
On the First Day of Reopening the Sanctuary

Sept. 12, 2021

First Unitarian Church

How are you feeling?

I feel... connected. Committed. I am nervous. On this first Sunday of holding two services again, I am afraid of doing the wrong thing—and aren't we all afraid of that, in so many ways, in this time? I am fearful about a future I can't imagine as clearly as I would like... but all week, also, my courage has been growing.

There are so many feelings, for all of us now, "all the feels," as they say ... but maybe two of the main ones are courage and fear. They sound like opposites, but in reality, they often go together, don't they?

A member of our congregation, Christina Yovovich, wrote a beautiful essay about that, about courage and fear. It was published in *Mutha* magazine online, and it's called, "I am afraid. I am not afraid."ⁱ The essay is about taking her son back to school for the first time in seventeen months. He's in fourth grade now but they both noticed that it feels like kindergarten again. By fourth grade, kids are usually pro's at school. But when you are only eight or nine years old, seventeen months is quite a lot of your life. The pandemic started two schoolyears ago, and second grade is a distant memory now.

In the essay, Christina remembers when she took him to kindergarten for the first time. Along the way, she sang a song from their favorite musical, *A Year with Frog and Toad*. The song goes, "I am not afraid. Well, I am but I'll be brave." She writes:

Four years later, I am afraid again, and I am trying to be brave again, my voice breaking on the word. Because now there is Covid, the Delta variant. As communicable as chicken pox, and he and all the other children are not vaccinated against it. I'm trying to be brave, but I'm terrified. Terrified of him getting sick, of him ending up on a ventilator. Of my husband and I getting sick despite our vaccines. I remind myself that if my son gets sick, the probability is he'll be okay. When I picture a ventilator, I try to remind myself, "Probably not." But it remains that taking my child to school isn't supposed to mean I fear for his life.

"Though this too is not entirely new," she continues:

While the school was closed due to the pandemic, a metal fence was put up all around the large campus. People can no longer casually stroll through. You have to be buzzed in a locked gate. Not to protect against Covid, but to protect against men with guns. "I am not afraid. Well, I am but I'll be brave."

Although she is afraid, she also sees the very real cost of not letting her son go to school, not letting him be with other children. There isn't a perfect answer. There is only brave love.

We can all relate to that, can't we?

Many of you responded to a survey sent out last week. Your church leaders needed to get a sense of how many people planned on attending the/this in person service today. 275 people responded. About 47% said they did not plan to attend in person – I assume that means they will continue to attend on Zoom. That's 128 people. Another 42% said they did plan to attend in person (115 people). And the rest (about 32 people) were not sure.

I know some folks who are staying on Zoom were worried about being left behind when we resumed services on campus. But whether you attend in the virtual sanctuary or the physical one, you're in good company. It's pretty close to an even split, with a slight preference for Zoom. And both are real church. Both are real church.

The survey also included an open question, to receive your comments. I want to read a sampling of the comments to you. I think it illustrates so much about this moment. The survey was anonymous, and I've taken out any identifying details people might have included. Here are five of the shorter responses:

- I am so thankful we are [holding in person services again]. It is time.
- I'll attend in person after booster shots are given
- I'll attend in person after my kids can get the vaccine, I'll stay on zoom until then
- Not ready for in person with the current rise in COVID cases, even among the vaccinated.
- So glad we are finally having in-person

There were some longer answers, too. Here are five of those:

1. I am looking forward to coming back, and have been ready to do so since getting vaccinated last April. I think the church has been closed for too long, and has been too cautious. While I appreciate the online services, and initial hesitancy, it's time for vaccinated, masked adults to gather in person.

2. I really wish you would strongly consider stepping back from the decision to hold worship in person. I have close family that was fully vaccinated, and wound up in the hospital with Delta COVID and on oxygen. It's just not worth it.
3. Though we do look forward to alternating Zoom and in-person church, we want to support Zoom church at this time of moving back to the sanctuary. It is wonderful in a different way from in-person church, in both intimacy and reach, and has allowed [family] to attend from a distance "with" us.
4. The church missed a shining moment here by not requiring a vaccine to attend [in person]... So much for the caring community as society continues on the downward spiral. Where is the leadership?
5. I feel conflicted and confused by the public health situation. However, I'm vaccinated, have no symptoms of illness, and have had no known contact with an infected person, so I believe that as long as I'm masked, I can join the congregation in person. My body may disagree with me once I'm there, however.

I love that one so much because it captures both the logistical and visceral or emotional confusion so many of us are experiencing. Here are just a few more short quotes:

[We] will not attend because [one of us has high risk health status.] Of course we... fully support the decision to do both in-person and online services.

I'm rusty on making time for church since I haven't attended the Zoom services. I want to try to make it though. (I hope you made it today, "Rusty.")

