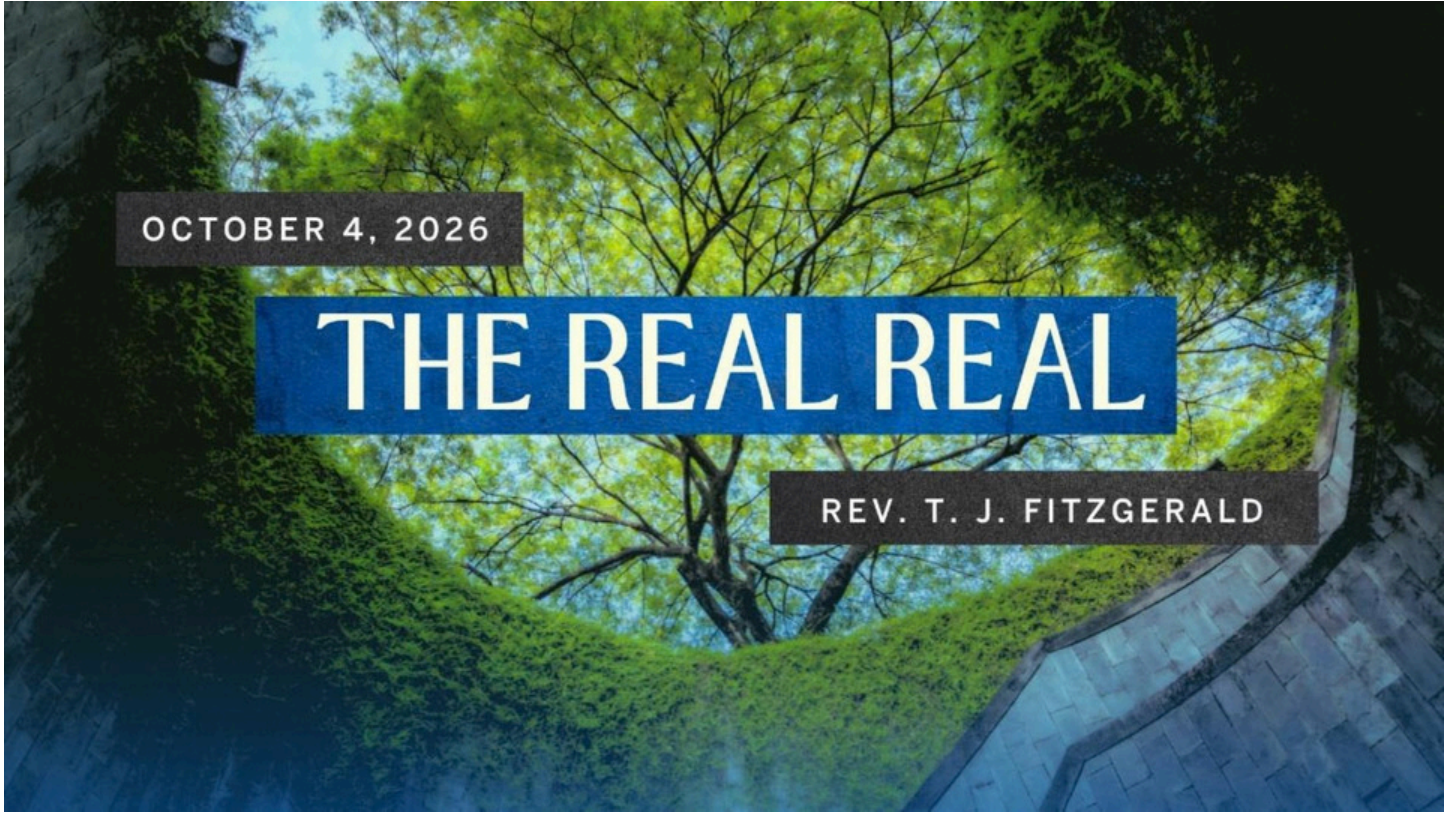




OCTOBER 4, 2026

THE REAL REAL

REV. T. J. FITZGERALD

One of the things, I think one of the very first things they tell you in preaching class in seminary is do not, do not talk about your golf game to your congregation. Don't do it. So one afternoon I was playing golf with my friend Joe. Sorry, Tom. I was playing golf with my friend Joe. You could call it playing golf, I got out of the cart, I dressed my ball and shanked it into heaven knows where, unrecoverable, and I headed back to the cart, somewhat annoyed with myself. And in doing so, I misjudged my entry vector into the cart and hit my head and scraped it there on the roof of the golf cart.

