

Sermon: The Church and the Parish
Sunday, September 27, 2026
First Unitarian Church
The Rev. Sarah C. Stewart

Good morning, church! [Good morning!] I love these Sundays when we are coming back together in the fall. I love being together as a whole church body. The church is not the building; the church is the people. When I think and talk about this church, who exactly do I mean?

I certainly mean all of you who are here. When I said “Good morning, church,” just now, you answered back, so you are the church. You, in all your loveliness: coming from Worcester or a nearby town, coming in this door for the 4,000th time or the first time, joyful or weary, eager or full of sorrow. You, whoever you are, you are the church.

And of course I also mean our children and teachers downstairs, who are getting to know each other again after the summer break and meeting new faces. I mean the babies in the nursery and the teens taking care of them. Of course I mean anyone who has quietly stayed behind in the Dining Room, to sip coffee and sit in silence as a spiritual practice. These people of all ages in other parts of the meetinghouse: they, too, are the church.

I also mean you who are joining us online. I know some of you: folks who can't get here to the meetinghouse, because of the limitations of body or distance. You're part of the church. Yet so are those of you whom I don't know, because I haven't met you yet: those of you who are considering this church and want to try it online first; those of you who tune in every week from far away; those of you who have stumbled on this livestream and are taking the welcome moment for a spiritual harbor. Through this technology, you are all part of the gathered church this morning.

Then there are those people who make up the church who aren't worshipping with us this morning. I'm thinking of the young people who grew up in this church and still think of it as home, even as they begin their lives somewhere else. I'm thinking of those who have moved away but maintained their membership here. I'm thinking of those Worcesterites who have always considered this church their spiritual home, and who will come here in their final repose, when it is time to remember their life well-lived. Not all these people are official "members" of the church; but the belonging of our names on a membership list does not always follow the belonging of our hearts. These are surely part of the larger church, too.

And I can't help but think of those members of the church of blessed memory, our loved ones who are no longer with us. I personally remember some of them, those who have died over the last 12 years. I remember their spiritual commitments, their special projects, the friendships and community they built here. Although the history of this church stretches all the way back to 1785, and thousands of people have passed through these doors, lived among the congregation for a while, and gone on to oneness with the Eternal, I feel their presence here as well. They laid these stones. They warmed these pews. They gave of themselves to do good in the world. They carried the covenant in their time, and although they have passed it on to us, they are with us still.

Yet there's a shadow side to this inheritance, and it is exactly about who makes up the church. Our earliest spiritual ancestors in America were the Puritans who came here in the 1600s to build their free churches. From the very beginning, they were worried about who should be allowed to be a member of the church. That anxiety can still be found in our churches today.

Those Puritans, those ancestors to modern Unitarian Universalism, were trying to live and worship as they believed God had commanded.

They had read their Bible carefully, and had noted all the stories about how the faithful organized themselves: from families, to a tribe in the desert, to the nation of Israel, to Jesus' followers, to the early church. As Unitarian Universalist scholar Alice Blair Wesley puts it, "They ask[ed] of the texts, 'What was decided here? Who decided? Whose counsel was offered, even if unasked? Which people had to be involved if a decision was to be considered legitimate? What did people in these stories do if they disagreed?'" After that careful consideration, these early Puritan leaders (educated male ministers) came to a fundamental conclusion: the church that God ordained was a local church, made up of people who could gather together regularly in person, bound together under the promise of a covenant.

Here's where the anxiety creeps in. Those early Puritans, their own Christian and reforming fervor was so strong that they wanted to believe that everyone who assented to the covenant would of course have experienced the saving grace of Jesus Christ. So at first they wrote, "This form [of God's church] then being by mutual covenant, it follows, it is not faith in the heart, nor the profession of that faith, nor cohabitation, nor baptism...[but] a church [is] a company of people combined together by

covenant for the worship of God... (21, 24).” But later in the same document, where they describe the free churches they are founding in America, they don’t have the courage of their convictions. What if people try to join the church without being assured of their salvation? What if they’re not Christian enough? What if they’re not perfect? And so they write, “The doors of the churches of Christ upon earth do not by God’s appointment stand so wide open that all sorts of people, good or bad, may freely enter therein at their pleasure; but such as are admitted thereto as members ought to be examined and tried first, whether they be fit and meet to be received into church society or not (38).” There it is. Church members might not be Christian enough. Church leaders—existing members—needed to examine them to learn if they were close enough to perfection to be official members of the church.

