

A Time of Harvest, a homily by the Rev. Dawn Skjei Cooley
Delivered as a part of the Lammas service on July 31, 2016
First Unitarian Church, Louisville, KY

As Christe shared with you, Lammas is the time of the first fruits of the harvest, a time for honoring the passing of the season, and the time for making space for new adventures. I would like to reflect on this more personally and institutionally for a few minutes.

Lammas is the time of the first harvest of the season. Those of you who are friends and members of the congregation should have gotten a letter in the past few days that shared with you that I have accepted a job with the Southern Region of our Unitarian Universalist Association. I will be consulting with congregations who need support, advice, help, training, and more. I'll be focusing on how to help congregations adapt to the changing religious landscape we're in – an area that has become not just my passion but which I've realized is my calling, my vocation. This means that my last day with you will be October 23.

In so many ways, I feel like *I* am being harvested. You have nurtured my ministry and allowed me to thrive. You have created a hospitable environment and I have grown. To stretch the metaphor, I feel like a crop of alfalfa - when I came, there was deep conflict and pain here. The congregation was wounded, but wanted to be whole again. Like soil that had been over harvested, you were tired. Alfalfa is a marvelous crop, for not only does it go on to be harvested to nourish other life, at the same time it puts nutrients *back* into the soil, so that the next crop (whether it is soybeans or corn or something else entirely) will be more productive. As you nurtured my ministry, I nurtured yours, and your soil is now fertile and rich once again.

Rev. Jack Mendelsohn once said something along the lines of how great ministers and great congregations create each other – and that is the work we have been about for the last 7 years. You've nurtured and grown me into a great minister. The Rev. Scott Tayler, head of

Congregational Life for the UUA, asked me to tell you “Thank you!” - thank you for growing such a fine minister. And thank you, he said, for sharing her with our larger faith tradition.

And in the process of nurturing each other, you have rediscovered *your* own greatness as a congregation. In our time together I've seen you develop into a congregation that says “Yes!” - one that is generous, that has an abundance of resources, that takes risks. You are a congregation that is grounded in your mission, that strives to be a force for good in the community, that's not afraid to take an unpopular stand if you know it is the right course of action to take. You have instilled in me knowledge of what is possible in our faith – of the transformation that can come when people truly work together and live our principles.

We have nurtured and grown with each other. And so now it is time for me to be harvested, to be sent off and take all that I have learned and help use it to nurture others. Which brings us to Christe's second point – that Lammas is the time to acknowledge and honor the passing of the seasons. The reality is that ministers are transient, but the ministry is permanent. In the coming weeks and months, we will have a chance to honor all we have done together. We will have a chance to reflect on the past 7 years. A chance to cry and grieve, as well as a chance to celebrate. My entire job for the next 3 months is to leave well. That started last week, actually. Today, I will be available after the service for as long as you need me to be, and in the coming weeks and months I am available to meet with you, to process, to say goodbye.

It has been quite a while since this congregation has experienced a healthy departure of the minister, and my plan is to do exactly that. I am not leaving out of conflict, I am not angry, I am not frustrated. I love you. And I know you love me, even if you are angry or disappointed right now. And so in our saying goodbye, in our honoring of the changing of the seasons, we will honor the love that we have shared. This means allowing ourselves to experience the full

spectrum of grief. Be angry with me if you need to. Be sad. Be excited for me. You can feel betrayed. Abandoned. Hopeful. Confused. Feel whatever it is you need to feel – we can work through it. Call me and yell at me on the phone – I won't hang up because I will know it is a natural part of the grieving process. We have to feel *all* the feels. That is okay, that is normal, and indeed, that is healthy. Because we will get through it. All will be well.

And then, finally, as Christe said, Lammas is about making space for new adventures. Certainly, I will be having adventures in my new position. The Southern Region is an exciting place to be but it will be weird to be not be writing sermons each week, weird to not have a congregation whose life I know well but instead to be available to over 100 who I'm mostly unfamiliar with. Frankly, I have a lot of sadness about what I'll be giving up with you – parish ministry is unique in how you allow a minister into your lives. It has been a privilege.

Meanwhile you, also, will be embarking on a new adventure. Your Board is already hard at work figuring out what the first stage will be. You may have an interim minister coming in a few short months, or it might be longer – trust your board – they are fabulous. At some point, you'll start thinking about what you want in your *next* settled minister – what amazing gifts and talents they might share with you.

Some of you might be a bit afraid. Those of you who are newer might not know that the process that ended up with me being here was rather difficult for the church. There was a 2 year interim, but no minister said “Yes” to settling here and so there was another year of interim. I cannot imagine that would be the case this time. Last time, back in 2007, you were still emerging from what we call a negotiated resignation of you minister. Ministers were, not surprisingly, nervous about coming here given that. Additionally, the compensation package you were offering was at the very bottom of the acceptable range – and your other staff positions were not

fair compensation either. AND, if that weren't enough, you were an urban congregation that didn't have a strong sense of mission in its community - which really isn't very surprising, since you were just coming out of a time of deep conflict!

But that is night and DAY from where you are now. With our ministry together, you have proven the negotiated resignation of your previous settled minister was an aberration in your history, not a new trend. You offer all your staff fair compensation, and due to some happily beneficial geographic re-indexing, the minister's package is in the mid-range. Your pledging is up, your finances are more sustainable, and, perhaps most importantly, you are grounded in your mission in the community. You are the type of congregation ministers dream about – you should be able to find an excellent one.

Are you perfect? Of course, not. This is a human institution, made up of imperfect human beings. But you are more than good enough. I adore your earnestness, I adore your willingness to take risks in your desire to grow your spiritual maturity. I adore your ability to engage in healthy conflict, how you rise to the occasion time and time again. You will be okay. You are resilient. You are loving. You are a congregation that has the capacity to remind ministers WHY we went into ministry, and that, my friends, is no small feat.

One of the hardest things to do is leave someone you love. And I love you. I hope that is obvious. So let us embrace our grief, let us celebrate our time left, and let us practice together the art of saying good bye, as we each prepare for the new adventures that await us. In this way, we honor the wheel of the year in our own lives. May it be so. Blessed be.