

## **“To Be or Not To Be”**

1 Peter 1:3-9; Excerpts from Michelle Obama’s **“Becoming”**  
by Rev. Don Ludwig (May 1, 2022)

### **Becoming**

I was reflecting on the changes that have happened all around us in society and the church and was reminded of the book “Becoming” by Michelle Obama, former first lady of the U.S. She writes, “For me, becoming isn’t about arriving somewhere or achieving a certain aim, I see it instead as a forward motion, a means of evolving, a way to reach continuously toward a better self.” She adds, “the journey never ends.”

Her words resonate for me for obvious reasons but when I think about Southminster, we too are in a state of becoming. The pandemic and the state of our world these past few years and in our recent experiences as a community of faith, there has been a lot of shifting and moving and growing and changing, morphing and developing. All of it suggests becoming. The impact of internal and external forces such as the changing demographics, the increasing cultural and political divides, rising inflation, an unjust war, and just the overall clash of values (like the “Don’t Say Gay” bill in Florida law recently passed that bans “gay” education till third grade)—all have had an impact on who we are as a community. We are not the same as we were even three years ago. So in some cases we are hitting the refresh button, we are leaving some things behind, and we are collectively looking ahead to what is to come. We are becoming.

Hamlet once said, “To be or not to be?, that is the question”. Shakespear discusses how painful and miserable human life is, and how death would be preferable, were it not for the fearful uncertainty of what comes after death. To be or not to be? This morning, I want to make that question a bit less existential and more about self discovery and growth. All of us are on a journey that can certainly be miserable at times. But on this journey, some of us remain static and others are more dynamic—some of us are continually becoming and others are not.

As I think about Southminster in the years ahead of us—as we in fact “become”—the words that come to mind are equity-minded, other-centered, and openness to evolving.

### **Equity-Minded**

A strong commitment of our church is to racial equity, social justice and inclusivity. This means that we seek ways to embrace others who are different and are courageous to challenge systems that unfairly treat them because of those differences. Sometimes it is not easy or comfortable—it means that we are committed to becoming aware of our

hidden biases and faulty assumptions and taking steps to change our language and our perspectives. Sometimes we stumble, but we recognize that becoming is not about perfection but about growth.

I recall an experience in 2017 when my family traveled to Australia. For five days, we stayed at our Pakistani friend's home, the Yousef's, who live in Brisbane. We were treated like royalty. They were so good to us. Every day we ate Pakistani food and laughed together like we had known each other our whole lives. It soon became very apparent that their political and religious views had become very different from ours—but that didn't matter. There were cultural differences too: the men did not shake hands with unknown women. Yet, our differences did not keep us or break us apart but deepened our conversations to a place I never expected.

There are huge differences in how conservative and progressives see the world. There are huge differences in cultures and religious experiences. I admit that I am on a journey of understanding those differences. Admittedly, I have sometimes hardened my heart to some people and labeled them before I get to know them. I am working on trying to recognize my hidden biases and not let them become the basis for misguided assumptions. It is not easy. I would much rather not do the hard work of dialogue. It is easier to walk away. But I am working on staying in the conversation for the sake of our shared humanity.

Five years ago, after visiting Australia actually, I recognized that I did not have many people of color or Republicans or people of other religions for that matter, in my current circle of influence. I looked at my Facebook newsfeed and there was very little evidence that they even exist. I realized that most of the blame was on my lack of intentionality in seeking out friendships across differences. White privilege. So I made it a goal to meet someone who looked different than me every quarter. This led to the development of a dialogue group at Clark College with five people of color who meet once a month for support and conversation. Hands down, the best thing I have ever done. Today my circle of influence and my Facebook newsfeed is much more diverse.

Theologian Frederick Buechner writes: "...to grit your teeth and clench your fists in order to survive the world at its harshest and worst—is, by that very act, to be unable to let something be done for you and in you that is more wonderful still."

