

“Shared Ministry Means Hearing Voices”
Sermon, Sunday, April 18, 2010
Second Congregational Society UU, Concord, NH
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A week from today you get to decide whether to call me as your next minister. We only have a week to get to know each other, so I want to be clear upfront. I am not interested in doing the ministry of this church. I am not interested in a church that wants me to do their ministry.

Now, before you start throwing stones (or hymnals or at least nasty looks) at me or the ministerial search committee, let me rephrase. I am not saying I don't want to be your minister. I very much want to be your minister and hope to be your minister and for a long time. I am not saying I don't want to be involved in the ministry of this church. I expect to be involved. I will need to be involved. It will be my job.

I like ministry. I like to serve. Ministry is the act of serving. Ministry is the act of serving others. Ministry is the act of serving something that exceeds our own self-interests. The purpose of this church is ministry. At least I hope it is. The purpose of this church is to serve others. The purpose of this church is to serve something that transforms the quality of life beyond our own selves. And in that process of serving others, we get changed, we get served, we experience ministry.

No - I am not interested in being the one doing the ministry of this church. I am interested in helping all of us define what ministry means for us as a church. For we are the church. All of us, together. Without the people, there is no church. Without all of us, there is no ministry, no act of serving, no purpose to this institution.

Yes - I am interested in the ministry of this church. I am interested in helping all of us find the ministry we are called to do. I am interested in helping facilitate the acts of service that makes us a church. I want to be here because of the potential for shared ministry among all of us, from the very young to the very old, from those spending much of their time here around this building, to those who find opportunities to serve in other places.

I am interested in shared ministry, because unless our ministry is shared our service to others will be incomplete, our church's ministry will be less than it can be, than it should be, and than it needs to be.

When you decide next Sunday whether to call me as your next minister, let your vote also be a decision about your own ministry. Are you ready to join with the minister in the ministry of this church? Are you ready to serve and thus be served?

In 1915, Sir Ernest Shackleton set out to find a crew for his legendary, yet ill-fated, voyage to Antarctica. He placed an ad in the *Times* of London which read: "Men wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages. Bitter cold. Long months of complete darkness. Constant danger. Safe return doubtful. Honor and recognition in case of success. Ernest Shackleton." Amazingly, 5,000 men applied.

The call to ministry may not require us to take the physical risks Shackleton expected of his crew, yet answering the call to ministry also means embarking on a journey. It means embarking on a journey to unknown places, to expect adventure, to take risks, and to be ready for discovery.

An ad for this journey may read: "Men and women and children wanted for a life-changing journey. It could get heated at times. There might be conflict. Long months without the light of certainty. The danger is constant - that you will be asked to reflect with an open heart, and act with compassion. Safe return to the place you started from - unlikely and not desired. In case of success anticipate spiritual growth and a world transformed by your contribution. Oh, and yes, please bring your own money to fund the operation."

Shackleton had room for only 28 people on his ship. Most of the 5,000 applicants did not get to go on this experience of a life time. The good news is that we have room for everyone who is ready for this journey. The good news is that we welcome all who are willing to listen to their call to ministry.

The religious literature is full of moving stories about calls to ministry. The Christian Scriptures talk about Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. He later describes the experience as a bright light from heaven that flashed around him, followed by a voice that asked him: "Why would you do the things you do?"

Those of you familiar with the story will remember that Paul had been particularly successful, and vicious, in persecuting members of a rebellious Jewish sect, a group inspired by a man called Jesus, and a group Paul would soon lead.

"Why would you do the things, the terrible things, you do?" That question resonates with me. It is a question that speaks of a gut feeling, an intuition that something isn't right, a recognition that we are heading in the wrong direction. Given Paul's horrific past, I could even imagine that what he really heard was closer to: "Are you nuts hurting all these people? It's time to stop and you know it."

Who knows whether that voice had been speaking to Paul long before his trip to Damascus? I certainly hope it did. Yet he did not pay attention. He did not hear the voice that would allow his ministry to begin.

Ministry means hearing voices. Serving others depends on hearing voices - voices calling from within, and voices that call on us from outside.

Sometimes a voice is loud and clear. "Are you nuts hurting all these people?" Or the content of the email I received three weeks ago from the principal of my children's school. He wrote: "This morning, a student in our Senior High Class died and two were seriously injured. A car lost control and ran into the students as they rode their bikes on a rural highway." Every parent's nightmare and a call for ministry impossible to ignore.

Or news that a devastating earthquake has destroyed the lives, homes and hopes of a people already close to hopelessness. The voice outside is loud and the voice within is clear: "I need to help. We need to help."

Yet many times the voices are more tentative, less clear, softer, more like "the hills singing, a sound you can't explain since it isn't made with words." Like the look on a child's face hinting: "I am growing up. I kind of have questions. I sort of would like to talk but maybe not. I mean you are not around that much. I know you are busy. Maybe those questions aren't that important. Never mind."