Now, my friend Joe and I had known each other since our 20s in Manhattan. We had both somehow ended up in Honolulu together around the same few months we arrived there. And so it was wonderful to reawaken that friendship there in Honolulu in our mid 30s. My experience of him was as a wise, shrewd investor in New York, a real estate broker and a cuttngly funny man. He played pickup hockey, just like a jock and very funny. And so when I banged my head, I was a little shocked to feel a hand on my head that started rubbing my booboo and hearing the words, "Aw buddy, are you okay?" But not mocking me like usual, but sincere.

I looked up at Joe like I had never seen him before. And he looked at me like I caught his hand in the cookie jar or something and we both had a good laugh, and I've never let him forget it. See, Joe had recently become a dad and his kid was in toddler phase and a wholly beautiful but holy terror, bumping into tables and TV stands. There was bumpers on everything at his house. And he'd clearly become more sensitive in his mid 30s to the pain of others, including his bumbling friend. Without a thought, he winced with me. He touched and rubbed my little booboo and tried to make me feel better. And I saw that part of him that I had never seen before or since actually. Hi Joe.

Aren't humans just the best? I actually have this theory that the internet was created only for videos of humans scratching behind the ears of animals that had never had that done to them before. If you have not seen or heard the sound a donkey makes when a human gets real good right behind their ears, I'm sorry you have not lived and I feel for you. [inaudible 00:03:42]. That's my best audience. She's laughing.

Everyone should have one of these books. If you don't have them, they're on the way out as you exit. If you already have one, that's great. Take one and give it to a friend. We have spent weeks of our lives creating this book for you that details every sermon, every sermon series, many of the things that are going to happen throughout the year. We've made it through the first sermon series and we're now in our second sermon series, and this is the beginning of it, and it's called Truth, Healing, Reconciliation and Transformation. So you can read more about the sermons upcoming in this. So this is the first sermon in that series. So we're going to be talking about truth and how we get to it in our lives.

When we were planning this year for worship, we did it a lot with our new inaugural fellow in community history, Jerry Hawkins. And he shared about how this framework of these four elements that we're exploring in this series were helpful in organizations that were reckoning in fact with many things, but primarily with their own history in racial equity or inequity around Dallas and around other places. And so we took this framework and we started to think about what it meant for us as people. And the first task of any group of people, of any person really undertaking this work, is to really think about how we get to truth in our lives. The truth about how we act, the truth about who we really are, the truth about what our shared history is. Yes, all of those are important and can be demonstrably shown somehow.

But getting there, getting there takes a sense of openness or a sense of trust, a sense of community spirit. And it's something hard for us to do, is to practice vulnerability. We heard about it in this reading when David White says, "The only choice we have, the only choice we have as we mature is how we inhabit our vulnerability. Will we be growing and growing in it as a strength or will we be misers? Will we be scared? Will we never barely or completely attempt to enter, never wanting to risk ourselves?" And he says, "Never fully walking through the door, just staying on that threshold."

When I read those words, when I heard them, I thought immediately like all good Unitarians of Mary Oliver. And I thought about her poem about prayer.

It doesn't have to be the blue iris.

It could be weeds in a vacant lot, or a few small stones.

Just pay attention.

Then patch a few words together.

And don't try to make them elaborate.

This isn't a contest but the doorway into thanks, and a silence in which another voice may speak.

The silence in which another voice may speak. Now, some might think this is a otherworldly voice that you're waiting for from on high, some inspiration, some voice that speaks to you, but I'm not so sure that's what it is. In the hymn, most of us sang, yes, I could see some of you not singing Precious Lord, that's fine. We are all about consent at this church. But just recall that that hymn was the dying wish of Dr. King, that it be sung, in his words, "Sing it pretty." His dying words to his friend, that it be sung at his memorial. And I think it's important that we sing that more often sometimes than just when we remember his birthday. At the river I stand. Guide my feet, hold my hand. Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home.

Interesting they say, take my hand, hold my hand twice. And I know in many of us, these words are not entirely comfortable. Lord and take my hand and standing by the river, that they have a bit of a gendered feel maybe or as other hymns we have that has that. It's just not true to our understanding, and I get that. It's not true to how we practice our faith. In a sense, these words are not real to us for that reason. So let's get real. There's very little, it's hard to say this as your minister, but there's very little in the world that I hear about God that I think is actually true. Just physical manifestations and speaking to people and deciding if I'll get a parking space, that's a big one. Or just witnessing the horrors in the world. How can it be true so much that people say about God when so much we see is happening to people around this earth?

