

You're Invited!

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Today I have three facts that I want to share with you.

Fact Number One:

29% of people living in the Western United States are not connected to any religion or congregation whatsoever.¹ That fact comes to us from a national study by the Pew Forum. If we assume Stockton is about average in this regard, that means about 80,000 people here in Stockton alone don't feel connected to a religious community. That's Fact Number One.

Fact Number Two:

Say there's someone you know who doesn't belong to a church already. If you were to ask that person to come to a church service with you, researchers have found there's a 90% chance that person will come with you, right now or sometime in the future.² So if ten of us went out tomorrow and invited a friend to church, chances are, nine of those people would actually come! Ninety percent. That's Fact Number Two.

Fact Number Three:

This is something we're going to generate together, right now. I'm really curious to hear about how many people here have invited a friend or relative to come to church with you lately. I don't want to put anyone on the spot.

¹ Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*, available at <http://religions.pewforum.org/comparisons#>.

² New Congregation and Growth Resources, Unitarian Universalist Association, *Congregational Growth in Unitarian Universalism* (2005), p. 16, available at <http://www.uua.org/documents/congservices/conggrowth.pdf>.

You don't have to answer.

But *if* you've invited someone you know to come to church with you, say, in the last year, and you're willing to let the rest of us know, would you raise your hands, please?

(About 12 people raised their hands.)

Well, I have to tell you, based on this snapshot, it looks like Unitarian Universalists have gotten much better at inviting our friends than we used to be in the 1960s, when one study found the average Unitarian Universalist invited a friend to church once every 27 years!

By the way, I want to add my greetings to our visitors today. It's great that you are here and I hope you will find a warm welcome here. This is a really warm and friendly congregation—we just get a little shy when it comes to inviting people to check it out. And there are reasons for that, which I'll talk about in a minute.

But the bottom line is this: there are a huge number of people in every city, including our own, who don't have a religious community to belong to. People without a religious community whose friends invite them to come to church are extremely likely to say yes. And though this congregation is already doing some of that, I hope I can convince you today that those of us who are members here can and should invite *lots* more people to come to *this* church—not just once every few years, but whenever we get the chance. I want to challenge you, in fact:

if you are a member or friend of this congregation,
I challenge you to invite at least one person you know
to come to church with you sometime in the next month.
This challenge is not just for the person sitting next to you;
it's for you personally. Sometime in the next month,
invite at least one person you know to come to church with you.

Now, for some people, this is going to be easy.
You may be doing it already!
But I know, for a lot of us, inviting someone to church
is only slightly less terrifying
than, oh, let's say, brushing our teeth with corrosive acid
or jumping out of a plane 5000 feet above the ground.
This one simple act of asking someone to come with us
and visit our spiritual home
brings up all sorts of fears and vulnerabilities
that are real and worthy of our compassion and tenderness,
even as I don't want us to get *stuck* in our fears.
So I want to talk today about how we can try to get past
some of the obstacles that come up
and get in the way of inviting people to visit our church.

Let's start with an obvious one.
We don't want to put our friends on the spot.
We might be worried about embarrassing them
or putting a strain on the friendship, making things awkward.
Maybe we've been on the receiving end
of someone asking us to come to their church,
and *we* didn't like it, so we don't want to do that to someone else,
especially not someone whose opinion is important to us.
We don't want to mess up the friendship.
I really hear that.

At the same time, do you notice:
all these fears about ruining the friendship

are based on an assumption that our friend
would not actually *want* to come to church with us.
And that may be true, or it may not be.

Let's assume for a moment that's true.
Your friend is really not looking for a religious community.
Some people we know are obviously happy in their own religion,
their own church or temple,
or maybe happy *not* being part of a religion.
That's fine. If someone's happy where they are,
we don't try to convert them. That's not our way.
You might still invite them to come for a visit
just as a way of getting to know you better
or to learn more about a religion they don't know much about.
Those are good reasons to visit someone else's church.
That could be a great thing for your friendship,
a way to share your different paths
without needing to convert one another.

But I also want to urge you,
don't be so quick to assume other people don't want
or don't need a church like this.
We don't want to put our friends on the spot:
OK, but imagine: could it be
that your friend would actually be very glad
to get an invitation to come to the church they know you go to?
Maybe they feel too shy to ask you about it.
They might be *waiting* for you to ask them!
Maybe *they* don't want to put themselves forward
or horn in on something you've treated as your private thing.
And if that's the case,
you could spend your whole lives
being too polite to share with one another
the very things that matter most to you,
just because you're afraid of what each other will think.

And how sad would that be?!

