

Uncharted Waters ©¹

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Homily

For the vast majority of us, for the vast majority of our lives, we are not forced to make radical changes against our will. If change is forced upon us, it is usually one thing at a time, and even then we want to believe that we have some choice, some bargaining power, some way to make it a bit more palatable to our tastes and desires.

What's unusual about this time is that we are being forced to make many radical changes at one time. And, though most of us may do so as a matter of survival and social responsibility, it is still something many of us would rather not be doing. It still goes against the grain of what our nature says we want. It's still really hard to change so many things at once for one of us, let alone for all of us, all at one time.

As someone who grew up moving every year or so, I've always prided myself as being someone who accepted change fairly easily. I developed chameleon qualities that would usually let me size up a situation and land on my feet quickly. As I changed from one school to the next, I would always sit up front so that I could figure out what was going on quickly. I'd observe and watch to see what the teacher really wanted, and who, among the students, were the most popular or got their way most of the time. Once, this backfired when we moved to Ft. Ord, outside of Monterey, California. It was my first day in school, and first day in Spanish class. I didn't know how to speak Spanish. But, I did know how to find out how to put the right heading on my paper. As we began the class, I looked sideways at the student's paper next to me, and noticed which came first: the Student's name, the class name, and then the date. Yes, I had this down . . . I knew how to get started in this place I'd never been and be with these people I'd never met. Except this time, and it was only this time, the teacher called me out for cheating, in front of the whole class. I was accused of copying answers from the student next to me, though in that moment there were no answers to copy on his page.

What I want to name here, is not whether or not I did the right thing, but to name the structures within which I was trying to adapt. I had experience with different schools. I had found that they all had their own way of creating the heading for student papers. My previous experience told me to look for the rules common to all institutions. I would observe and study them, I would figure them out, and as I did, I would be fine.

But, we are in uncharted waters, are we not? This virus has its own rules, and we're trying to figure them out, but they are new to us and mostly unknown. Whatever its rules are, they are pretty non-negotiable. And, its non-discriminating, it cuts across all people and all institutions. This non-negotiability is hard to accept. We're not used to having no say about something important like this. And, some of us, so frustrated with the rules of this virus may, in our frustration or arrogance, deny its

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power, and, in our denial choose to ignore the rules, just because . . . because . . . well just because we can. The human spirit doesn't like to be told what to do, and it will resist if allowed to.

Unchartered waters, nonnegotiable unchartered waters. I was thinking of what happens when you're on a boat and suddenly you fall into the churn and swell of deep waters. Though there may be a map someone else has of those waters, you, in that moment of trashing about in the chop of waves all around you, to you, those waters are unchartered. Unchartered in that you can't tell which way is up, nor where you are in a boundless sea. You don't know the rules, and if there are rules, they are pretty nonnegotiable. The one rule you want to follow in that moment is "don't sink".

So what's the best that can happen in that moment? Well, it would be great if someone would throw you a life preserver. In this case, I'm imagining one of those old fashioned life rings that are placed strategically around a ship. If someone threw it to you, and, you caught it, then, at least you could follow that first rule, "don't sink". It would keep you from sinking. But, you know what would be even better? What would be even better would be if there was attached to that life ring, a life line. A line of rope that was, on one end attached to the life ring, and on the other end, attached to the ship. That would be even better, because then not only would you not sink, you could or someone else could pull you to safety and back to a world where the rules were understood and because they were, you could live your life again, once again making choices that were negotiable, and less life threatening.

There's another example that I can think of that's similar. How many of you have been kayaking? I imagine quite a bit of you. My husband and I each have kayaks and have taken beginner lessons on how to kayak efficiently and safely. Since you're going to be on water, and water can get dangerous, it makes sense to learn some rules that will keep you safe. One of those rules is what to do when you're kayaking with other people and one of you becomes injured or the weather turns foul. The rule to follow then is that you and your fellow kayakers form a raft out of all the kayaks. In other words, you bring all the kayaks together side by side, and you lash them together to form a more stable and resilient vessel. One that can more easily weather treacherous waters or more easily transport an injured person back to shore.

It seems to me that all of us are in unchartered waters right now. There may be some rules, but not very many, and those that exist are pretty nonnegotiable, which makes the situation unsatisfying at best, and dangerous at worst, for many people. As we search for answers about how to get out of these unchartered waters, we're looking for answers, for rules, for a life line, for a raft to help us out of this precarious situation. And, unfortunately, those rules and answers are not coming fast enough or clear enough. Sometimes they are even contradictory. Wouldn't it be good if we knew some people who could read the chop of the water and the situation and could tell us the best rules by which we could get back to safety? Wouldn't it be great if some people would form a raft around us, giving us greater resiliency and buoyancy in these chaotic times?

Well, friends, here in this congregation, this community, we have people like that. We have 10 medical professionals and scientists who have volunteered to become that raft for us. Out of love and affection for us all, they have joined together to form a Covid-19 Advisory Group, for the purpose of pulling together their considerable expertise so that they can interpret to us, as best they can at any given moment, the life-saving truths we need to hear. They will interpret, as best they can, "the rules" that

this virus follows so that, with a bit of luck, we can get back to the shore together. The members of this group are people we know well and trust. They are: Xandi Garino, PhD, PA-C; Martha Howard, MD; Lemi Luu, MD; Andrew Miranker, PhD; Liz Miranker, PhD; Neal Schultes, PhD; Nancy Stanwood, MD; Jennifer Swenson, MD; Scott Swenson, MD; Enrique Alvarez Sotomayor, DVM, MA. Yesterday and today, they are conducting webinars for members, friends and staff to help us understand the rules we need to know for survival. This week, and weekly, they will offer us reflections in our weekly news about what's happening and how it effects our personal lives. As more education is needed, they will provide it, until . . . we are out of these unchartered waters.

Last week I shared with you the answer I gave someone when they asked me what it is that we, as Unitarian Universalists, believe. My answer to that person was, "each other." We believe in each other. At its core, that's the fundamental rule the members of this community live by. We believe in each other even if some of us have rough edges and strong personalities. We believe in each other even if, or perhaps especially when, we make mistakes. We believe in each other when we are challenged by forces beyond our control. In these moments, and in other times we show up for each other in the form of promoting the greater good for us all. We work hard together to hold each other in care during normal times, and we are all working that much harder to hold each other in care during these times. This is our rule, "we believe in each other and we show up for each other." These times may be the times that try our souls, but more importantly they are the times during which we can incarnate in body, word, and deed, that yes, we believe in each other.

May it be so.