As it happens, the primary definition of God in Webster's Dictionary, again, a rule of sermonizing, don't quote people the dictionary, but here we go, one of the first definitions is literally objective reality. It's more horrifying than any other definition of God I've ever heard, I have to accept reality? Gosh, God. Or what they mean is what's really real. And as much as we can think about God, as much as we can fantasize or do this or what, ultimately in our lives, who are we actually dealing with? Other people. And what did Sartre say about other people? Hell is other people. That's right. People read your Sartre. Welcome to First Unitarian. That's right.

Here in the last quarter of this year as your ministers, every year, we know that you are facing a few things. One, is deciding where and with whom you are going to spend your holidays, and we feel for you. We have lots of conversations about strategies, about speaking with family and friends over the next few months. And the other thing that happens every few years around this time is electing our future leaders and conversations about doing that with our family is just a special treat that we all have in store for us.

Life can just feel a little unreal at times. We think to ourselves, how could someone possibly do or say that? How on earth can someone believe that? What kind of monsters are they? Not our family. I get it. Dr. Tara Brach wrote a book called Radical Acceptance. I commend it to you. And she uses her Buddhist faith to help readers widen their compassion and understanding of others. She was raised Unitarian naturally, to no one's surprise when you read it because her book is filled with references to the inherent worth and dignity of others.

In it, she says this, "Our immediate response of attraction and diversion of interest or inattention is part of our biological programming for survival. How a person looks, the way they smell and speak, alert us to whether or not they are from the same tribe. When we're trapped in this biological trance, we can only read behaviors and opinions as signs of friend or foe. While this

evolutionary conditioning to perceive difference is powerful, we also have the capacity to relax our armor. We can learn to see our shared vulnerability and realize our belonging with all beings."

When I read this the first time and maybe even the second or third, something jumped out at me and it still does. It is that line about armor, the image of this protection many of us have to have in this world. Now, don't answer out loud, this is for inside your mind, but think about it, what's your armor? What's your protection against so much that we see in the world? What do you use to keep yourself from disappointment or pain? How do you resolve not to be wounded in this world like so many have been in the past?

Now, think of someone you really dislike. Just get it in your head. Someone you think of maybe as a monster. Think of how they deal with challenges and adversity. Think about what lengths they've gone to keep themselves safe. What armor do they take on to repel responsibility and other recourses? And just imagine for a moment what happened to them to make them go so far, to wield themselves with such armor and to weld themselves inside? What horror in their life or in their mind leads to what you find so shocking, what you might find truly revolting?

Dr. Brach has something to say about that, thank heavens, too. She says, "Even if we don't like someone, seeing their vulnerability allows us to open our heart to them." I like this part here. She says, "We might vote against them in an election. We might never invite them to our home. We might even feel they should be imprisoned to protect others. Still, our habitual feelings of attraction and diversion do not have to overrule our basic capacity to see that like us, they suffer and long to be happy. When we see who is really in front of us, we don't want them to suffer, and I would add, they seem a lot less powerful."

One of the core beliefs in this church is in the inherent goodness of each one of us, of every person. The question many of us have about this core belief, especially when they're new here in this place, one of the main questions people ask is, "Well, what about the monsters?" What about the real monsters, the despicable, the irredeemable in their eyes? "What about the people who hurt and revile others for their own selfish ends?" Yeah, that is the real heart of this faith and many faiths. And to this, we say, I say, a person, every person was born with inherent goodness, with original blessing. But what happens to them, how they choose to armor themselves from that, how they defend the softness of their human vulnerable nature, those effects, that armor is not always necessarily good itself. In fact, it can be deadly. It can be dangerous.

You might not believe this, there are actually people out there in the world who really, really, really do not like me. Shocking. They think I am a menace to society. They send me emails about it. I will spare you the many paragraphs of emails. And I'm pretty sure they are not watching right now, so I can let you guys in on a secret. I can't help it, I kind of love them for it. I know that sounds bizarre, but they're so expressive, so passionate about something and trying to engage me in their cause. I find it refreshing, because we're at a point in so many of our lives and our conversations, at least when people are speaking, that we're only speaking with people who agree with us, many of us. We're moving into circles and walls that are more like echo chambers at times. So getting these refreshing missives about who I've helped do what over the years is something.

