

Love and Gratitude

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October 22, 2017
First Parish in Brookline

We were set up!

There is no other way around it.

We were set up.

You—all of you—and me.

We met, we were together for about a nanosecond, and we fell in love.

Little did I know when I asked in my first sermon, “What if we fall in love with each other!?” how true those words would be.

I have spent a lot of time—a LOT of time—over the past weeks and even months, wondering if I had done something wrong. If I should have tried to stop what was happening. Left earlier for another ministry. Stopped saying I love you. Been somehow different, more distant, or stand offish. If it were wrong to fall in love. I wondered and I prayed and I asked myself until there were no more questions, only tears. And a lot of those, too, if you want to know the truth. Of course you want to know the truth, because that’s who you are. Truth seekers, truth tellers.... Lovers of truth. Justice. And compassion.

I asked until the clarity and the answer came—and the answer is No. We did nothing wrong. We fell in love with each other. It could not have been different without being disingenuous or contrived. And that would have been a travesty.

There is no way that we could have created the community that we have, made the strides, accomplished, learned and changed and healed as we have. There is no way that this congregation could have been transformed without being the people that we truly are meant to be.

For us that meant that we were going to fall in love. In fact, I believe that love was the essential ingredient—the ingredient—that actually empowered all that has occurred to happen.

So that’s where I stand. We would not have done and experienced what we have together, without Love. True love. Genuine Love. Vulnerable, powerful and transformative love.

So I say again, we were set up.

We fell in love and now, soon, it is time for me to leave. I will leave. I need to leave. It is the right thing.

As clear as that answer is to me now, it didn't come easily. It was painful, confusing, overwhelming at times, and hard. I tried thinking about it, rationalizing it, writing about it, talking about it...denying it, ignoring it...until finally I had no other way around it...I felt it.

I felt my way into the pain and the confusion and the deep, deep love that I have for each of you, and for us. I cried and I grieved, I got angry and wrote a few letters that I never sent (thank goodness). I grieved. (And I'm not done yet. Grief is not a once and done thing.)

I grieved and then the clarity was there.

We did great things together and now it is time for me to leave.

As much as parts of me wanted the answer to be different, it's not, and I have come to not only accept that. I have come to be grateful for it.

The truth is that what we had, what we have now, what we have experienced together is our interim ministry. Our shared interim ministry.

You hired me as your interim minister to come, to walk with you for a period of time.

Together in this interim ministry, we claimed and honored this congregation's past, healed your griefs and conflicts. We uncovered your unique identity including your needs and challenges, weaknesses and strengths.

We clarified leadership at all levels of congregational life. Tried new things with the roles and leadership of the congregation—in worship, planning and envisioning your future.

We clarified the leadership and roles of the minister that is right for you—which by the way is clearly a shared ministry; one in which we create this congregation together—you and me—you and your minister.

We reviewed and changed the visible, like whether to hang pictures of all white male ministers in the entryway to the church, and we reviewed the invisible, like how we make decisions and how we can disagree and grow stronger because of that.

We connected and strengthened your partnerships with the UUA, Centro Presente, Black Lives Matter and more. We addressed budgetary issues, met financial questions head on, and created the staffing and ministry structure appropriate for this congregation.

We did interim ministry; and I say, we did it exceedingly well! WE did it exceedingly well.

I truly do not believe that it could have been what it was if we did not operate within a trusting, loving, caring and mutually respectful relationship.

AND our interim ministry is coming into its final months.

This phase of the process is not easy. It is human nature to not want something that has been so life affirming, so good, to change form—to end, in the way that we have known it.

It is human nature to cling, to hang on, to want things to stay the same. Ultimately however, the essential next step is to surrender and accept. To decide that this new reality is true, and then to live intentionally into and through the next and final phase of our ministry.

Time and again in our lives we learn that when we trust, let go, be in the uncertainty and unknowing of change, we will experience gifts. Gifts that we could not have known had we not let go.

Our interim ministry will be over next July 15th, and you will be a congregation at the start of a new settled ministry, with a minister who is not me. You will have called your next minister on May 6th and you will be preparing for their arrival as I finish my last days with you.

I, too, will have been called to a settled ministry. That congregation will be saying goodbye to their current minister and preparing the way for me.

This may seem hard, yet it is as it should be. I could not stay here and I will not stay here. It would not be right.

For me to stay here, I would need to break relationship with the UUA and my ministerial colleagues, and I am not willing to do that.

