

“The Cliffhanger”
Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Church in Boston
May 31, 2026

Have you ever been enthralled in a story—a movie or a podcast—only to have it suddenly end with some big unresolved question? There’s some stunning reveal, but then the credits start to roll. *Wait, what?!* The story ends with a cliffhanger. The story ends with a longing to stay engaged and to find out what happens next.

Throughout this church year, we have been exploring the power of Story. In *The Science of Storytelling*, journalist and author Will Storr suggests that “every story you’ll ever hear amounts to ‘something changed.’” Something changes and we want to know what happens *now*? The tension between what was, what is now happening, and what comes next draws us into stories of all kinds—love stories, stories of journey and return, stories of coming-of-age, and more.

Change is itself neutral. A change might be welcome—like when your cancer is beat or your child is born healthy and strong. But sometimes a change arrives unbidden and unwelcome—such as job cuts to your department at work, a fatal diagnosis for a loved one, or a dangerous new war. Change of many kinds simply *is* part of our stories as living beings who dwell in a complex, interwoven world.

On this Sunday, as we welcome seven new members and gather for our Annual Meeting, I want us to revisit our story as a congregation—including some of the key changes we have already weathered and some that we face today. Rather than recite yet another “history of the First Church in Boston,” I invite you instead to imagine that you are sitting down for a cup of coffee with a friend to share stories—stories about where you’ve been, what’s going on with you in this moment, and some of what you hope tomorrow might bring.

YOU might ask: So, First Church Boston, tell me a bit about yourself. Are you new to the city?

I, as First Church Boston (FCB) might say: Well, actually, I’ve been around here since the beginning. The beginning of the English city that is. Before the English arrived, the Massachusetts people and other indigenous folks were already living here. Like us, they are still around today in fact.

YOU: Woah, you’ve been here since 1630? Where did you come from? Why did you come here?

FCB: We came from England as a pretty large group hoping to create a new community in a safer place. Now don't get me wrong, we were loyal to the King, but on the whole we disagreed with the direction of the church in England. Some of us were even threatened by the church and state for our religious beliefs and actions. Putting an ocean between us and the Bishops seemed like a better plan. When we arrived here, we set up the church—under a big tree—by signing our names to a Covenant, a statement of our hope to unite together in this new place as a group committed to be faithful God as well as to mutual love and respect for each other . . . at least to try to the best of our abilities, with some grace from God.

YOU: Well, you're still here, so things must have worked out okay over the centuries?!

FCB: To be honest, trying to live in religious community can be rather difficult at times and we've not always made always made good choices. While you might say that our religious ancestors were just trying to do the right thing as they understood it, there were definitely actions we would not condone today—and frankly, that from our current point of view just seem wrong.

For example, one of the early settlers, Anne, was a brilliant thinker who spoke out with her own religious ideas. But both the civil and religious leaders rejected her ideas and her right to speak out as she did. They banned her from living here. And, about the same time, we became involved in a brutal war against the Pequot people. In the aftermath of this war, we justified enslaving both Pequot and African people, setting up a racialized system of white superiority over other races—a system that still lingers in ongoing racial prejudices as well as inequalities in generational wealth. I feel we have to be honest that our story includes significant harm to others—some of which not only hurt individuals back then but also set in motion structures of bigoted thinking and unjust actions with ongoing impact today.

YOU: Acknowledging the harm you have caused cannot be easy. Why not just leave it in the past? Why not just focus on the good stuff—or on the present?

FCB: Truthfully, we've often tried! If you read the histories of the church written fifty, one hundred, or two hundred years ago, you'd find a largely positive story. And there is much of which we are proud. Those early settlers set up a government that included the voices and votes of more people (well, men) than had been allowed in England. These systems of town meetings and even annual meetings of the church created habits of having a voice that fostered a culture that would eventually contribute to the demand for liberty and self-government in the American Revolution.

In church life too, there was a movement towards more liberty of thought, which is to say the church became less puritanical and more liberal. By the early 19^h century, we were even starting to identify as liberal Christians, although there was some hesitancy to adopt the “Unitarian” label when it first appeared 200 years ago. This liberal Christian identity lingered well into the mid 20th-century, even as there was increasing openness to modern scientific thought, humanism, and world religions.

Then, when our church burned down in 1968, it was a bleak time at first. However, we merged with the Second Church in Boston and proceeded to rebuild despite activists demanding we abandon the project and use the funds for low-income housing. For the rest of the 20th century, we really did fairly well with good numbers in worship and strong support from a number of folks—not to mention kids, families, and an excellent music program.

YOU: That sounds great! But from what I’ve heard, the more liberal and mainline churches in America have not done so well in the 21st century? Not to mention, wasn’t Covid hard on churches? How are you doing now?

