

Forget Your Perfect Offering

Sermon by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan

June 11, 2023

I open with words of Rev. Manish Mishra-Marzetti from an essay in which he describes church.

We are engaged in a fallible, human enterprise, but it is one that simultaneously transcends our finitude. Amid the uncertainty, and the risk of failure, can we remember why we stepped forward?

To make a difference in someone's life.

To help build and create healthy community.

To share our gifts and talents with the world around us.

To be the best we can be and bring out the best in others.

Grounded in these intentions, it's never possible to fail.

The world needs every bit of good that each of us has to offer.

Why did you step forward to be a part of this spiritual community? Was it in your genes? Are you part of a family tied to our faith or to this church? Or did someone slip our address in your proverbial blue jeans, encouraging you to "check us out" or "see what was going in that UU church"? Why did you step forward to be a part of this community and why have you stayed?

I accepted the call to serve as your settled minister on May 6, 2018. We have completed five years of ministry together. Some of you have been here nearly every Sunday since that vote. Some of you have been here on some Sundays, others have been here less often, but here nonetheless. Some of you have been members for decades or even generations; others joined in my first year or two or during COVID. Some of you joined this church year.

Some of your lives have changed indelibly over the past five years. Children are now grown. Loved ones have died. We're all aging. Others of you have met the love of your life, discovered new or renewed passions, found your voice. All of us have changed in big and small ways. How could it be otherwise?

However long you've been here and however frequently you've been here, we are richer for your presence. You make us who we are. *This is our church.*

It seems appropriate to offer a few reflections at this five-year mark. I'll do so by answering four questions:

1. What have I learned about who you are and what has not changed over the past five years?
2. Where was I wrong and what apologies do I owe you?
3. Where do we go from here?
4. What promises do we make to ourselves, this congregation and each other?

1. What have I learned about who you are and what has not changed over the past five years?

Above all, this congregation is faithful, loyal, and generous. You show up for one another. You pay attention and know what is going on, even from afar, even when I think you don't read the newsletters.

You send notes when someone experiences a sorrow or a joy. You support one another, even when your actions are under the radar. You attend memorial services like no other church—showing up in droves, arriving early, staying late, wearing your best clothes.

Unlike those at memorial services, however, you *don't* always come to church. Some of you do, and for that I am grateful. It is always good to see every one of you whenever you come, no matter the frequency. It matters that you are here. Please come as often as you can. We will all be better for it.

You love history but are not constrained by it. You know what it means to do the right thing, and you do it, with strong affirmation—whether it is converting the Parish Hall into housing for refugees, paying the church staff fair wages, or marching in the streets for women's reproductive rights and Pride Month.

Forget Your Perfect Offering

June 11, 2023 *page 2*

You love to learn and are genuinely interested in theology. This is one of the unexpected joys for me and one I look forward to getting into more deeply next year. You are seekers. You are interested in what others believe and you respect what they believe, within and beyond these walls.

We learned during COVID that you are adaptable and can pivot. You change to meet the times and invest in making this the best church it can be for as many people as possible. As I said, you are loyal, faithful, and generous, and you are Yankees. :)

I am the first female minister here in the church's almost 300 years. My ministry was long awaited by many of you and is still a mystery to others. I ask that you call me Reverend Rebecca in solidarity with all women and historically marginalized people, knowing that our clerical respect is not assumed by the size of our bodies or gender. This request remains, but it's also about time that we became friends, so my boundaries on that front are relaxing. After five years, I believe we can be both minister and friend.

I am also the first minister that has served as both your spiritual leader and CEO. This is a learning experience for all of us. I look forward to examining the balance of these roles more closely next year, making adjustments that work better for who we are together.

So, what will never change?

I am not Harold. That will never change. For those who don't know, Minister Emeritus Reverend Harold Babcock was my predecessor. Harold and I share characteristics such as our love of nature, family, and poetry. We are also different in many ways. I hug harder, talk a lot about love, and am more involved with issues of social justice. We are both good ministers and are ourselves. More important, we are your ministers, along with Reverends Helen, Stan, and Jane.

