

## "Feeling Stuck?"

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tamara Lebak, Associate Minister  
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, May 22, 2011

I am so glad to see all of you!

May 22, 2011 might just be a good day to start taking attendance – take a look around you and make a note of who isn't here. Although, I'm not sure whether a sanctuary full of Unitarians tells us much about whether or not the rapture occurred yesterday or not. In honor of The Rapture that Wasn't, I'd like to take a quick dip into the Gospel of John, and remind you this morning of a man named Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the Jewish ruling council during the time of Jesus, and is mentioned *only* in the Gospel of John.

Before I went to seminary, all I really knew about John was John 3:16; I looked it up one day after seeing it painted on a sign held up during a major sporting event on TV. In seminary, we mainly focused on Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In these gospels, Jesus' followers proclaim that Jesus performed miracles, but Jesus himself is more mysterious in his replies about who he is. It is in John where Jesus is portrayed as speaking specifically to his divinity, but only to his disciples. The miracles in John are also different than the other gospels, including raising Lazarus from the dead, and Jesus' teaching parables are not present. John doesn't get much air time in Unitarian sanctuaries, and it is a *particular*, more fundamentalist interpretation of John that drives many to feel the need to clarify *your* interpretation of Jesus.

So where was I? Oh yes...so in light of The Rapture, I was reading about and wanted to share with you the story of Nicodemus. You see, Nicodemus was stuck. He found himself in quite a predicament. Nicodemus was an influential leader of his people, but his people were being oppressed under the rule of the Roman Empire. Nicodemus' Judaism told him that God loved the Jews and despised the Gentiles. Nicodemus' Judaism told him that if Israel would just straighten up their act and get right with God, God would oust the Romans and set his people free so that they could seek revenge on their oppressors. Nicodemus' people were fighting amongst themselves – they were

angry at the Romans, they were angry at one another. And so we find Nicodemus looking for a new perspective; it was then when he sought out the radical rabbi Jesus. Jesus tells Nicodemus in John, “No one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

What does that mean? There are lots of people today who believe that they have a monopoly on what that means. When Nicodemus hears Jesus say this, he himself responds with skepticism. “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!” Well, certainly not. But what if being born again is when we break free of that feeling of being stuck, that feeling of being tied down or chained up? What if being born again is that feeling of being completely open to any and all possibilities? What if being born again is the feeling of being connected to everyone and everything? Some would call that being filled with the Spirit, maybe you might call it a feeling of purpose. Do you know what I am talking about?

Well, if you don’t know the feeling of being set free, surely you can identify with the feeling of being stuck: that grating feeling of being dissatisfied with how things are, paralyzed in the present either because the outcome of your future is completely unknown, or paralyzed because you feel trapped in such a predictable rut that it feels you couldn’t possibly escape. Have you been stuck, church? When you feel as though you have tried everything and nothing has worked, and you are exhausted. It’s those places in your life where you have given up, or “settled.” Maybe you have felt stuck in a relationship, or in a job. Maybe you have felt stuck in uncertainty, paralyzed between too many choices. Or maybe you have been stuck in someone else’s narrative of your life.

Jeff and Lisa married right out of college. They met their freshman year and seemed to be made for one another. They shared interests and friends, and seemed to get along. Lisa told herself that Jeff was supposed to be the perfect husband, All of their friends were envious of their relationship. Their senior year, Jeff proposed and Lisa said yes. They did everything they were supposed to do...and that actually was the problem. Lisa told me the day of the wedding, she knew marrying Jeff wasn’t right. All this time that

they had been dating, Lisa had not truly been honest with Jeff about her feelings and dreams. Not wanting to be negative and fearful of being rejected, she had sacrificed being real. She sacrificed being true to herself because she hadn't yet figured out how.

Author Martha Beck writes,

Our hearts are imprisoned for just one reason: the only language they can speak is the truth. Unlike the mind, which can be persuaded to accept the most bizarre ideas, your heart tells it like it is, without bothering to be tactful or socially appropriate. Free hearts rock boats, break rules, do things that disrupt the system – whether the system is a dysfunctional family, a bloated bureaucracy, or the whole wide world. As a result, few of us speak the truth out loud. All our lives we've been hearing things like "what you are thinking/feeling/saying/becoming, etc. is stupid/rude/scandalous/sinful/depressing/ridiculous/unoriginal, etc. All the infinite variations on this theme convey just one message: silence your heart or you will be rejected. Rejection hurts our little social-mammal hearts so much that just the threat of it convinces most of us to cooperate with our enemies. First we go dumb, learning never to speak our deepest truths. Then we go deaf, refusing to hear our own souls. To release your heart you simply reverse the two-step process by which you locked it up. First you begin to listen for messages from your heart – messages you may have been ignoring since childhood. Next you must take the daring, risky step of expressing your heart in the outside world. It's lucky this process is so simple, because it's also terrifying.

Lisa had not been listening to her heart. After the ceremony Lisa and Jeff fought more than they ever had – loud voices and throwing things. They both began to spend more and more time at work and less time at home, and both of them began to lubricate their time together with alcohol. Just before their one year anniversary, Lisa came to see me and said that she felt completely stuck.

What we discovered together was that Lisa had never really been clear with Jeff about any of her feelings of doubt or discomfort. Her fear of rejection trapped her into a relationship that fit a cultural narrative of what marriage was "supposed to look like," but it did not fit her own story. When Lisa finally had the courage to tell Jeff how she felt, Jeff turned a deaf ear to her pain and struggle, and refused to go to counseling. Instead of them both getting real with one another for what could have been the first time speaking heart-to-heart, they decided they could not work it out from where they were,

and instead chose to divorce. Lisa was living someone else's version of her story that she could no longer bear. It is in these times when I love the metaphor of being born again; of shedding our old skin and becoming a better *us* than we could have ever imagined. I am happy to report that Lisa has gone on to marry a second time, and has been in that very open and honest relationship for over twenty years.

