

THIRTY YEARS AT ALL SOULS IN A NUTSHELL

Forrest Church

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The year was 1978. Menachem Begin, Anwar Sadat and Jimmy Carter signed the Camp David Accords, winning Begin and Sadat the Nobel Peace Prize. In Tehran, two million people took to the streets to protest against the Shah of Iran. Here in New York, Ed Koch was serving his first of twelve years as mayor. When he took over from Abe Beame, New York City was staring bankruptcy in the teeth. The government rescued us with a highly controversial two billion dollar bailout.

Pete Rose got his 3000th hit in 1978. Kobe Bryant was born. The LDS church opened heaven and, perhaps somewhat more reluctantly, their temples to Blacks. Disco was the craze and the Bee Gees had five of the top eight Songs on the Billboard 100. The Susan B. Anthony Dollar was minted and never seen again. The best selling book of the year was Erma Bombeck's "If Life is a Bowl of Cherries—What am I Doing in the Pits?" And All Souls, a smallish church—some 75 appearing on a Sunday by 1977—with a great history and a hearty vision, was searching for a new minister.

That's where I pop into the picture. On paper anyway, if any of the dozens of candidates who sought the All Souls pulpit was less qualified to assume it than I was when I arrived here thirty years ago this month, I would be shocked.

The first thing I did, in self-protection, was to lower the All Souls pulpit by some dozen feet. They built me this nice little portable pulpit, which I've used ever since. After all, I'd preached fewer than ten sermons my entire life, three of them about Thomas Jefferson. Relying on past experience alone, projected over a thirty sermon preaching schedule my first year, that would translate into nine sermons on Thomas Jefferson, in other words, about nine sermons too many.

I spent the summer before I assumed your pulpit reading the collected sermons of A. Powell Davies and Harry Emerson Fosdick. This made me an expert, of sorts, in the linear, left-brained pulpit style of the 1930s and 40s. Then I put together 30 manila folders, alternating between social action, spirituality, theology, history, Christmas, you get the idea. Then I started looking for jokes.

Right after Christmas, I received a visitation from Maxine Beshers, the first woman to serve as our church president. After a few awkward formalities, she said, "Forrest, a number of people have asked me to speak to you about your sermons. Could you, perhaps, spend a little more time preparing them?"

Ouch. I'd been preparing my sermons by the numbers, fifteen hours a week mulling books and articles in my study, at least eight hours writing on Saturdays and then up at dawn on Sunday to polish my mighty efforts with a final sheen. If I'd spent any more time preparing my sermons, I'd have had precious little time left over to perform my other duties.

Time, of course, was not the problem. Life experience was. The experience of love and death. As I've told you before, I didn't really become a minister until I performed my first funeral. From that day forward you took me by the hand, leading me, one by one, through the valley of the shadow and all the other valleys you traversed in your lives. I began telling stories in my sermons, your stories. I shared your courage and faith. I became a preacher.

My plan this morning was to offer a synopsis of All Souls's growth and development over the past thirty years, how we slowly added programs, enhanced our outreach and inreach, and became, once again, as we had been in the nineteenth century, a flagship church. The problem was this. My sermon began to be littered with numbers, percentages, and dollar signs. Despite the fact that I'm doing remarkably well holding my cancer at bay—so well that, after two or three poignant farewell sermons, I'm almost embarrassed this morning to be seen in public upright—I'm still too weak to beat my chest for twenty minutes.

So instead, let me share with you this morning five things I have learned about the ministry over my thirty years among you. Since we Unitarians embrace the priesthood of all believers, what I've learned, may, I hope, illuminate your ministries here as well.

First, remember the word itself, what it means. Not magister, the greatest of these, but minister, the least. To minister is to serve. Though I earned a Ph.D., I quickly put the kibosh on those of you who tried to call me Dr. Church. I know the Calvinist tradition from which we stem honored the magisterium above all other offices. We still wear, as Calvin did, academic robes. But that's a trap. Pride is the greatest and most seductive sin. Never forget the most instructive of etymologies: human, humane, humanitarian, humility, humble, humus. Dust to dust. Which, in pastoral terms, means heart to heart.

Second, though I know that many of us go into the ministry out of a need to be loved, those who succeed get over that temptation fast. The pastor's job is not to be loved but to love—unconditional love, agape, which unlike eros or even philia, comes with no quid pro quo attached. I may not have liked all of you, at least not all the time. In fact, I can promise you that I didn't. But I had to love you. And to pray for you. And to serve you. Most of you have loved me in return, which is wonderful. Over the past months, I have feasted on that love every day. But in the ministry looking for love leads to pandering, corner cutting, trimming your prophetic sails, remaining silent when you should speak out. Knowing that I loved you, you have consistently forgiven me my forthrightness, when hard words were the order of the hour. In fact, you have honored it. Over thirty years, many of you have openly and sometime volubly disagreed with my stated views,

but not a single one of you has threatened to cut your financial support of the church if I persisted in expressing them.

I mustn't be too bold in presenting my prophetic religious credentials, given how little contention we've experienced over the great majority of my thirty-year pastorate. A prophet in the pulpit, by the way, doesn't win this honor by speaking boldly to the choir. He dares instead to speak out against the prejudices and blind spots of his own faith community, not just prejudices displayed by others, which don't tempt us in the least. For instance, there is nothing prophetic about a religious liberal mounting a liberal pulpit week after week to warn his liberal congregation against the dangers posed by religious orthodoxy. The idolatries we are prone to here—undisciplined freedom, an overweening pride in our supposed superior knowledge, and the condescending virtue of tolerance (which should always be upgraded to true respect)—I have brought to your and my own attention, but perhaps not as vigorously as I might.

