

Breath and Strength and Life by Rev. Sarah Stewart
Sermon delivered at First Unitarian Church of Worcester
June 4, 2017

Here at First Unitarian Church we know who we are. We are the free church on Court Hill, gathered according to our conscience since 1785. We are a church united in truth and spirit, worship and service. We follow the spirit of Jesus' ministry and meaning. We organize ourselves democratically and congregationally, and we cherish our covenant but require no creeds. We are a church with a rich liturgy and an invitation to the deep life of the spirit. We are a beautiful church committed to receiving the spirit through art and music. We are a downtown church committed to the welfare of the city of Worcester and central Massachusetts. We are a Unitarian Universalist church which helped to create American Unitarianism at the time of our founding. We are a spiritual home for adults and children; singles, couples and families; youngers and elders; political liberals and political conservatives; people of all sexual orientations, all races, and a wide range of beliefs. We know who we are.

Today I'm not asking who we are. Today I'm asking what we are for as a church. What are we here for?

Today is the Christian festival of Pentecost. The story remembers a myth from the early church, when the followers of Jesus were gathered for a Jewish festival in Jerusalem 50 days after Passover. On that day, the story goes, the spirit went out onto every disciple, and they were able to speak to all the people gathered in Jerusalem from all over the world, each in their own language. There were no barriers to sharing the good news. On this day, remembering the spirit going out to all the people, I'm asking what we as a church are for. What is our purpose in existing here, in gathering every Sunday, in giving, in being together as a congregation?

An answer to this question has been rising up in me in my three years as your minister. Maybe the Spirit has come to me, as it comes to all of us from time to time, and given me a vision of our purpose. Maybe I have simply taken root in the deep soil of this congregation and adopted the purpose which is always growing here.

Our First Unitarian Church is here for the revival of life in all its forms, and the renewal and restoration of life to itself. The Church is here to renew life in ourselves, in those we serve, and in our relationships, and to equip us to be prophets of revival in all that we do.

The church is here for us. It revives our own dying spirits. In those moments when we have lost our thread and lost our connection to the source of life, the church brings us back to community and to caring. Our church weaves us into the human whole.

I marvel sometimes at how joyful church life is, as a whole, when so much of what we do together is care for one another in death and dying. We affirm the meaning in life even at its end. Our rituals bring us back to ourselves.

Once in my ministry I was called to the home of a man who had just died. Actually, this has happened to me many times, but I remember this time in particular because this man was such a wonderful person. The kind of person who would do anything for the church, who tinkered and helped, who visited with troubled young men on their spiritual journeys and who shared kindness wherever he went. He was elderly and had been ill, but no one expected him to die so soon. That afternoon he sat down in his favorite armchair and breathed his last. His family called me to be with them.

In that room I did the work of the church. The family sat together and we said a prayer. I sat with the man's body and touched his head and said a

prayer for his spirit. When the undertakers came, we stayed together as they took his body away. It was deeply meaningful for me to be with them and to share their love of their husband, father and uncle.

That was on a Saturday. The next morning, it fell on me to tell the church that he had died. The family was not attending church that morning, and we had had no time to get the word out. That morning I felt all my grief. I sat in the church parking lot in my car and cried with the weight of having to share such sad news. I thought every time I told someone he had died my own heart would break.

I took a deep breath and went into the church. And I discovered a miracle—the miracle of the Spirit in every person. As I told people the sad news, my own grief softened and my heart filled. We cried together and shared together. Our grief was not less for sharing it, but it was easier to bear. The ministry of death and dying is a ministry of the whole church.

It was not so much the individual people but the church as a whole that saved me from my own worry and grief. Whenever I face a barrier in my ministry, it can be overcome through the wisdom of the church and its leadership. Even at the hardest times, the church revives our own dying spirits.

We heard a story of life revived among the people Israel this morning. We heard the story of the valley of the dry bones.