Sheltering ourselves from those whom we may disagree with or who are culturally different only serves to isolate us further from each other. We miss out on something that is more wonderful. It may be more secure and bring us solace to be in community with those who are like-minded and look like us in most ways, but that is not the vision

of our Beloved community—and by itself will lead to isolation and loneliness and shortsightedness.

Who are the people that you have either shut out or simply don't have in your circle of influence? Maybe, it is time for you and me to "move closer"—to become intentional about widening our circle of influences. Our Pakistani friends in Australia differ from us in so many ways—but it's hard to hate close up. We need to reach continuously toward our better selves—to become—To Be or Not To Be?

### **Other-Centered**

Becoming reminds us also that we are all on a journey. None of us have arrived at being fully inclusive. We strive for excellence in all that we do at Southminster: from our excellent music ministry, to the Art Show, to Adult Education, we don't just do mediocre here. We do things excellently. Michelle Obama writes, "If we want to reach the potential of our ability to contribute significantly to building a better world, our challenge is this: our excellence lies to a great degree to the initiatives of individuals."

Perhaps our biggest challenge is trying to do too many things. And sometimes we can become so focused on our close contacts that we lose sight of others. A member of the church recently shared with me her observation that a visitor to Southminster was left by himself at coffee hour with no one connecting with him for over 10 minutes (just three weeks ago).

There was a study conducted at Princeton Theological Seminary about five years ago. Students studying to be ministers were asked to reflect on the Good Samaritan parable and then give a short speech about it. These ministry students at Princeton were being set up for an experiment they didn't know was taking place. The students were sent rushing from one building on campus to another to give their prepared speech about this parable on mercy. Unbeknownst to them, they were set up to pass an injured person in need of help along the way, and the researchers were curious to find out how many of them would actually stop and help.

Believe it or not, few of the students actually stopped and helped the injured person. Think about that for a minute. On their way to share their theological reflection on this biblical story of helping others, most of these future ministers walked right past someone in need. In fact, one of them even stepped over the man. To be or not to be?

### **Openness to Evolving**

And finally, my hope is that we will always be open to evolving. There is an agility and nimbleness that we must maintain when we think about our evolving ministries. Various

think tanks and religious researches have noted a significant shift in religious experience—even in the past two years. For the first time in a long time, there are signs that progressive churches are slightly growing (instead of declining) and conservative churches are in fact in decline. A cultural shift is happening. Even though the “Don’t Say Gay” law in Florida passed to ban gay curriculum—it should be recognized that nearly 70% of Floridians do not agree with it.

It is clear that the future of Southminster will need to meet challenges of every stripe. Zoom or some form of it will always be with us. Family ministries will need to work with children and youth and families by providing many points of contact throughout the week rather than expecting them to always show up on Sunday morning. Specifically, what that looks like and what we choose to make our priorities moving forward is yet to be determined. Regardless, we need to take on a “Growth Mindset” and be ready to respond, come what may!

Michelle Obama talks about the process of becoming known. What are you known for? What are we known for at Southminster? Southminster is certainly a pillar in our community, known for our progressive values and commitment to welcome all races and creeds. But I would also challenge us to be known for closing opportunity gaps, closing equity gaps, known for breaking the cycle of poverty, known for our interfaith and intrafaith connections, known for our ability to evolve and become what is needed when it is needed. To Be or Not to Be?

### **How are you “becoming”?**

Wherever you are, we welcome you on our journey toward “becoming”. Southminster too is in the state of becoming. None of us have arrived. The journey never ends. As we enter our unknown future, as we tackle some challenges, some that we expect, some unexpected, let us remember that “becoming” requires patience and rigor and contemplation. As Michelle admonishes, “let us never give up on the idea that there is more growing to be done”.

So I want to encourage everyone to pause and take a deep breath. Take a moment this morning for some self-reflection. How are you doing on the road to becoming? Where do you need to be more equitable? In your busy life, do you take time or take steps to notice or meet with others who are new or different? How are you evolving as a person?

Once we answer those questions as individuals, then we can ask: “how are we doing as a community of faith?” // To Be or Not to Be? That is the question.

**A-men.**