

## “Serving in Sacred Kitchens”

If you go to the top of your order of service you will see  
 A line there from Meg’s reading that Julien read for us (thank you Julien!).  
 It’s a good line, it expresses one of our themes today,  
 But I want to replace it with a line I heard late this week,  
 (too late to swap this quote out),  
 This from Howard Thurman, that great African American preacher and teacher,  
 Who said on this theme of service and outreach and sharing your love  
 With the world:

*“Don’t ask what the world needs. No, don’t ask that.*

*That’s not the right question.*

*No, ask what makes you come alive...*

*...and go do THAT!*

*Because what the world needs more than anything are people who have come alive.*

*What the world needs more than anything are people who come alive.*

*What the world needs more than anything are people who have come alive.*

Good quote, yes?

Hold on to it for me, and then go with me into how this sermon began for me.

It is weeks ago at one of our Ministry Council meetings,

This council that brings together four times a year the chair-people of many

Of our committees in the church,

And that always starts with a question or a check-in not about church-work or  
 Committee work, but about each of us as a person.

Knowing that we are faith community, and that as Unitarian Universalists

We cherish our doubts as well as our certainties,

The question I asked us that night three weeks ago was this:

*“This week what I am doubting is \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank).*

I had expected to hear zesty, even liberating doubts about theology or the Bible

Or the upcoming Superbowl (as in: I *doubt* the Pats will lose...oh well!),

But what I heard instead was doubts that sounded like this

(and remember I asked this is right around the Florida primary,  
the negative campaigning, the caustic political climate):

*“I doubt our country can recover a dialogue of civility...”*

*I doubt we can change the way we talk and live with one another in this country...”*

*I doubt the economy, I doubt that my friend who lost his job will find something*

*Else to support his family and retirement...he is past 50;*

*I doubt the future of a patient I am working with; I worry what will happen next.*

Around the room we went, *“yes, I doubt that too! I doubt that too,*

*Yes, what you said!*

*I doubt, I worry, I fear...*

To be honest, it was not what I was expecting to hear,

But it reminded me of something else I know about doubts:

How sometimes we don't have the time or temperament to spend our doubts so luxuriously –

How sometimes what we are doubting are not ideas or theologies or beliefs,

But rather our own ability to come alive and stay alive in a world

that sometimes overwhelms us.

And it is this feeling of overwhelming, this doubt,

This wondering about how we can come alive and stay alive

In a world of great need

That I feel moved and feel called to respond to this morning.

Now, you may have noticed in my preaching this year that I am full

Of stories. I do not always know how and where they come,

but I do know to pay attention when they do,

because while sermons are sometimes hard to remember, stories are not,

and I want us to remember.

And the one that came back to me as I thought about this idea

Of overwhelming, of doubt, of service

Takes place in the kitchen of a Brookline mansion

Where Karen and I lived during two of my seminary years at Boston University.

You're thinking: Mansion, while in seminary? Does theology pay THAT well?

Definitely no.

So maybe it will make more sense when I tell you that we lived on the top floor

Of that mansion, one bedroom, a closet for a study, a baby kitchen  
 Entirely rent free in exchange for twenty hours worth of cooking and cleaning  
 And laundry by yours truly,  
 Yours truly who up until that time thought real cooking meant  
 Cooking on the stove instead of the microwave.

It is April in our second year there.  
 I have a thirty page paper due pulling apart the book of Ezekiel,  
 and prep to do for an exam on systematic theology,  
 And applications to fill out for a summer hospital chaplaincy,  
 And banks to talk with about the mortgage we're trying to secure  
 So we can move out in June to a place of our own.  
 Overwhelming? Yes. Am I full of doubt that I will survive it all? Yes.  
 But that is nothing compared to overwhelming moment each morning  
 When I look at Karen's ever-more-round belly  
 And realize that I – Nathan, me, that young face in the mirror –  
 will be a father in four short months.

The phone rings. It is Amy from the mansion downstairs.  
 "Nathan," she says, her voice hopeful and expectant, maybe even desperate.  
 "*Bob and I need a big favor.*  
*As you know it is Passover this week and we're hosting a big Seder dinner*  
*This weekend. We just found out the friends who offered to help*  
*Us prepare can't be here. The kids are coming in to town.*  
*My mother will be here. Bob's sister from New York.*  
*It will be the first Seder since their mother died.*  
*Is there anyway you and Karen help us cook and serve?*  
 "Uh. Um. Whaa...For how many?" I ask.  
 And Amy, quietly, maybe so I can't quite hear, says: "*shouldn't be more*  
*Than 15...(long pause)...plus Elijah.*"

Don't ask what the world needs, says Thurman. Wrong question.  
 A waitress gets overwhelmed if she has too many tables, says Meg Barnhouse.

Prioritize.

