

Here I Am, Send Me ©

A sermon by the Rev. Lee Bluemel
Preached at the Ordination of the Rev. Wendy Edith Page
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Reading: O Send Forth Me, written and read by the Rev. Tess Baumberger

**O, send forth me, spirit, forth to do well my work,
work of my life, of my living.**

May this my life touch healingly, lovingly, those in greatest need.

**May I bear witness to my faith,
even when to do so seems too great a risk.**

**O, send forth me, spirit, yet leave a tap root here to sustain me
and to twine with roots of lovely, loving others,
whose spirits have welled a while with mine.**

Sermon:

In the Hebrew scriptures when the prophet Isaiah is called to his new vocation, God appears to him on a high and lofty throne in a place that is shaking on its foundations, filled with smoke and full of heavenly beings called seraphs- each of whom has six wings. It's all rather dramatic, this call from God! Indeed, such a scene might give most of us pause.

Not Isaiah.

It shakes him to his core, of course, seeing God and all those seraphs. But when God says "*Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?*", Isaiah says without hesitation, "*Here am I; send me!*"

It seems the Biblical prophets can be divided into two camps when it comes to responding to God's call. Some are reluctant and try to avoid God, or suggest that perhaps there is someone else out there better suited to the task. I think of Moses, far too self-conscious of his stuttering, or Jonah, who hates his assignment and runs away to hide.

Then there are those prophets who willingly and eagerly respond to a divine summons.

I think of Mary, the mother of Jesus, who does not hide when the angel Gabriel appears, but says, "Here am I". Or Isaiah, who says "*Here am I; send me!*" – eager to go on some divine errand despite all that smoke and shaking of the foundations, despite not knowing what his assignment will be, where it will take him, what it will ask of him or who he will encounter along the way.

How might *we* respond when called to some new and sacred work? Some of us might be among the reluctant ones. Others- willing and eager to begin. Wherever any of *us* might be, I dare say that Wendy falls into this latter category.

At a time when some people might start plotting their retirement, Wendy, you decided to leave your career, begin divinity school and become an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister. You did this willingly, eagerly! It was a big project, and today, we will pass that ordination milestone on the way to a larger goal: fulfilling a new purpose and call to interfaith chaplaincy. This next chapter in your life will be a big project, too.

Fortunately, anyone who grows up on a farm, or bikes 100 miles at a time, or reads 100 assigned books in a year is not easily thwarted!

This is good because we come to this ordination in a time thirsty for ministry.

Merely one year ago, I suspect few of us would have foreseen the depths of division, anger and fear evident today in our nation.

It is a time of polarization.

It is a time when turning our neighbors into “the other” is part of the air we breathe.

Humans have a tendency to do this, especially in times of anxiety: to sort themselves into tribal groups and turn others into the enemy.

So it certainly doesn't help when those impulses are fanned into flames by those at the highest levels of our government,

those who wish to capitalize on divisions based on class, ethnicity, religion, politics, gender, gender identity, immigration status, age and health.

We see them wielding the art of divisiveness,

when what we need more than ever

is an appreciation of our common humanity

and our fragile, interdependent reality.

There is a human cost to this, a societal cost, a personal and spiritual cost.

The evidence is clear. We come to this hour of ordination in a country

caught in the grip of its addictions- to white supremacy, opioids and guns. (*Amen? Amen!*)

It's a country hoodwinked by those who deny science or the worth of all people. (*Amen!*)

It's a country that seems to have forgotten the basic ethical mandate

to welcome strangers and protect widows and orphans-

rather than create more of them through violence, war

or the forcible separation of parents and children

through mass incarceration and deportation. (*Amen!*)

Many of us feel powerfully, strongly about these issues...

so much so that it is seductive to demonize *our* enemies.

It can be a spiritual challenge for us to *not be overcome with hate*

for those behind these ethical travesties...

and then *expand* those feelings to those with whom we disagree,

or those who don't seem to care about the threats
to our children, our earth, our health, our safety.

When *so much* is at risk, it is possible to lose our own center -
our roots and our grounding in compassion and love.

"Blessed are those who trust in love, whose trust IS love,"

go the words from Jeremiah 17,

(in my adaptation- you can use your own, traditional version).

"They shall be like a tree planted by the water, sending out its roots by the stream.

They shall not fear when hate comes, and their leaves shall stay green;

in the year of drought they will not be anxious, and will not cease to bear fruit."

Blessed are those who trust in love, in God.

They shall not fear when hate comes.

In the year of drought they will not be anxious.

The truth is, that's easier said than done.

It is a *faithful* struggle to name what we see as evil,
the willing violation of the vulnerable by powerful persons and systems.

It is a faithful *struggle* to be clear about who we stand with and why.

It is *also* a faithful struggle to try to keep seeing the humanity,
the sacredness in all others- no matter who they are.

I have one of those signs in my front yard
that says "Hate Has No Home Here".

Every time I pull into my driveway,

I am reminded of how easy it is for *me* to feel hateful.

And I remember that the sign is as much for me
as it is a declaration of resistance to the world.

Of course, resistance is what we're all about these days- amen? (*Amen!*)
At this particular historical moment,
our Association of congregations is focused on resistance and public witness--

on the need for Unitarian Universalists to bring their moral voice into the public square. And yet this is *not* the focus of the ministry to which we ordain Wendy Page today.