In fact, at the heart of that fear of putting your friends on the spot, I think there's a much deeper fear that we ourselves will be judged and rejected if ever we allow someone else, even a dear friend, to truly see our souls.

We want to protect our spiritual life, our deepest self, from other people's disdain or critique or rejection.

And when we tell a friend about our church, the place we've chosen as our spiritual home, it may feel very risky. It can make us feel very exposed and unsafe.

We can spin out all sorts of fearful stories:

What if they don't like it?

What if they think it's dumb

or they just don't get it?

What would that say about how they feel about *me*?

The fears are real.

But are we going to shut ourselves down entirely and never take the risk of revealing ourselves to those who love us best?

In our closest relationships, with the people who really care about us, there are moments when we have an opportunity to share our heart with them, moments where something in the air shifts and shimmers and we feel there is a safety between us, a web of trust that allows us to risk speaking a truth about ourselves that we haven't dared to say out loud, maybe ever.

What I wish for you is that in those moments you will be brave enough to speak your truth, and your friendship will be strong and loving enough to receive that truth as the precious jewel it is.

And I wish for you, also, that when you speak the truth about your soul, it will be a blessing for others too. Albert Schweitzer reminds us that

At times our own light goes out
and is rekindled by a spark from another person.

And it just might be
the friend you are afraid of offending
by talking about your church and your spiritual life
is the very person most in need of your light.
Could it be?

I want us to invite our friends
because I want people to have a spiritual community
where people feel connected and support one another.

But sometimes the issue takes a different form.
Sometimes what holds us back, what stops us
from telling a friend about this church which is so meaningful to us
is a fear that maybe our church community
will not be able to receive and love that friend well enough
to keep *them* safe and well.

We might worry about whether our friend
will be rightly seen and honored by our community.

This is a real concern

for people who don't fit our majority demographics.

Every church has to ask itself, and ours is no exception,
is our door open to people who maybe look different,
have a different experience of life,
speak a different language?

Are we as an institution open-hearted enough
to welcome every single person who walks through those doors
and honor them and appreciate them for who they are,

not trying to change them
but allowing ourselves to be changed *by* them,
to make room for them to sit down and settle down
and make a home here
and have a say about what that looks like?

I know this is the kind of church we fervently want to be.
I also know there are times we get it wrong,
times we screw up and aren't as welcoming as we want to be.
When we're lucky, we get to talk about it
and learn how to do better next time.

This is such a huge and important thing,
how well we welcome people
when they do accept that invitation and walk through our doors—
how well and richly we are able
to see the beauty in *every* human soul,
how gracefully we can be a community that truly honors diversity,
how open we can be to that journey of meeting
and coming to know another human being and, over time,
deepening the connections that bind us together in community.
Of course there are at least a hundred sermons
just waiting to be preached on this alone.

For today I just want to acknowledge that, like every community,
this congregation is not perfect, *and* we want to get better.
We want everyone here to feel welcome,
and if you ever have any concerns about this,
if *ever* you hesitate to bring someone to this church
for fear of how they will be received,
I invite you to talk to me or anyone you feel safe with here.
Let's make things right.

So much is at stake.
I want more people to visit our church,

and join, and be a part of this community,
because I believe our religion saves lives.
The message of Unitarian Universalism is so simple and so needed.
In a world crippled by hate for those who are different,
a world where religious violence shatters communities
and destroys lives every day,
this is our message:

We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of *all* people.
We believe every person is precious,
no matter who they are,
no matter what they've done,
no matter how much money they have
or where they come from
or what they look like
or who they love.

We know we as individuals and as congregations
get it wrong sometimes.
We're not perfect. We know we screw up.
But the *ideal* is there in front of us, leading us on,
constantly challenging us to love more
and live up to our ideals more fully,
comforting us when we fall short
with the knowledge that we ourselves are loved, always.

Because we believe the ultimate truth of things is *love*,
infinite love for all people, all beings, everything that is.
And we are here on earth to be agents of that love.
Our work is to radiate that love in everything we do,
every day of our lives, wherever we are, whomever we're with,
in the service of justice and compassion and truth.
That's our call.
Every person has worth.
All are loved.

We are called to be agents of that love here and now.
That is our message.
It's that simple.
It's that important.

So will you take up this challenge?
One person in one month.
Just ask yourself, who needs to hear our message?
Who needs to be here who isn't already?
Because the real question is, who *doesn't*?
I am standing up here in front of you today
and tell you I want you to do something I know is scary:
bring your friends, tell them about us,
because I know this faith, *your* faith,
has the power to open minds
and transform hearts
and save lives.
It's that important.

Blessings on all of us and all we love, and on all the world.
May every act performed in love bear fruit.
May all who seek be found.

Amen.