FCB: It’s been tough. While our membership records have not always been the most accurate, it’s clear that we are a lot smaller than we used to be— compared to 2018, we now have about half the number of members and half as many people attending Sunday services. However, the members that remain or have joined in recent years are generally quite engaged and offer support in many ways. But with fewer folks, some things are harder . . . like recruiting enough volunteers to fill out long-standing committees and raising the same amount of money. It’s clear that things are not the same as they used to be.

YOU: It definitely sounds like things have changed. So . . . what’s next?

What is next? This is our “cliffhanger.”

And, as this is not a scripted show but real life, none of us actually know “the” answer. What happens next is what we do in response to this moment.

My hope is that we will work towards a healthy, mission-driven congregation.

Healthy can mean many things. Healthy can be a “vibe” you feel when you enter into the building. Are you happy and lighter when you move through the door? Do you feel like there is space for you here to be yourself, to share *your story*, to ask for help? Healthy can be interpersonal. It can mean building a community culture of caring support that also knows

how to manage conflict well. Do you feel like you can disagree and stay in relationship? Do you feel like when you screw up, you can apologize and repair the relationship?

Healthy can also mean institutional culture and behaviors such as clarity and transparency about how things work. Do you know who does what, who is accountable to whom, and just what the *actual* resources are that we have available to help make things happen. Do people feel like they know what's going on and/or that they trust the people making decisions on behalf of the church? Do folks know to whom to direct their questions—and do they feel as if it is *okay* to ask if they don't know?

You might be shaking your head “no” to some of these questions. Or you might be surprised to learn that the person sitting next to you is quietly shaking their head no. I am so proud of the hard work this church has done these past years to move towards a healthier place of higher trust, more mutual respect, and greater joy. We may not *yet* be where we'd like to be, but we are, I think, on the way.

As we move towards a healthier congregation, I also hope that we will engage in deeper conversations about our *mission*. What is our purpose for being beyond simply continuing to be? Our historic 1630 covenant is full of “mission” language—they knew their purpose was to follow the laws of God and the commands of Christ as laid out in the Bible. This isn't language that works for us today as a Unitarian Universalist congregation. So, what *is* our language to express our purpose in *this* moment?

In *this* moment, when we are facing numerous headwinds, including a larger environment of declining church membership. Just this week, social scientist Ryan [Burge published a Substack on Unitarian Universalists](#) which shows a membership drop of about 26% over the last decade. After evaluating various detailed demographics, his summary states:

What do I make of the Unitarians after looking at all this data? **As you can probably guess - they give me echoes of The Episcopal Church.** They are older, white, well-educated folks who tend to lean toward the left side of the ideological spectrum. Both groups have a nice core of strong givers and their long term asset portfolio is incredibly strong.

In other words, they are both facing the same problem in 30 years: a bunch of money but not a bunch of people.

Will this be First Church in 30 years? I don't think it has to be. However, to avoid this outcome, we need to attract and retain more people. But who? And how?

In Burge's book, *The Vanishing Church*, he writes, "the American political landscape has continued to sort into very conservative Republicans and incredibly progressive Democrats." This matters for religion, he argues, because studies suggest that political affiliation is *upstream* from religious affiliation. In other words, if you are a politically conservative Republican, you likely will look for an evangelical or Catholic church, both of which have moved to the right in recent decades. And, if you are an incredibly progressive Democrat, you might join a mainline Protestant church—or a UU one—or, perhaps more likely you may just join the rising ranks of those who do not claim any religious affiliation.

In *The Vanishing Church*, Burge is most concerned that we are losing the religious *middle*. As with politics, religion is polarizing and the center is eroding *fast*. It is far less likely to find a Republican and a Democrat sharing a pew today than in the 1950's or even the 1980's. I believe this is also true here at First Church. I know many of you are longtime supporters of Democrats *and* one of our prominent members was the late Eliot Richardson who infamously walked away from the Nixon administration during the Watergate scandal. And he was not the only Republican in these seats—then or perhaps even now.

So, could our mission today be attempting to hold the center, to be a moderate congregation—or, at least, a moderate Unitarian Universalist congregation?!? Burge says that the relationships and social capital built by sharing "pews" tempers polarization and the dehumanization of the "other", thereby helping to strengthen a pluralistic democracy. And yet, even as Burge relays the merits of the moderate church, he also notes how the data shows that the inclination "to [welcome] all viewpoints and political proclivities... has not proven to be a viable pathway for organizational vitality." (46) In other words, churches in the center are rapidly losing members.

So where does that leave us? Honestly, I'm not entirely sure. But I am sure that any way forward will need a healthy congregation capable of collaboration, conversations, and an openness to change. **As a nearly 400-year-old church that has moved from Puritans to pluralism, adapting to change is our story.** As the religious and political landscape changes from the 1950's, 1980's, or even the decade before Covid, we are again facing a "cliffhanger" moment of uncertainty about where our story goes now.

I invite you to stay engaged and to help us figure out what's next—for *your* sake and for the sake of all whose lives might yet be changed for the better by finding their way here.

May it be so. Ashé. Amen.