I also know that your loyalty, faithfulness, and generosity and your love of learning, children, and music will never change.

2. Where was I wrong and what apologies do I owe you?

I have not been perfect. I apologize for when there has been too much change and when the change was too quick.

We are a blossoming congregation finding our way at a time when many churches are failing. We are a loving generation of people who are aging and at the same time, a loving generation of people who are arriving, helping to form this congregation into what it is becoming. As a congregation, we are at once aging and arriving and must do both well while considering the future of the congregation.

Help me know what is right for us. Share your hopes, dreams, and critiques. Ours is a ministry of relationships; let me know you. Send me things to read, suggest sermon topics, and challenge me to consider something differently.

I apologize for sometimes botching up traditions. We are revisioning the Candlelight service built on a foundation of understanding and treasuring its tradition. I'm open to reconsidering summer church and will be preaching more often. Though you clearly think I can read your minds, I can't. The congregation often gives no feedback. Please talk with me, not just each other.

I apologize for trying too hard to please you and in so doing hiding parts of myself. I am deeply spiritual, a theologian through and through, an engaged contemplative who believes in my core that justice and contemplation go hand in hand. I find great joy in exploring and learning and want to do more of that together. I also love to laugh and can be irreverent. I will show more of me and invite you to do the same.

3. Where do we go from here?

We have been through a lot, and there is much good coming! For all our idiosyncrasies and hiccups, we are a thriving church. While two-thirds of UU congregations in the country have 140 members or fewer, we are growing, even as we are mourning too many deaths of stalwarts of this congregation. With fewer ministers than ever coming into parish ministry and congregations having to merge and be lay led, we are a strong presence of liberal religion in the region. We owe it to ourselves, the future of this congregation,

Forget Your Perfect Offering

June 11, 2023 *page 3*

and the public sphere to lean into our strengths and keep evolving, humbly and with pride.

We have important priorities next year including envisioning the future of the Parish Hall. There will be congregational conversations about how we want to renovate the Parish Hall and for what purposes. We will find long-term housing for the Mirzayee family, and we need your help to do that.

Our anniversary will run from January 1 to December 31, 2025. Over the next church year, we will discover many ways to help plan for the anniversary.

Most important, we will be focusing on membership next year. This includes how to best get to know one another, develop leadership opportunities, and deepen our connections among all members and friends, online and in person.

I'll be offering a monthly Unitarian Universalist discussion group the first Tuesday evening of each month where we will come together to discuss our theology, values, and beliefs; our history; and how we are responding to local and world issues of justice.

Among the many other exciting programming opportunities are Wednesday Night Fellowship, Justice Sundays, and a Mary Oliver Retreat. There are great plans for Young Church including Crossing Paths, the updated Neighboring Faiths program.

We will be exploring more deeply what it means to become the Beloved Community in our commitment to and work in anti-racism, climate justice, common sense gun laws, LGBTQ+, and gender equality. Of course, we have our fellowship and fundraising events, which are joyous and beneficial in important ways.

4. What promises do we make to ourselves, this congregation, and each other?

As we move into the next five years, I promise to do better at pacing myself and pacing us. This will include balancing the essential movement forward and changes needed to continue to be a thriving congregation with the equally important time to remember, rest, and simply be. I promise

to bring my full self to you, trusting that we respect each other enough to have differences. I promise to continue to deepen our work with social justice and to join with you in envisioning and creating an amazing future, filled with joy, fun, celebrations, sacraments, seeking, sharing, growing, and loving, so we be grateful for all that is this church and our blessings. I promise to know you, respect you, and love you, individually and collectively, as only a minister can.

What are your promises? Think carefully, for your promises matter.

May they be filled and fulfilled and may you be blessed.

Have a beautiful summer, whatever that looks like for you. I will miss you all. I love you and look forward to being together again soon. Until then, you will be in my thoughts and in my heart.

Amen.