And it concerns me this way that we've cordoned ourselves off sometimes, because nothing stops vulnerability in its tracks faster than shame. That terrible weapon that is wielded, many here I know, many of us love come from faiths or from families where that weapon of shame was wielded over our bodies, over our thoughts, over access or acceptance in community, and even with the threat of eternal separation from our idea of God or objective reality and of those we love. I have a friend who was cast out of her faith and none of her friends or family will speak to her to this day. Coming here or to another faith that doesn't use shame as a weapon takes some getting used to for people. And for those of us raised in this faith, it's almost hard to understand, and I say thank God for that. It takes care and understanding though, and sometimes a good friend to get to the heart of what that means.

It reminds me of the famous story about the man who falls in the hole. Have you heard that one? A man falls in the hole and doesn't know how to get out. And a lawyer comes by, looks down in the hole and he says, "Oh my God, this is terrible. We're going to file briefs. We're going to alert the court right away. Bye, I'll see you later." And the guy down in the hole is like, "What? What are you doing? I'm still stuck in the hole." So he's down there and he's calling for help and a priest comes by, the priest looks down and says, "Oh my son, this is terrible. You've fallen in a hole. I'll say all the prayers. I'll alert the people. We'll get into the church bulletin right away. Bye-bye." And he walks on, no help.

So he's down there in the hole. How's this going to help? And then a friend walks by and she looks down and she says, "Friend, you're in the hole." And he says, "Yes, go get help. Go do this. I need help. I'm in the hole." And instead she jumps down in the hole and he says, "What are you doing? You were just up there and now we're both in this hole." She says, "Yes, but I brought all the seasons of RuPaul's Drag Race with me and we're going to watch them together." That's not the version you guys heard? I'm sorry, I come from a very different background than you, I guess. Okay, fine. She jumps down in the hole and he says to her, "Well, now you're down in the hole. What are we going to do?" And she says, "Yeah, but I've been down in this hole before and I know the way out."

And that is what a friend, that is what a faith like this can do. When our eyes met, Joe's and mine, while his hand was on my head, for an instant, the precious father in him showed up, the father that not everyone got to have, the father that many of us want to be. He was holding his child that he could see for an instant. I'm actually older than him, by the way, so ageism be damned. But this instant, like others in our lives, think of those moments where the humanity and the vulnerability shone out like a light to you. Really hold that. Those are the doorways. Those are the doorways that are a glimpse of real ultimate reality, who we really are, that we are made of so much loving. We are made to be so much loving.

Well, around us all, I know we deal with what is made up. We deal with what is made up, lies, ideas we tell ourselves about ourselves, tell ourselves about others, ideas, opinions, guesses, insinuations, fears. They're all made up, friends. For me, there is no difference between accepting objective reality and believing in God. For me, they're one and the same. Telling God or speaking into reality what we are scared to say, to be vulnerable to another person, and when we fear others will judge us and then what they will feel or do is good, is very good. But the real, real, being ourselves, telling another person about it, telling the real truth we are feeling any hold of shame or

guilt, any bondage of society's ridiculous expectations of us, and they are ridiculous friends, any grip, any incarceration of our soul, the real, real beginning of freedom is telling someone vulnerably exactly who you are, what you fear, what you love.

Sometimes it's said that ours is a free faith. It's true. It doesn't mean though that we're free to just do as we please without any repercussions. When it's said ours is a free faith, it doesn't only mean that we have the very right to disagree and still be welcome here fully and completely. It means those things, yes. But for me, more than that, deeper than that, more than any of these, when I say this is a free faith, I say it has the power to free you, the power to free me. Our colleague likes to begin every talk he gives the general assembly with the question, how free do you want to be? This faith has the power to free us from false human control by shame and guilt, to free us from the gatekeepers who claim to know who is in and who is out, whether in this life or the next, to free us from the improper and the unenlightened interpretations of scripture that have been running rampant on this earth for millennia and more and more of these.

The real, real truth is this. When it is said that ours is a free faith, it means less about what we are free from and more about what we are free to do. All of the vulnerabilities that this society says exist, whether it means that you are gay or you are trans or you are a woman or you are vulnerable for some other reason, this church takes them all, holds them together, binds them up in its own faith and says, "This is not vulnerability, this is strength." And that is what strength means in this faith, friends.

It is the freedom to be exactly who you are created to be the freedom to be ourselves in the presence of the divine, which is the best definition of prayer I've ever heard and free to speak our truth to others and be loved in return, free to practice boldly this faith that says no to hate, yes to love, and a more and prodigious and more justice in this world, a faith that lives in us and through us so long as we grow together in truth and justice, and may it ever be so, in love. May it ever be so, blessed be an amen, friends.