It's ironic, we were finally ready to attend the zoom services after our sabbatical from church. Now the zoom services are moved to a time that isn't available for us.

And finally:

I want the 9:30 service returned, no more Zoom.

Apart from the survey, I also received a letter this summer accusing me of handpicking the COVID advisory council so that they would do my bidding and we'd never have to reopen. The letter claimed that I don't care who I hurt by keeping the church virtual when people are suffering and need to see other people in person.

So, it's complicated, right? Whether we meet in person or stay all virtual, some people are hurt or outraged, and some are relieved and thankful, and both options are irresponsible, depending on who you ask. If we simply followed the public health orders and the law, our sanctuary would be full. If we took the safest, most conservative path, it would be closed. We've taken a middle path. I believe our congregation probably has a higher vaccination rate than the general population. If we required proof of vaccination for in person attendance, it might make in person services a little safer. But for people who cannot get vaccinated for some reason—such as their age or medical condition—that would be like finding a sign on the church door that says You Are Simply Not Welcome Here. And so, at least for now, we are not doing that.

This is a hard needle to thread.

Of course, the situation around us keeps changing, too. New variants. New waves. We have to learn to exist with this thing. As a church we have to be flexible yet somehow communicate expectations clearly; we have to be adaptable, yet collaborative... and collaboration takes time. Sometimes our policies have gotten misaligned—for a minute there it looked like we'd hold in-person services but not allow in-person small groups, which is weird right? That's because with all these moving pieces, things don't move in a neat linear order. Our policies have been updated again now. The new ones will be on the website this week.

So what is possible here? Not a perfect answer. But brave love.

It is impossible that we will all be of one mind. What is possible? That however we gather, we will see the holy in each other's faces.

What is possible? Not to go back to normal. But to go forward.

What is possible? That we will have as our moral compass not just an ethic of individual choice, but of care. That we will look at the options before us, and ask each time, every time: who is included here? Who is able to do this, and who is not? How do we draw the circle wide? Wider? How can we "god" our neighbors?

I'm remembering the words of this morning's reading (the poem by our own Carlton Holte): that if God were only a verb, and not a noun, then

What would be left is the memory
that whatever the noun
was supposed to signify

was a Good thing,
or things,
or being,
or beings,
and that—
with god now verbed—
actions that were good and loving
would be god-ing;
and there would be
as many god-ings as there are huggings
and kissings
and meals fed to the hungry
and bandages put on wounds;
and there would always be
plenty of opportunities
to god your neighbor.

What is possible? God-ing together. Deepening in our spiritual lives and in care for one another, through understanding and grace. That's what we are here for, isn't it? Why did you come to church this morning?

What if instead that old noun, church, that we had mastered and made predictable, what if we are now churching?

And what if, in churching together, without having the same opinion, we can look in the same direction? What if it's possible to look together toward connection, not perfection? I believe that's possible.

Embracing possibility takes some letting go. Some ability to sit with discomfort and the unknown. That's how we embrace possibility: we let go of what is no longer possible. We stop grasping at what is not within our control. We let go, and we allow ourselves to be present and attentive to what is. To be open. Open. And I know, *I know*, you are doing this so much in your personal lives today, too. I am. You are. We are living through big changes. The world is different. It is harsher, more urgent. Guns. Climate change. The economy. All of it. Our lives are different. Our relationships, our health, and our spirits are impacted.

"I am not afraid. Well I am, but I'll be brave." Breathe with me.

Trust with me. Breathe. Be.

Listen to these words, by the swiss poet, Henri-Frederic Amiel:

Let mystery have its place in you ... leave a little fallow corner in your heart ready for any seed the winds may bring, and reserve a nook of shadow for the passing bird; keep a place in your heart for the unexpected guests, an altar for an unknown God.

An altar for an unknown God. Or, for unexpected god-ing.

When Christina at last arrived at the school with her son, she saw that it was in a portable building that wasn't very attractive on the outside. But inside, the fourth-grade classroom was welcoming. They found her son's seat together right away, located in the front. The school's occupational therapist had already set up a special wiggle stool for him and placed some fidgets on the desk to help him be comfortable there. "Because his school knows him," she writes. She has hopes for a good year, she says, but also, she is trying to be brave.

There is a place prepared for you today, too. On the surface, it may not look as you imagined. But inside this congregation there is a place prepared for you. For you to come in with your hopes and fears. To bring your spirit and all its wonderings. To fall apart and reweave. To transform. To have faith. To believe. Whoever you are, whatever your health status, your age, however lonely or resilient you are, there is a place for you here. Here where we are churching, god-ing, doing the work of brave love.

It is *so good* to be together.

ⁱ <http://www.muthamagazine.com/2021/08/i-am-afraid-i-am-not-afraid/?fbclid=IwAR2Dtif-owx1TruQBZzuO7oQMkOulpANbkYTJITioSKDXjdgRu6v9oxzQ0>