This story is told by the prophet Ezekiel, writing during the Babylonian exile. During this time, much of the population of Judah, the southern kingdom of the Jewish people, were carried off to Babylon. It was a rending experience. “By the waters of Babylon, we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion,” the Psalmist wrote during the exile. Ezekiel prophesied

during this time of deep mourning. He evoked the life-giving promise God still held for Israel, even in her despair.

In this story, God gives Ezekiel a vision of the valley of the dry bones. He tells Ezekiel to prophecy, and the bones will knit back together. Then God tells Ezekiel to prophecy to the breath, and the spirit will come upon those bodies and make them alive once more.

Who were those dead bones? The Talmud gives us some ideas. The Talmud is a kind of commentary on the Hebrew Bible, collected from the sayings of rabbis around the year 500 CE. The rabbis discuss who those dead bones might have been before God breathed life into them once again. It is a litany of the lost:

They were one of the lost tribes of Israel, deported to Assyria and lost to history

They were people who will be denied resurrection with the people Israel in God's final reign

This is my favorite: They were people who "lacked the vitalizing sap of good deeds"

They were those who defiled the Temple and caused it to be torn down

Here's a hopeful thought: They were the loyal Israelites who went into Babylon's fiery furnace and yet did not burn up; God's spirit was there and revived them fully

It is not just we who find new life in the church. The power of our church is for all those who are lost or cast out, all those who find themselves on the outside, all who have lost their vitalizing sap. We are for the lost. We are for those who think nothing will come to life in them again. We provide

the actions of goodness to break through the despair of hopelessness. We are for those whose misdeeds go before them and alienate them from their knowledge of God. We are for ourselves when we are these dead bones, and we are for all those who need our ministry in this world. Our religious community helps bring life to life again. We are here for all who need us.

Scholars have listed the metaphors of brokenness which God promised to restore during this exile. “Barrenness, exile, loss of children, abandonment by one’s [spouse] (either through divorce or death), estrangement from God, death,...slavery...” These were all alienations known to the Israelites, as they are known to us today. And from these losses God promises to restore God’s people to life.

If the spirit is truly at work in our church, then the Spirit works through us to bring these deaths back to life. We are a community of meaning-making that stands against those losses and says, “Even if you’ve gone through the worst, you still matter, you still belong, you are still a human connected to other humans.”

Have you lost children, or wanted children you could not have, or have children who wander and struggle despite all your love? You are beloved here. Are you divorced or widowed, single when you would rather be couple, married but lonely? You are beloved here. Are you far from your family, alienated from those you once loved, a stranger in a strange land? You are beloved here. Have you known a grief so massive thought you would break under its weight? You are beloved here. Are you enslaved to addiction, to pride, to the emptiness of self—and who among us is not? You are beloved here. Have you lost the golden thread that connected you to meaning in your life? We are all searching to hold it, too. You are beloved here with us.

There is one last question I have for us today. Who are we in this story?

We have seen that we are the bones revived, brought back to life and connection when we feel cut off. And we have seen that the church is here for all who seek to be brought into the fullness of life through connection, through the vitalizing sap of good deeds, through purpose and love. But we are not only the dead bones. In our church, the spirit goes out to all the people and helps us spread the good news of justice and love. We are also the prophet, praying to the spirit, breathing out the message of life restored.

We come into this church and we find our own revival. The call to us is then to share that revival with others. We find meaning in our small groups, in the music of our church, in our children's spiritual development, in the service we offer the community. Our ministry takes its full shape when we find meaning not only in what we receive from those gifts but in opening those gifts to the world. Have you found connection here? Become a prophet seeking to connect with others. Have you found hope here? Be a prophet of hope. Have you found meaning and love here? The church is not a container full of those things, so that each new visitor in coffee hour is a scavenger who might take some of what is yours. Our church is a capacitor, a battery, a garden, an engine of salvation discovered through human connection and meaning, so that we are successful in our ministry when you find more love by giving the love of the church away. This day is Pentecost, the day the spirit goes out to all the people. Feel it at work in you, knitting together your tired bones, that you may share the love you have found with all who need it in our world.

Amen.