More importantly if we were to consider my staying here, we would not only be continuing old patterns of this congregation of breaking the rules. Actually if we moved forward with trying to have me stay here as your settled minister, we would be set up again. The difference being that this time we would be setting ourselves up. However, this time we would be setting ourselves up to fail.

Let's explore that. If I were to stay as your called minister, we would never know if a minister of color might have been called instead. I am curious about that! Aren't you?

We might have learned that not everyone would want that. You wouldn't have the chance to see what other fantastic ministers are interested in you, and there will be many.

You would not even give the opportunity for ministers of color to apply, or to follow the best practices that other congregations have taught us.

We would, I believe, find ourselves in a situation that the vote to call me, even if affirmed, would not be as pure and uncomplicated as it needs me—for both you and me.

We would be setting me up to be the scapegoat for challenges that will occur and creating fertile ground for regrets, and romantic thinking about what might have been if you didn't call me. When things went wrong, as they will, we would both wonder if it was the right decision. Most of all we would be trying to make the past fit a new reality, and that will never fit.

Our ministry has been remarkable, and like all transformations, it leaves us all ready to go onto our next phase, made different for having been together. Both of us. You and me.

We changed the service today because you spoke. In the online survey and at congregational discussions with the Search Committee. You spoke out and asked, "Why can't Rev. Rebecca stay?" You asked for a waiver around interims not staying as called ministers. You asked and your Search Committee heard you. Loud and clear.

They came to me and asked me if I would ever consider staying. My answer, after deep discernment, was yes. I would consider staying under two conditions. The first, that a waiver was granted, and the second, that it be the right thing for the entire congregation. No risk of it being harmful, divisive or detrimental to the path that you are on now.

Asking the right question is key. This was the question that had to be asked. And the answer was no. We would not have received a waiver AND it would not have been without risk to the well-being and amazing growth of this congregation, and myself.

I'm glad, ever so glad that we/you asked the question. If you hadn't and the Search Committee hadn't responded, it would have been a big impediment to your moving forward. It would have been like living in Whiteness and never stopping to name it, and ask what is the right path to take to address it.

In this case, the path is clear. We will stay together, joyfully, for the next eight and a half months. A lot can happen in eight and a half months.

Some people have wondered if you might need another interim minister to recover from my leaving. I don't think so—not if we keep on as we always have together—if we keep on the path of honesty, openness, transparency and compassion. If we hold both the agenda and the process. Make room for grieving and feeling and hearing one another. If we do not rush and also do not get stuck.

If we keep learning and loving and growing together, I believe that our transformation will come to a natural completion. That you will be more than ready for your next minister, and I for my next congregation. And the learning that will come with intentional endings will help us all in many ways throughout our entire lives, not just church.

Our work is not done. We are moving into the next and final phase, and as with life, I believe that it can be the most rewarding. The sweetest. If we left now we would be incomplete. We would have missed some of our best times.

We still have things to do together. We need to support each other through our respective searches. Be each others' allies.

We need to be honest and clear about what we learned and what we did not get done. What work lies ahead for this congregation; and what may never be done. We need to say goodbye, in a proper fashion, so that all of us can integrate the incredible fruits of our ministry and make them a part of who we are.

We need to grieve, process, recognize what we have accomplished and celebrate it. I also have some personal hopes for us including play and trying some last-minute things (like an outing, preaching extemporaneously or having a series on grief).

We do this while we continue doing the regular ongoing work of the church and our justice work.

If this sounds like a lot, it is. AND I have no doubt that we can do this—every bit as well as we have done everything else together.

Today is NOT goodbye. It is hello to the start of this ending. There is so much to learn.

Let's start by taking the time now to honor and remember some of the things that we are grateful for during this interim ministry. One of the first things that we did together was when the Transition Team had you all write down things about First Parish from your history. Things that defined this community to you.

We are going to do that again today, except this time the wall will be the love and gratitude that we have for what we have done together in our shared interim ministry.

Take a minute now and using the post it notes in your order of service write down one or several things that you are grateful for about our interim ministry.

(pause)

The Transition Team and I invite you after the service during coffee hour to post your notes of love and gratitude on the wall in Lyon Chapel. The wall is entitled "with love and gratitude," the signature, don't you think for what we have done, and will finish doing together?

Transition Team members will also be there to offer you a cup of tea. Not because we need tea, rather, because we need ritual. Drink your tea and drink in gratitude, peace, and trust. Swallow love-infused chamomile tea and have faith. Drink your tea with a commitment to conscious and intentional endings; to opening to the gifts that are waiting for us all as we do this—together. Most of all drink your tea as a toast to Love.

Amen and Blessed Be.