Another way of feeling stuck in someone else's narrative about our lives is when we feel stuck in someone else's theology – when we become aware that the religion we are being sold is not large enough to contain all of who we are. When we let other people label our experiences of the HOLY that are confining and narrow. For most people the recognition that we're stuck, whether it's a career situation or a broader life situation, creeps up rather than presents itself suddenly. For most people it comes through feelings first: of being frustrated, maybe even feeling a persistently bad mood, a lack of energy, a lack of passion. And along with that, typically, is a self-blame, a feeling that there is something wrong with us. If we can keep from internalizing the problem and realize that our feeling stuck is a reaction to the change process...if we can keep from blaming ourselves and see that we are on the edge of change...we can gain the traction we need to move forward.

Sometimes breaking away from feeling stuck takes creativity. The kind of feeling stuck I am talking about is persistent. Maybe the place in your life where you are stuck feels like a rock in your shoe that you are trying to ignore, and you just keep on walking even though every single step is painful. I heard a wonderful story the other day about a woman who was at a charity event that was raising money by selling Oprah Winfrey's clothing. There were all kinds of clothes in many different sizes, God bless our Oprah (she has been many shapes and sizes over the years). Anyway, this woman was in the middle of her own *stuck* experience. She was at a crossroads: she had lost her job and was not sure what she was being called to do in the world. And so at this charity event, this woman found an inexpensive pair of black shoes that Oprah had once worn. Now, they were a size ten and she was only a size seven, but it didn't matter...something drove her to buy those shoes. Over the next few months, when she was trying to sort through her stuck place, this woman would put on Oprah's shoes and walk around her house in

Oprah's shoes, to do *something* differently than she ever had before. And it helped her sort through her situation and get clear about what she wanted to do in her profession. Standing in Oprah's shoes inspired her to go back to school. Ironically, standing in Oprah's shoes helped her to believe in her own self. Sometimes it just takes getting creative, and doing one small thing differently than we ever have before, that can shift our entire experience.

If we could embrace our stuckness, be more gentle with ourselves when we find ourselves in those stuck places... Sometimes when we relax and care for ourselves, and quit forcing the issue, clarity comes. Most importantly, let me suggest that the feeling of being stuck is actually a wonderful thing! Feeling stuck actually means that you have become aware of an acceptance of mediocrity in some area of your life. Let me say that again: Feeling stuck actually means that you have become aware of an acceptance of mediocrity in some area of your life. So many people have accepted mediocrity; it is as though they are sleepwalking through certain portions of their life. The feeling of being stuck is our body telling us it is tired of being passive; telling us it is time for us to carefully, deliberately, and intentionally act, do, or feel; telling us it is time to ask for help or accept the help that has been offered to us.

Feeling stuck means that we are aware that if we keep doing what we have always been doing, then we will continue to be in exactly the same place. Feeling stuck means we are being called to do *something* differently, that we are on the precipice, on the verge of doing something about it. Sometimes we need help getting clear, someone else to help us see that it is from this fertile ground of awareness that we will make a significant change. It is from this place that we can find what is truly meaningful to us, what is valuable, what we are passionate about. Feeling stuck is a natural part of significant change. We don't have to put on Oprah's shoes to have our own, "Aha!"

I have come to realize that for me, no matter how hard I try, that if I have gotten myself stuck I cannot *think* my way out of *feeling* stuck. I have to *do* something differently. That might be acting, praying, or feeling my way out of it. If it is life's circumstances that have me stuck, then taking one small step that is within the realm of my power is often the key to getting unstuck.

So the next time life stops you in your tracks – in traffic, for example – pay attention to how you respond. When we are stuck by life's circumstances, do we add to the problem? Do we in fact make it worse? Am I the only one who has done that? Or do we see it as an opportunity to pray for the other drivers on the road? An opportunity to daydream about our heart's desires and what we might do about it...an opportunity to get present with ourselves? As we learn to live paying attention to our stuckness as an opportunity, and being true to our own feelings, every choice we make becomes another way of telling your story, calling your tribe, and liberating not only our heart but the hearts of others.

Maybe this is what Jesus means by being born again. We cannot see the Kingdom when we are stuck; our future is unknown, we are blind to the possibilities before us. Unless we are born again. Unless we are freed from settling with mediocrity. Being present and awake, feeling connected and with a sense of purpose, is what makes all-too-human people and societies capable of true humanity. Paying attention to where you are stuck will chart you a life's journey as unique and authentic as your fingerprint, and with a bit of creativity and risk, send you out full of hope and breathtaking exhilaration onto paths you never thought you could travel, born again. It is the way you were meant to exist: born again and again and again, continuing to change and grow. If you stop to listen, you'll realize that your heart has been telling you so all along.

Nicodemus was stuck, and although he questioned Jesus' call to be born again, he realized that in order to get out of his rut and into the grove he had to do something differently. Maybe we can learn from Nicodemus by asking the question, is this life we are living now what God intended? Is this the life our hearts call us to live? If it is not, then do one thing within your power today to change it. Take a breath; speak from your heart; seek help; make the phone call; treat yourself like you would your best friend; put on a new pair of shoes – or at least stop long enough to take the rock out of the shoes you are wearing. Do something, *one thing* differently.

We do not have to wait for The Rapture to live our lives unstuck. We can create the Kingdom of Heaven right here on Earth for ourselves and for the world.