As a Unitarian Universalist minister called to interfaith chaplaincy, there will be no social justice banners unfurled at her places of ministry. There will be no petitions, press conferences or marches. I'm sorry Wendy, but you'll have to do all of that on your off hours! I know you'll be busy.

Hers will be primarily a *different* sort of public ministry, a ministry of presence, of kindness, of deep listening- *no matter who is doing the talking.* Of course, such spiritual practices- presence, kindness and deep listening- are good habits for us all. They are practices that can serve as a counter-balance and corrective to the divisions and hate within our neighborhoods... and even within our own hearts.

The ministry to which we ordain Wendy today is a ministry of literally being "on call". She will be called to the bedsides of an incredibly diverse cross-section of humanity, because cancer, disease, dementia and disability can come to us all. She will be called to those in pain, those who are anxious or confused, those who are sick, or very very sick.

They might be rich or poor, young or old, Democrat or Republican, Capitalist or Socialist, but *all* will likely be feeling much more vulnerable than usual. In a world of medical sterility, Wendy will be called to offer a human touch, a human connection, and say, simply, "*Here I am.*"

I suspect that *most* of the people Wendy ministers to will not ask her what faith she is. Some who *do* ask will not understand when she says "Unitarian Universalist".

Some won't really care that she is UU, *part of the Resistance-*
which is like most of our neighbors and co-workers.

They *will* care that she is kind. They will care that she listens.
They will care that she truly sees them and respects their humanity.
They will care that when they called for someone
she willingly, eagerly, quietly appeared, saying "*Here I am.*"

There may be times when folks don't want to see her,
or forget her visits from one day to the next, which- I tell you- is humbling.
But there will also be times, in this ministry, when her presence
or the touch of her hand will become a sacred moment.
Our mere presence, or the touch of a hand, can be *sacred*.

Just the other day I was listening to a story on the radio
about a guy named Ron Hoffman,
who runs an organization called Compassionate Care ALS. Maybe you heard it too.

Ron's outfit helps about 500 people navigate the living and dying with ALS.
He drives all over the place, delivering special equipment,
offering emotional support to patients and caregivers as they face the disease.
He is clearly a man with a mission.

At the end of the piece, the story shifted from his present work
to Ron's childhood. The reporter, Lisa Mullins, said:

*"When (Ron) was growing up in Richmond, Virginia,
his father was an alcoholic and frighteningly abusive to his mother.
One night, when Hoffman was 10, his father pointed a gun at his mother.
Hoffman dove in front of her, and a bullet pierced his side.
It lodged at the base of his spine.*

*Hoffman calls it a "sacred bullet," because being shot
led to a moment he considers sacred.
He was on a gurney at the door to the hospital,*

when an orderly met him and put a hand on his shoulder.

"I just felt the warmth and love of his hand," Hoffman recalls.

"And he just looked at me and said, 'Ronnie, I'm here.'

It was a moment that I've never forgotten all my life.

Someone was actually there for me."

There are many ways for the church to be present to those who are vulnerable and alone.

This ministry to which we ordain Wendy today is one of those ways- a most *intimate* way to convey the presence of love, of God.

All sorts of people will call her to their side.

They might have a different taste in presidents than her.

They might not believe in climate change... or recycling!

They might even be overtly racist, sexist, homophobic or partake in a host of other UU sins.

But that probably won't come up, because where Wendy is called, the issues will be far more immediate and personal:

Will I continue to live, or am I dying soon?

What choices do I have and how will I make them?

How will I live with this pain, disability, or diagnosis?

What is my next step?

What, exactly, is hope?

How will I make peace with my life, my family?

How will I say goodbye?

Must I bear this pain and sorrow alone?

Am I all alone here?

Am I alone?

**O, send forth me, spirit, forth to do well my work,
work of my life, of my living.
May this- my life- touch healingly, lovingly, those in greatest need.**

Wendy, you bring so much to this ministry.
You bring the eye of an artist, the passion of an advocate and the grace of a mentor.
You bring the habit of deep listening and meeting people where they are.
You bring a UU ability to translate and code-switch when speaking religious language.
You bring an utter lack of interest in proselytizing or converting anyone.

You bring a UU theology of *accompaniment-*
of being present to each other through all that life brings, even fear and loss.
You bring our Universalist theology and your own conviction
that *there is nothing to fear after death.*

And you bring your life: your farm girl's connection to the earth,
your childhood experience of deep, destabilizing loss,
the saving care of your childhood church.
You bring the experience of diagnosis, facing your mortality,
and undergoing treatment with no faith community to support you.
And then being sick yet again, but this time *with* the love of faith community
evident all around you.
You bring all this and so much more-- including all of us.

Of course, there are too many of us to fit into a hospital room,
and who wants that many people around?
But we have invested in you, and send our love with you.
Our roots are twined with yours.

Wendy, we send you forth to go eagerly, willingly
where the rest of us cannot go.
We humbly ask you to offer a ministry of presence, kindness, and deep listening
on our behalf... no matter who has called you to their side.

And in the days ahead, when you hold the hand or touch the shoulder of a patient who calls you, you might remember this day and the moment that we lay our hands on your shoulders, all of us connected. Know that in such sacred moments, you bring not *only* the love of God and your own heart, but the love and warmth of these two congregations, your colleagues, friends and family.

Wendy, you are truly rooted and grounded in Love.

May this be so, for us all.

Amen.