You can imagine what this did. On the one hand, pious people were eager to prove their Christian bona fides. On the other hand, some other people over time decided that the church that wanted to “examine and try” them was too snooty or hypocritical to be worth their time. Or, being honest with themselves, they knew they had not had an experience of saving grace, and so didn’t seek church membership.

Even those founding Puritans were not “perfect” in any sense of the word. They had come to the new world for profit as well as piety. They wrested land and resources from the Algonquin people by force. They participated eagerly in the trade of goods produced by enslaved labor between New England, the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe. Too often, looking like a good Christian overlapped entirely with being an upstanding member of society, even if society was doing abhorrent things. And it proved impossible to instill future generations with the same religious fervor as the founders. Over time, a new status quo emerged: every church was made up of its pious members, and it served all the people in the town, or parish, where it stood. The church: the elect. The parish: the riff-raff. Over time, the parish also included the Quakers, Methodists and other Christians who didn’t fit in the congregational system at all.

For all their faults, I have soft spot in my heart for those Puritans. Who among us has not wished for a pathway to spiritual perfection? That one-time experience of grace that will set us on the right path for the rest of our lives? It’s like the poem said: we long for a car-wash for our souls. The Puritans were hoping against hope that if they gained some assurance of grace, and if they only worshiped God with other sanctified people, they

would have been through the ultimate car wash, which took care of everything: grime, transmission, and rusted undercarriage all in one go. As if they recognized that their religious assurance was rare and hard to hold onto, and they needed protection from the ordinary, sinful world to keep hold of it. And this, in turn, led to that terrible anxiety about who was, and was not, a church member.

We still see this mindset in our society today. Just think about the performative nature of social media, where the right post or the right comment can signal that a person belongs in with the right crowd—and where the wrong post can get a person excommunicated. I know I've felt this pressure in my life to show that I belong in the circle of belonging, and not out in the wilderness. Maybe you have, too. If only I had the right clothes, I've thought, or the right amount of money, or could pretend to be interested in their obsessions, or was willing to compromise my values a little bit, a group would accept me. I have felt this way; but true joy lies in setting that anxiety aside and knowing that we are acceptable and good, just as we are.

Although they didn't intend it, the Puritans built a church founded on the *appearance* of grace. Over time, more and more people did not have

the ecstatic experience of grace necessary for church membership. Some religious leaders tried fear, to scare people into grace with the threat of hell. And other leaders, like the laypeople who founded our First Unitarian Church in 1785, bet on the power of love over the power of fear. They rejected that part of their Puritan ancestry. Today, in our church, it's not Christian belief that makes you a member. We are a multi-religious congregation, with members who identify as Christians, Jews, atheists, Buddhists, and nothing or I-don't-know-yet. It's not wealth or social status that makes you a member. Members are owners of industry and people getting by without work. They are students and parents and seekers and lovers of the good. What brings us together is this community, its covenant of love and worship, spirit and service—both the joy of saying it and the practice of living it out. We are not trying to be perfect. We are trying to be better, together.

There is an appropriate symmetry between a covenant and the gathered, local church. This kind of covenant is for a number of people who can be together, know each other, confront each other when there's been a breach and comfort each other in the holy love they share. It wasn't designed for a nation of 300 million people. Yet I can't help but wish that we

had a covenant as a nation. The United States needs a covenant of mutual understanding and respect.

A good national covenant wouldn't be based on perfection. No one would have to prove they were rich enough, white enough, or had been on these shores long enough to deserve to be here. We would agree on a shared level of dignity in living that every American should have access to. Healthy food for their families, a safe space to lay their heads, care when they were sick, and equitable education for their children might top the list. We would not enter into war without just deliberation. And we would not demonize immigrants when we rely on immigrant labor for economy to function. We would look together toward the more perfect union envisioned by the descendants of those Puritans: a nation built on mutual tolerance, understanding, and respect. May this be the inheritance we have received from our ancestors, and which we may yet pass on to those who come after us. I love you all. Amen.

Sources

The Cambridge Platform, ed. Peter Hughes. With an introduction by Alice Blair Wesley. Boston: Skinner House, 2008.

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