

## Sermon

### Unitarian Universalist Church of Essex MA

April 17, 2016

Good morning. Thank you for having me. Special thanks to Art.

Now I looked at our website and there was a guy wearing pink bunny ears in the congregation. I figured I would probably be safe with no tie but I wore a coat just in case.

My name is Andrew DeFranza. I am a short, working class, Italian guy from New Jersey with an accidental white collar education. Most of what you need to know about me you now do.

I work with Harborlight Community Partners. We develop and manage housing for people with limited incomes:

- Parents, grandparents, working families....people with disabilities.
  - People whose work we depend on...who grow and serve our food, care for our children and parents, cut our grass, pick our fruit, and pour our drinks!
- We are involved with nearly 420 units of housing of which 370 are on the North Shore.
- We are working in 8 soon to be 9 communities and support homes for 500-600 people.
- This includes places like Turtle Creek, Turtle Woods, Pigeon Cove Ledges, Rockport High School Apartments, Whipple Riverview Place, and the Community Land Trust of Cape Ann.
- We spent a lot of time doing very boring and painful things the result of which is that economically vulnerable people can be included in our community.
  - This is all harder than it should be.

I am going to try something new on you all if that is ok? I don't often get to talk about the work we do and my personal motives. This morning I am going to talk about the moral and religious case for this work if you don't mind. Lets see how it goes.

I grew up in a very conservative Church setting. We were the Italian Baptist connection of South Jersey which is kind of strange. It worked for us. I am an Episcopalian now. My parents were and are the most faithful people I know of. They used all they had to pursue their convictions. I am barely the scent of their faithfulness...

Last week my daughter asked me at Church...or told me... "Dad, sometimes I wonder if there really is a God?" A question in the form of an anxious statement...one I have had many times myself.

How about you?

Now I did my undergrad in Biblical Studies and I went to seminary thought I try not to admit it in public. So what did I have for her? I told her that I wondered too...but that I thought so....and I hoped so.

One of the reasons I hope so is in the readings this morning. Remember I am an Episcopalian now. I don't know all the names for stuff that they have. But I do know that they have daily readings, communion weekly, and the sermons are short—the equivalent of a Christian experience hat trick.

So why hope? A reading for today...

Revelation 7:9-17 *Common English Bible (CEB)*

<sup>9</sup> After this I looked, and there was a great crowd that no one could number. They were from every nation, tribe, people, and language. They were standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They wore white robes and held palm branches in their hands. <sup>10</sup> They cried out with a loud voice:

“Victory belongs to our God  
who sits on the throne,  
and to the Lamb.”

<sup>11</sup> All the angels stood in a circle around the throne, and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell facedown before the throne and worshipped God, <sup>12</sup> saying,

“Amen! Blessing and glory  
and wisdom and thanksgiving  
and honor and power and might  
be to our God forever and always. Amen.”

<sup>13</sup> Then one of the elders said to me, “Who are these people wearing white robes, and where did they come from?”

<sup>14</sup> I said to him, “Sir, you know.”

Then he said to me, “These people have come out of great hardship. They have washed their robes and made them white in the Lamb’s blood.”

Ok that is through verse 15. Everyone get that? Everyone understand it?

Yeah, me neither. There is much about Revelation I do not understand. Stay with me here. This is the part.

Verse. 15-17

<sup>15</sup> This is the reason they are before God’s throne. They worship him day and night in his temple, and the one seated on the throne will shelter them. <sup>16</sup> They won’t hunger or thirst anymore. No sun or scorching heat will beat down on them, <sup>17</sup> because the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them. He will lead them to the springs of life-giving water, <sup>[a]</sup> and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

I do not know many things. I don’t understand Revelation most of the time but this part....this part is the dike that holds back my roiling fear and uncertainty. Some day wrong things will be made right. Some day...yes to shelter and no more thirst or tears...

That is hope.

So we take that ending and that eventual hope and we read it back into today, back into this crazy story of God as a human, last being first, leaders as servants, and kings riding donkeys...and upside down place.

Here our definitive directions are:

- 1) Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and
- 2) Love your neighbor as yourself

The second being evidenced in many ways by the first.

Neighboring having much more to do with our behavior being consistent with the second greatest commandment than anyone's proximity. Someone standing as our neighbor is about our character and behavior and not their zip code. More on that later.

### So what now?

Part of what we do now in our HOPE is reach toward the good we hope for....a tearless kind.

We bring the whole ethical package. We take what we BELIEVE with what we HAVE and CAN DO and we act.

Just like 1 John 3: 17-18 English Standard Version (ESV)

<sup>17</sup> But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? <sup>18</sup> Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

Believing and not acting is not an option.

Part of what we do NOW is we act to right wrongs and to bring the good.

One of those wrongs in our community is related to housing. We have in our region a history of housing policy that is and has been designed to exclude. It is designed to exclude based on race and income....and it has been wildly successful as evidenced by a stroll around many North Shore communities or a quick look at the census data on [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov).

There were ways this was done before like redlining and strategically placed roads and bridges. There are ways it is done now like large lot, no multi family zoning and intentionally limited infrastructure around transportation, water, and sewers or septic systems.

75% of land that can be developed in the State is zoning only for single family housing.

We have fabricated a shortage of land for multi family housing creation which has driven up the costs of housing we need for people.

Our primary cause of the affordable housing crisis, according to a recent Mass Housing Partnership report, is restrictive local zoning laws.

Community Preservation Act funding that is supposed to go to housing is at times going to reports, staffing, planning, and rental assistance....with no housing ever being built.

Lack of public sewer and water is used as a means to control growth.

Only people then with significant resources can buy the land, the water and septic systems, and the transportation access.

Others without that type of income cannot.

We make then for ourselves gated municipalities without gates...but to the same effect.

We get largely white and largely affluent communities because our policies intended it.

We have local discussions about diversity and fair housing. We set up committees to explore and support racial inclusion and housing access.

We house homeless families in our Churches through Family promise and yet despite all this we are bewildered by how hard it is for people to find a place to live.

This is at best sadly ironic. At its worst it is morally incoherent.

It is wrong.

But unlike many of the wrongs far away that we have little ability to address ourselves---this wrong we own.

This wrong we can change.

If we want to change this it will take actions equal in intent and vigor to those that got us here....those that resulted in the demographic patterns we now have.

Here we have a wrong in the world that we have the power, motive and ability to fix.

Here we have tears we can dry.

Here we have a way to act today that is consistent with our hope and our convictions.

We can support changes in zoning locally and at the State level.

We can support the use of Community Preservation Act resources for actual housing creation.

We can tell our leaders and neighbors that our collective and structural pattern of exclusion is not right and that we need to act to fix it.

WE CAN DO THIS.

We can right this wrong.

We can change these unfair land use systems.

People can quite literally live inside of the changes you can help make.

This will be hard but we have hope and motive...and so we act.

God help us to do it. I leave you with a poem from my favorite author Wendell Berry:

*I know that I have life  
Only in so far as I have love  
I have no love except it come  
From thee  
Help me please to carry this candle  
Against the wind....  
Amen*