That said, I am an unashamed, unabashed evangelical Unitarian Universalist. I embrace the open hand, open heart and open mind. I've witnessed to the lofty principles of our chosen faith in many of my books. And together we've honored these principles, not only in our extensive mission to the larger community but also by engaging the great moral issues of our time, ranging from Gay rights and anti-racism to our leaders' fatal penchant to twist true American patriotic values into prideful bellicosity and nationalistic arrogance. So, yes, some fire and brimstone has rained down from this pulpit, but I make no major claim to the rare and distinguished prophetic mantle. I possess, at heart, a pastoral temperament, and never came close to blowing our doors from their hinges.

Third, I learned early on that I must first and foremost minister to the health of the congregation, not to its sickness. If I had spent all of my oil on squeaky wheels, I'd never have had any left for the crankshaft. Part of this entailed building a culture that honors compliments above criticism. Also one that honors the spirit above the letter. The moment a church, its board, or minister, get captured by the letter and lose the spirit, the church itself loses its soul.

At times being a minister is a bit like being a kindergarten superintendent: calling for time out, and making people play nicely. After awhile it becomes a habit. Most people actually enjoy how they feel when they play nicely. Some don't. Many Unitarians are by nature anti-institutionalists, who come through our doors more practiced in savaging institutions than in building them up. But I didn't spend a disproportionate amount of time letting these particular folks, many of whom grew into fine members of this body, ruin my day, not to mention let them set the church's agenda or fill my own.

There's an art to this too. First, if you water only its dead flowers your garden will not grow. Second, and equally important, by not ostracizing or demonizing angry dissidents, thereby forcing them into a permanent opposition, by simply letting them be, what was worthy in their critique (and almost every criticism carries some worth and value) could be heard more clearly and, if not adopted, certainly respected. This led to the development of a win/win, not win/lose, culture. Let me give you a single example, one

out of many. After our two-year spirited debate over the change in the Bond of Union, only one member resigned from the church.

The same approach works in our daily lives. The best thing you can do with someone who is getting your goat, is to give it to them. You don't need your goat, you really don't. And the best way to accomplish this is to pray for them. Fix them in your mind's eye. Pray that they will find the peace and satisfaction that is missing from their lives. Remember that they too were, against all odds, mysteriously born and one day will die.

By the way, it's impossible to pray for people and hate them at the same time. Praying for others may not change how they feel about you, but it will change how you feel about them. When you next encounter them, you will see the face you prayed for, not the one you dread. And, over the years, you may even grow to love them, which is, after all, the highest human calling.

Fourth, I never forgot that, with the possible exception of professors, I had the cushiest job in the world. My time was my own, to spend exactly how I would. The business people on our board and the lawyers work 70-hour weeks nonstop and still have time to serve the church. Whenever a minister complains about being too busy, I cringe. I've never been too busy. In fact, my life has been carved out of free time, with more time to spare, even waste, than I dare to confess.

There was really only one exception to this freedom. A redeeming exception, I might add. I had to be ready to drop everything to be by the side, often the bedside, of anyone of you who needed me the moment you needed me, the moment you called. Your time was then my own.

Again, this same charge holds for all of us. When you can be of service, overcome your selfishness, or shyness, or sense of inadequacy. Respond immediately and unstintingly. Nothing takes precedence. Nothing is more important than to offer what comfort, consolation, and commiseration we can to those in need of our strength, presence and empathy.

Fifth and finally, something I mention to all my young colleagues: Sunday worship is the most important hour in a minister's week. You are ministering then to everyone. Cut yourself into tiny pieces during the week, no matter how widely you distribute yourself you will still fail to meet the vast majority of your parishioners' spiritual needs. These same needs you can meet, or at least try to meet, on Sunday morning, with a thoughtful sermon that they may mull over for days, time that you, virtually, are with them, each and all.

There's something else about worship that I learned early and have never forgotten. Every Sunday there is at least one person present who is giving church, perhaps even life, one last chance. We won't know her. She'll come in late and be sitting in the back pew, ready to sneak out. She is the most important person here. The minister has a responsibility to include a place for her, a prayer for her, a time of peace for her, in the

liturgy. She's come to church looking for bread. We mustn't throw stones at her. Walter Klauss and our unparalleled choir make this task much easier than it otherwise might be. Even so, whenever I preached to you on public events, I tried to tilt the rest of the service to private matters and needs, and vice versa. And I tried to make sure there was room in each hour of worship for confession, forgiveness, and consecration. I didn't always succeed. I know this for a fact, having seen people I didn't recognize leave crying half way through worship. But I've tried to remember in speaking to you over thirty years of Sundays, to speak to your hearts, not only to your minds.

In closing, let me simply say how proud I am of you. You have turned All Souls from a pulpit into a full service, socially engaged, and wonderfully vital congregation.

I thank you for the remarkable gift you have given me: this three-decade ministry to you and with you and from you. I thank my family, my parents, my dear children, and Carolyn, the love of my life, for supporting me through my hardest and uplifting me through the great majority of my blessed days. And I thank Galen for the exceptional leadership he has shown, already lifting All Souls to new heights. Galen will learn things over the years—he already has—that I have missed entirely. Each of us, in answering the call, seeks authentic words and deeds that will be uniquely his or her own. All I can say is this. I am grateful, eternally grateful, for the privilege of serving you—at your pleasure and I hope with it—for the past, for me, wonderful thirty years. You have charged and recharged my spirit. You have opened my heart. You have invested my life with purpose and given meaning to my days.

Amen. I love you. Happy New Year. And may God bless us all.