

The Church of Not Being Horrible

Beacon UU Congregation

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Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker

When I was called to my first settled ministry back in 2000, I was 100% sure that I had landed in clergy clover - the ultimate “church of not being horrible.” The UU Church of “Anywhere”, MA was what is often called “a plum,” a thriving throng of committed adults and curious children gathering in a gorgeous mid-1800’s building on a leafy suburban corner.

They certainly saw themselves that way. So much so, that the President at the time quipped during my candidating week that they were such a “gem” that I should be “paying them to come and serve as their minister.” Yea, I know...a pretty big red flag, as it turns out. But I was green, naïve, dazzled, and determined to be their new wunderkind.

I received other cautionary warnings. At General Assembly that June prior to my start-up, I sat down in the clergy choir and when the colleague next to me saw my name tag, she exclaimed, “Oh, you’re Robin Zucker; you’re either very good or very stupid.” I gawked at her with nary a clue of what she was getting at.

But I figured it out soon enough. You see, I followed a bona fide UU ministry icon into the pulpit there – we’ll call her the Rev Sue. It didn’t seem dumb to me or even risky at the time because I had no context for alarm. No one warned me; in fact, Rev. Sue herself encouraged me.

In retrospect, as a newly fellowshipped minister with more talent than political skills, I was a lamb to the slaughter. The interim they had engaged for one year had done the bare minimum to hold a mirror to their faces and made very little attempt to explain that ministers have different styles.

This supposed plum shriveled up to prune- sized as the tribe turned toxic and this lovely congregation became a church whose behavior was distinctly “horrible.” When I cut my hair short, I was asked if I was a lesbian and pretending to be straight. When I preached on social justice, I was told it was pretty good for a girl.

The finance chair, who had been privy to my salary negotiations, quipped that I sure got paid a lot for an “amateur.” The backstairs gossip about me grew more and more frenzied. Eventually, I unraveled. There was bona fide trauma. This promising start became a three-year unintentional interim ministry from which I needed years to recover. I wasn’t sure I would ever want to (or could) serve in a church again, and I was crushed.

If you are squirming over these exceedingly rude and inappropriate comments, good on you. It bodes well for the arrival of your next minister when my interim time concludes.

Sadly, my story is not unique. Daily, I read tales from the fox holes and bunkers my colleagues find themselves in, under duress and at war with Boards and congregants over resolvable issues and differences. Or, our shortcomings collide with a congregation that turns out to be a bad fit. The resignations pile up like a stack of hymnals. In the reading we heard earlier, an excerpt from Carl Scovel Saved My Life, my colleague the Rev. Roger Butts shares his own cautionary tale.

Truth is- It is harder and harder to sustain this profession. And clergy can not sustain a “church of not being horrible” on their own. To be clear - I am not projecting that you will fail with your next minister once our interim time is concluded, or that we will fail together in the here and now.

Far from it. I believe in you and your future. We’ve grown together and I can honestly say, that aside from a few non-lethal dust-ups and survivable incidences, we’ve created positive energy here that we can build on now as we enter a third year of Interim Ministry, still hamstrung by COVID but sallying forth to do some important appreciative inquiry together.

This grinding pandemic has left us with anxiety, emotional whiplash, uncertainty. And this hamster wheel of what if and what now? can lead to lashing out, acting out, blaming others (especially ministers and congregational leaders), unnecessary distractions, and generally unproductive bad behavior.

Faith and trust, my friends. That’s the secret sauce. Please lean into the best possible interpretation of events and actions with me, your current Interim Minister, and then, your next minister. And, just as importantly, with one another. Keep faith until it has been proven that faith has been broken.

You might wonder where I’ve gotten this idea of “the church of not being horrible.” It’s a kind of peculiar way to put it, eh? The phrase originates with liberal Christian pastor John Pavlovitz. He pens a very popular blog called “Things That Need to Be Said,” and I respect him a great deal. I wish this blog had been around to share with the good people of Anywhere, MA in 2000.

Here’s what he has to say, verbatim about The Church of Not Being Horrible. This description is as good a rubric for our own congregational visioning as I have ever heard. “I’m tired,” writes Pavlovitz.

“I’m tired of professed Christians preaching a Jesus that they seem to have no interest at all in emulating; of religious people being a loud, loveless noise in the world while claiming to speak for a God who is

supposedly love.

I know the world is tired of such people. I'm fairly certain that God is too. I'm starting a new church—the Church of Not Being Horrible. Our mission statement is simply this: *Don't be horrible to people*: Don't treat them as less worthy of love, respect, dignity, joy, and opportunity than you are. Don't create caricatures out of them based on their skin color, their religion, their sexual orientation, the amount of money they have, the circumstances they find themselves in.

Don't seek to take away things from them that you already enjoy in abundance: civil rights, clean water, education, marriage, access to healthcare.

Don't tell someone's story for them about why they are poor, depressed, addicted, victimized, alone. Let them tell their story and believe they know it better than you do.

