

## **Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the South Jersey Shore**

### **“On This Journey Together”**

**Birch Spick, Guest Speaker**

**June 6, 2021**

“You can believe anything you want. It doesn’t matter what you believe, but it is important that you participate in the church community.”

My mother said something to me like this when I was twelve or thirteen. I can’t remember what we were talking about, exactly, but I was feeling disconnected from the church we were raised in. While I eventually stopped participating in my religion of origin, this early conversation with my mom has shaped the rest of my religious and spiritual growth. Community enriches our endeavors to find and make meaning in this world – whether through spiritual, ethical, or metaphysical means. But many people struggle to imagine, access, and participate fully in these kinds of communities.

This struggle has many causes and manifestations. This struggle might sound familiar to many of you. Today however, I want to focus on the struggle that many LGBTQ people encounter in meaning-making community. More importantly, I want to look beyond to see that despite the challenges, finding communities that embrace us is both possible, and critical. Honest participation in meaning-making communities allows us to navigate life with the support and guidance of others. My hope is that whether trans or cis, queer or straight, you will find something nourishing here for your journey.

When I look back to the story I opened with, there were a number of likely causes for the drift from my childhood religion. My evangelical friends and family members insisted that evolution was ungodly and unsupported by scripture; on the other hand, our Catholic faith offered me little guidance or comfort to navigate this. Christianity aside, I was feeling a growing connection to paganism, and talked about this often with my mom and her closer friends. But there was another growing cause that I kept quiet and to myself: I was queer. To be fair, our faith was not the only, or even the most

immediate, reason I didn't feel safe or supported to be open about my queerness. But I also had a hard time imagining a future where I could be queer and embraced by a religious community. When I say religious community, I mean one where I and others can connect to something (anything) wider and deeper than ourselves, and find some meaning in our lives because of it.

I might be preaching to the choir when I say that LGBTQ people are often driven out or driven under in the religious communities that raised us. And even for those who do find meaning in our communities, we face hurdles & considerations which our straight and cisgender peers may not. Some have called our lives violations of scripture or natural law. Some tell us we're just too conspicuous. We can find ample rhetoric laid out against us. So, some of us leave our communities; some of us hide; some of us keep going in the hope that our perseverance will pay off.

From what our communities of origin may show us, few of us are equipped with the knowledge that other congregations, communities, or traditions can be different. Or that we might be better able to flourish somewhere else. This is not unique to LGBTQ peoples' experiences.

It's convenient to believe that religion is monolithic. It's a convincing, understandable perspective if we've only known one tradition or congregation. When we are afforded such a small glimpse of reality, it becomes harder to be open to all the other realities that might be around us. It's compelling then, to accept that if our birth communities won't affirm us, then perhaps no-one else will either. While we can explain this reaction however, that doesn't mean it's without its shortfalls. It cuts us off from other possibilities. Possibilities where we find both meaning and the love of others.

That's not to say we can't make sense of our lives on our own, or outside of organized communities. A growing number of people live fulfilling lives without religion. In demographic surveys we see these people described as "spiritual but not religious", or answering the questionnaire with "none of the above". Many LGBTQ people grow up in religious communities and decide

not to find new ones after they leave. But some of us leave and long to go back, or find a new home entirely. When I was a young teen realizing that my religious community may not be able to embrace my queerness, I already knew I longed for a religious community that would. There's an added dimension when we find and make meaning together. I can sing, and pray, and contemplate all on my own, just fine. And I do! But it's not the same as singing, praying, and contemplating with others, especially when I have the option to do it all in one place. And maybe most importantly, there is only so much growing I can do on my own. I've grown in communities like this one, in ways I could not have all by myself.

In his forward to the anthology *Struggling in Good Faith*, Episcopalian bishop Gene Robinson reminds us that religion is never monolithic. He writes:

“Most people would tell you that religions are the keepers and preservers of unchanging, eternal truths. They would be wrong.

Although, of course, every religion is based on principles, understandings, and revelations that remain fairly constant over time. Even the methodologies with which a particular religion sorts out truth from untruth remain similar and distinctive to that “brand” of religion or its specific manifestation in a denomination or subgrouping.

But on the other hand, religion is constantly changing. While the underpinnings for a religion remain fairly constant, the *application* of these principles to modern situations is a day-to-day task for a religion's leaders and followers. A religion is a living, breathing organism...”

A religion, a community of meaning, is the sum of all its influences borne out through all its participants. Sure, a religion's basic components might remain relatively the same, but those components are always filtered through and shaped by its adherents and their participation in the tradition. They come to the surface in new shapes. A religion may be built around a stable structure, but the rest of its parts are always moving.

This idea is abstract until we acknowledge that we are the participants practicing and reassessing and reimagining our communities' foundational sources. Later in his piece, Robinson discusses the ways that lesbian, gay, & bisexual Christians pushed back against the prevailing homophobia in their denominations to assert that they belonged as much as their heterosexual peers did. In his words:

“Ancient texts were not discarded, but rather declared misunderstood, and those texts that had long been thought to be obvious in their meaning were questioned. Because many of these people were our sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, classmates and coworkers, we could dismiss neither them nor the claims they were making. And often, it felt like chaos. And then, over time, after much wrestling, a new worldview and a new religious understanding emerged...”

This recounting shows how the basic components of these traditions are cast into new light when LGBTQ participants demand that their lived experiences be taken into consideration. Particularly alongside activism and consciousness-raising in broader society, LGBTQ people have worked to assert and cultivate their places in meaning-making communities. This process creates healthier, more affirming communities, not just for queer and trans people, but for everyone. In their introduction to the *Struggling in Good Faith*, Rabbis Mychal Copeland & D’Vorah Rose make this observation:

“when LGBTQ people are able to bring themselves fully and authentically to the project of religious and spiritual life, they create theologies and ideologies that challenge traditional notions of gender and relationship, institute new approaches to pastoral care, and bring an awareness of particular political struggles and paradigms of power and oppression.”

However, this process isn't always copacetic. Sometimes the people we meet can reopen old wounds, or their congregations aren't the refuges we hoped they would be. Hurtful behavior can lead us to question the potential

we could find among other people. But as the Rev. Gail Geisenhainer writes,

“When we covenant to walk together through all that life brings, it means that when things get ugly, we don’t walk away. Oh, how we may want to walk away! But our covenants call us to abide and work things through.”

To participate in religious community is a commitment. It is a commitment to be aware of other peoples’ mistakes and their ability to harm, but also be open to their capacity to make amends. It is a commitment to trust that no matter what happens, our desire to be together, to make meaning together, will see us through. This takes a willingness to sift out what is worth leaving for and what is worth staying for.

A meaning-making community is important not just in order to make sense of our lives, but to do so in the company of others. Even at its best though, being in community isn’t guaranteed to be easy, and sometimes it’s painful. Yet despite pain and difficulty, we and our communities always carry the potential to continue growing. We create communities by participating in them. Meaning-making communities, like any other, are dynamic. I hope you take that away with you this morning.

There are many other dimensions to this conversation that we can’t cram into a 15-minute sermon. This conversation hasn’t accounted for healing from the hurt religion can create. It hasn’t talked about setting boundaries for yourself and knowing your limits. But maybe this will change how you see this community, a part of our Living Tradition. So I ask you as our time together ends, how will this change you? What can you take out into your wider life? What path will this send you down? Whatever your journey, may you take it together.

Peace, Amen, So May It Be.