But what if you a second year graduate student during finals,  
 You're trying to secure a mortgage, you're wife is about to have a baby,  
 And your landlord has just asked you to prepare a Passover Seder,  
 Never mind that you grew up Catholic, that you are married to British Anglican,  
 And that you have never been to a Seder before (I hadn't)?  
 What then?

I love what Meg says in our reading, in response to moments like these.

*"Sometimes it doesn't matter what's going on with you.*

*Sometimes what matters is to let something larger work through you,*

*To let the rich aromas from the dishes you're holding in your arms,*

*And know what it means to the people who need it."*

She also says that if you try to serve all the table at once, if you burn  
 Out trying to serve everybody and everything, then you're no good to  
 Anyone.

So I call my professor: *Sorry, Hon, that paper is going to be late.*

I call the bank: *Sorry, Hon, those papers are going to have to wait.*

I look at Karen's belly: *Sorry, Hon, that worry and fear about parenthood  
 Is going to have to hold off until week after next. I mean, you're coming no  
 Matter if we're ready for you or not, right?*

And we dive in to the work. It is Friday.

My job is to roast the sweet brisket.

Karen is hovering over the Matzo-ball soup.

Both of us are learning what Gelfite fish is – *sorry, Hon, we say to Amy,  
 Can't do that, can't eat that, not our table.*

In between all that I am roasting potatoes.

We are preparing Red Cabbage and colorful cauliflower.

I am chopping apples, walnuts, cinnamon, and sugar for a dish called Haroset.

Doorbells ring. People begin to arrive.

In the dining room, just off the kitchen,

The lights are dimmed, the candles are lit,  
The Haggadahs, that text that tells the story  
Of the Exodus, are laid out at each place setting.  
Hebrew words float into the kitchen, mixing with aromas  
Of hot soup and potatoes and roasting meat.  
We fill steaming food into beautiful blue and gold bowls brought  
All the way from Israel, and carry them in.  
I serve the sister and Bob as they cry for the loss of their mother.  
And then I go back into that kitchen, and follow along  
as best I can in my own Haggadah,  
Listening again to this story of exodus from fear,  
This story of freedom from slavery,  
This story of freedom from overwhelming hardship,  
forgetting along the way about my own worries and doubts,  
discovering you don't have to be Jewish to appreciate the message,  
feeling less and less scared and more and more alive in  
This kitchen, I remember thinking then, that was becoming more  
Sacred every moment.

*Don't ask what the world needs, says Thurman.*

*Wrong Question! You will get overwhelmed!*

*No, ask what makes you come alive and go do THAT!*

*Because what the world needs are more people who are alive.*

Who knew that in that season of doubt and worry and great overwhelming  
That what would bring me back to life would be serving Seder dinner  
To a crowd of first and second generation American Jews  
Who needed me to get of my own way  
And let the rich aromas from the dishes I held in my arms  
Work through me in service to something larger than myself.

I think of that story and it makes me think of us,  
We who get up in the morning and serve in all kinds of kitchens –  
Kitchens of home and family, kitchens of work and career,

Kitchens of life changes and losses and new chapters,  
Kitchens of doubts and worries and so much need.  
It can get to be pretty much sometimes,  
And it can get to seem pretty un-sacred sometimes.  
Each of us can only do so much,  
And the mantra of “*Sorry, Hon, not my table*” is an important  
Message for us to hear.

But if you’re anything like me then I believe that sometimes  
What we’re actually crying out for is not less to do.  
Instead, what I think we want is to do more things that make us feel more alive.  
And here in this church and here with this faith what we say we believe  
Is that nothing can make you feel more alive  
Than serving someone or something outside yourself –  
Mentor a prisoner, build a home, make a meal, advocate for immigrant rights,  
Teach a Brazilian mother how to read English to her kids,  
lobby your legislators on issues that matter to us as UU’s,  
Occupy the suburbs, drive someone to their doctor appointment,  
Coach someone on their resume....  
The list is endless, boundless, abundant.  
Don’t feel overwhelmed. Don’t doubt the impact of your efforts.  
Feel curious. Go downstairs today, meet folks, and feel full of wondering and exploration.

Ask yourself:

What am I gifted in? What do I want to try?  
What gets me excited? What do I love? What makes me feel alive?  
And then pledge your service to that this year between now and next  
February.

Because this I believe: I may have the “Rev.” in front of my name,  
But we’re all ministers in this room  
When we get out of our own way  
And bring from this sacred kitchen of our faith nourishment to hungry souls,

Be they hungry for company, justice, advice, listening, partnership,  
Witness, or sometimes even a Seder meal.

So if you are with me say Amen.

If you are ready to start cooking saying Amen.

If you are ready to know when to say *sorry, Hon, not my table*, say Amen.

If you are ready to come alive because what the world needs

Is people who are live say Amen.

And blessed be.