Or the voicemail message from the person you used to spend time with at church: "Good to see you at the supermarket yesterday. I am sorry I had to run so quickly. Life has been really

busy. Do you still go to church? I haven't been since I lost my job two months ago. I can't stand the thought of people seeing me like this. Well, take care, and say hello to the kids."

Some voices we can hear in the middle of a noisy discussion at social hour, some voices require the focused attention of a small group check-in to be noticed. Sometimes, we need a change of scenery, a road to Damascus - or a trip to the White Mountains, perhaps - to make us hear and pay attention.

Ministry means hearing voices. Yet that's not really true. What I should have said is: Hearing voices is the beginning of ministry, it can turn into ministry. Ministry is hearing voices and responding to what we hear in a useful way.

Like the hospital doctor in our story hearing a voice suggesting he do something quite extraordinary and courageous, suggesting he relinquish his role as an expert by opening the door to prayer. And then doing it.

Like the teacher in the religious education classroom, recognizing the importance of meaningful relationships across the generations. And then volunteering to make that happen.

Like Unitarian Universalists concerned about the state of our earth, pledging to make a lifestyle change for 40 days. And then following through on their pledges.

We all have that voice, that gut feeling, the intuition that offers a compass to our actions. Sometimes that voice makes sense to us, appeals to our reason. Other times, we cannot quite explain why we do what that voice compels us to do.

Gerd Gigerenzer, director of the Max Plank Institute for Human Development in Berlin, in his fascinating book *Gut Feelings: The Intelligence of the Unconscious* tells this story:

"A friend of mine named Phil played baseball for the local team. His coach scolded him repeatedly for being lazy, because Phil [sometimes took his time trotting over] toward the point where the ball came down. The coach thought that Phil took undue risks and insisted that he run as fast as he could in order to make any necessary last-second corrections. Phil found himself in a dilemma. When he tried to avoid the coach's fury by running at top speed, he missed the ball more often.

What was going wrong? Phil had played as an outfielder for years and had never understood how he caught the ball. His coach, in contrast, had a theory: He believed that players intuitively calculate the ball's trajectory, and that the best strategy is to run as fast as possible to the spot where the ball will hit the ground. How else could it work?

Computing a trajectory of a ball is not a simple feat. Theoretically, balls have parabolic trajectories. In order to select the parabola, the player's brain would have to estimate the ball's initial distance, initial velocity, and projection angle. In addition, the calculation would have to account for air resistance, wind, and spin to compute the resulting path and the point where the ball will land.

All this would have to be completed within a few seconds - the time the ball is in the air. This is the standard account, according to which the mind solves a complex problem by a complex process."

The biologist Richard Dawkins assumes likewise in *The Selfish Gene*. He writes: "When a man throws a ball high in the air and catches it again, he behaves as if he had solved a set of differential equations in predicting the trajectory of the ball."

Yet experiments have shown that players don't do very well in estimating where the ball would strike the ground. "If they were able to estimate, one would not see them running into walls, dugouts, and over the stands trying to chase fly balls. Clearly something else is at work."

What Gigerenzer and his team found out is that "players use a few simple rules of thumb, one of which is the gaze rule of thumb."

"Fix your gaze on the ball, start running, and adjust your running speed so that the angle of gaze remains constant."

"The angle of gaze is the angle between the eye and the ball, relative to the ground. A player who uses this rule does not need to measure wind, air resistance, [or] spin. All the relevant facts are contained in one variable: the angle of gaze."

Our brains are amazing, not because they can outperform computers in solving complex equations. Our brains are amazing because we have learned how to ignore most of the information bombarding us at any given time. Because we evolved to pay attention to what is most relevant to get us moving toward our goal, even if the goal remains shrouded.

Making use of this phenomenal skill, our ability to act on the most useful rules of thumb, is not unreasonable. It makes sense given the complexity of life around us.

Ministry is complex. Serving others is complex because of the many different trajectories involved. We cannot hope to compute an ideal solution most of the time. We cannot expect to know exactly where we need to be to make the catch.

We may have sophisticated theories on why we need to do the ministry we are called to do. We might be able to offer complicated explanations why we select to get involved with one ministry over another, why we choose to serve in a pastoral role, why we decide to be a teacher in faith development, why we are drawn to social service or the fight for social justice. Or why we do them all.

Yet, on the field of ministry, when the ball is in the air, and we have to decide which direction to turn, we need simple rules of thumb. We need to, and can, let go of the overload of information. We need to, and can, remember the limits of our brains to solve complex problems. We need to, and can, open our hearts, open them wide, so love and compassion can be our guide.

Open our hearts - so we can hear the voices. Love and compassion, so we will respond.

Love and compassion cannot tell us our final destination, but they will guide us to where we need to go. Love and compassion will not solve the many challenges our ministry will face, but they can tell us whether we need to run faster - or slow down, work harder - or take our time, be more present - or create more space.

Love and compassion, be our guide - our guide for the process of ministry, that journey to unknown places, a journey of adventure, risk, and discovery, a journey I hope we will share. May it be so. Amen.