Whose Are We?
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Pacific Unitarian Church

For many years I have asked what matters most to you? What matter most to you in your life? Your family? Your health? Your job? Your income? Your pet? This Church? God? The world? Over the years I have gotten some amazing answers. One woman told me that her hair used to matter most to her, she loved her hair, she wore it like a crown, like a mantle of beauty and power. And then she got cancer and lost all that hair, and now her health matters a great deal, but more importantly, what matters most to her are her two children, even more than her health. She had faith in them, faith being that word that describes what matters most to each of us. Many, many professed that the church mattered if not most, a close second. Not God as such but her manifestation in the love of those who know you and hold you, and call you friend even if they know all your faults.

I still think it’s important to ask what matters most. As individuals on a spiritual quest, we ask that question one way or another all the time. In fact, it’s at the heart of our identity as UUs. It’s what makes our theology; theology being the study of what matters most.

Deciding on our theology is only part of the story of why we are here. In recent years, I ask another question alongside what matters most. I ask, “whose are we?” To whom do we belong? Who holds our loyalty? Certainly your family? Perhaps other groups? You certainly belong to this church, in varying degrees whether or not you have decided to become a member. We also have 30 or so regularly attending and contributing friends who I consider as belong here. Whose are we? We are each other’s, in our keeping and learning and growing as a people. We help form each other. One of our own, Angela Henderson, who was our intern minister last year is now serving as the UU campus minister at UC Davies and living with her partner Becca, a United Methodist minister in Grass Valley. I just received news yesterday that Angela has passed the ministerial fellowship committee, our equivalent of the bar, and is cleared for ordination and permanent settlement! She texted me as soon as she was out of her interview. She is one of ours that will now go on to serve our fellow UUs for many good and deep years to come. We are living our faith in the best of what we can become.

Whose are we? We belong to a family to be sure. We may or may not consider ourselves as part of that family but we still belong. And yet, I don’t believe this church is a family. Families are complicated by systems of dysfunction that last for life! We have our dysfunctions here but being related for life is something we choose, families don’t get to choose. Whose are we? We are part of this church. We belong here. We are each other’s. The real meaning of humanity, humility and humanism.

Whose are we? We belong to each other but only in the present. Sometimes we can belong to a place or a person who has been lost to us, but even that in time will fade. We belong to one another in the here and now. That realization brings us the greatest happiness.

And this is what ministry is: Answering the question of belonging with the affirmative, right here and right now. You know, I occasionally hear through the grapevine that someone is upset
with me or this church because they didn’t notice they were gone. I always wonder about that. How do you expect us to remember you by not being here? I mean, I don’t know. There are four hundred or so souls that belong here on a regular basis, that is they show up in one way or another, they send a check, they work for a cause we support, they write on our face book page, they make themselves known and in the knowing they are ours: they belong to us. That is the test. Are you making the effort to belong. If you aren’t here, (anyone not here?), if you aren’t here, then we don’t have a clue what kind of ministry you need or can offer in return. We don’t keep attendance here (although we have been talking about bar codes recently), so occasionally if you aren’t here for a while, someone on our team will notice. If you are at risk, we track you, but if you aren’t here and waiting for someone to notice… well you may be waiting a while. It’s not cold, it’s just real ministry. We are each other’s but you have to make the effort to be in that relationship. What was it Woody Allen said “Eighty percent of success is showing up”. Show up and be a part of us.

Whose are we? I think we belong to the communities, this country, this planet, and the cosmos. But we often don’t act that way when faced with where to put our loyalties, we tend to belong to those closest to us. Still we like to think globally but act locally. It’s the point where the answer to our question “what matters most?” meets the answer to the question “whose are we?” What matters most to the ones I love? This is one of the reasons why throughout this year you will be hearing from members of this church as they answer those two questions in our opening words: What matters most to them - what do they deeply believe - and why is being here at PUC so important to that faith.

Whose are we? We are part of the divine in ways we can’t always see. Sharon Salzberg is a Buddhist teacher and, in my opinion, a closet UU. She spoke to a minister’s gathering some time ago and spoke about this mysterious connection to the larger cosmos. ‘She had sent a class of novices to practice offering prayers of compassion to those on a subway platform. These were silent prayers mind you, but the idea was you spot someone you see and you offer them a prayer of compassion while seeing them from a distance. Now you had to be careful with this in New York, because staring at someone while you are praying for them is well, a bit creepy. One young woman spotted a businessman who seemed to be very harried and nervous. Silently she started reciting prayers for him, almost immediately she began judging herself; I must be doing this wrong because I feel so distant. I don’t have a great wash of warm feeling over me. She began to doubt her choice, I mean suppose the guy was exploiting others. Still she kept at it and the man noticed her staring. Uh oh, she thought, as he walked up to her. He looked right at her and said “I’ve never done anything like this before in my life, but I’d like to ask you to pray for me. I am about to face a very difficult situation in my life. You somehow seem to have a really loving heart, and I’d just like to know that you’re praying for me.”’(Adapted Sharon Salzberg Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience pp143-144)

We belong to each other in ways we can’t always see, in a connectedness that goes beyond the rational. We belong to each other and the cosmos. The point is to let life live through us, to let love live through. This for me is the essence of faith. It’s how we let life live through us and how we make a life worth living. Whose are we? There are many answers to that. But ultimately, we belong to the cosmos. We belong to the earth. We belong to life. We belong to each other. We may not feel that ever widening sense of belonging today, but it is there. You are loved and you are not alone. Amen.