Don't imagine that your experience of the world is everyone's experience of the world; that the ease, comfort, support, affection you have received are universal. Don't be preoccupied with how someone experiences the sacred, how they define family, who they love. Cultivate *your* faith, family, and intimate relationships alone.”

Pavlovitz continues: “The central question at any given moment in the church is: *Am I being horrible right now?* If one concludes that they are, they endeavor to not do so. If they are unsure, they allow other people to help them see their horrible blind spots of privilege, prejudice, and ignorance—and then they respond. In other words, our sacred calling is to be decent, to be kind, to be compassionate, to be whatever it is that we believe this place is lacking: to be the kind of people the world needs—and it definitely needs less horrible these days.

The Church of Not Being Horrible will gather every week to celebrate the inherent goodness of people. We'll share stories of the ways we succeeded in being less than horrible to our families, coworkers, and strangers, and we'll challenge ourselves to be even less horrible in the coming week. We'll do this faithfully, repeatedly, and passionately, and hopefully we'll begin to watch the world around us gradually become less angry, less bitter, less painful—less horrible.”

“I'm not sure such religion will catch on, Pavlovitz muses, “as being horrible seems to be trending these days among religious people, but I think it's worth a shot. I think it might alter the homes, marriages, and communities we're living in, if not the planet we're standing on.

It might renovate our very hearts, themselves so prone to being horrible. It

might help us become the best version of ourselves that we are able to be. If you're interested in joining the church, you don't need to pray a magic prayer. You don't have to recite any creeds."

"There are no theological or bureaucratic hoops to jump through," he tells us. "There is no conversion, there is only commencement. You simply begin, right where you are, in this very moment—seeking to be less horrible to the people you live with, work with, come across in the street, interact with online, see from a distance. That's it. It may seem like a low bar to set, but it's actually a beautiful and somewhat novel aspiration lately for a congregation: making the world less cruel, less violent, less insulting—less horrible.

If you feel like that might be a religion worthy of your days: let's have some church, friends."

This sounds like a place I'd like to be part of. How about you? In what ways could Beacon UU further grown into this paradigm? Your future search committee, (and the one that chose me) are people whom you trust, aren't they? They will select a good person. A new minister will be amongst you when we conclude our time together. .Will he/she/they be well-met? Do you need this person to look like you? Think like you? Believe like you? Do you hold these expectations of me, of one another?

In the words of the Rev. Nancy McDonald Ladd, will you "put your acceptance in boxes, prefacing it with qualifications: I will love you if – I will see you if – I will bear the truth of my soul alongside you if – and only if –You agree with me, you stand like me, you act like me, you sing like me, you wear your gender on your sleeve and produce it upon demand." "If and only if you give evidence of your good liberal values. If and only if you never fail to speak the language of the movement?"

We become so used to ourselves that we don't always have an accurate picture of our projections or our expectations until they pounce out into the clearing like a tiger. At home, we don't see the clutter or dust bunnies. At church, we may not recognize the cracks in the covenant. That's why interim ministry is a gift of growing self-awareness.

Friends, we do not need to be perfect, or even close. How boring would that be? But we do need to be "not horrible" in all the ways Pavlovitz so articulately names. My colleague Elea Kemler charmingly lifts up her own imperfect congregation in her reflection – "The Church Where Everything Goes Wrong."

We recognize this too, right? It makes us human and real and a messy marvelous group of humans, doing our best with what we got. It's what ministers long to find when we enter service amongst you – self-aware, perfectly imperfect non-horrible people.

The Rev. Kemler, who has served since 2000 at the First Parish of Groton, MA, brings it home with her loving poke at the announcement out of order, the crying baby relay, the absent flowers, the annoying buzz in the microphone. She laments: "I imagine a God shaking his or her head and saying, "What in the world are they doing over there? This is what they call church? What were they thinking?"

Yet, Kemler mines the beauty of it all, too, musing that "But I also imagines a God who is touched and maybe a little honored by our efforts, however halting, to worship and give praise. I imagine a God who is moved by our attempts to care for one another and to name the things we know as holy."

"There is a warmth in this congregation that is new to me, a simple friendliness that shines through the fumbings and failures, a love that makes the ragged edges smooth. I have always wanted to believe, really believe, that our mistakes aren't the most important parts of us. I have always wanted to believe that kindness and compassion matter more than anything. She concludes: I sense that I can learn this here."

May this congregation, this church of not being horrible, offer the same learning opportunity to all who enter these doors, whether they inhabit the pulpit or the pew.

May the life-affirming realization of the Rev. Roger Butts come to mind when we falter in faith and trust of one another; "may we be guided every day as we confront tragedy, tears, resilience and hope by the idea that every person we encounter here at Beacon, and beyond, holds a goodness, a purposeful goodness, at the very core of their being, too."

May this be a vision worthy of our days and in Pastor Pavolvitz's words: "let's have some church, friends."

Blessed be. Blessed we. And Amen.

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