

Faith with a Backbone: *When Attention Becomes Action*
Rev. Dianne M. Daniels
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Norwich, March 29, 2026

Opening Words/Call to Worship by Rev. Dianne M. Daniels

Good morning, and welcome.

This month, we have been exploring the spiritual discipline of paying attention to ourselves, to one another, and to the world around us.

Paying attention sounds simple.
But it is anything but easy.

Because when we truly pay attention,
We begin to see more clearly.

We notice not only beauty, but also pain.
Not only connection, but also division.
Not only possibility, but also injustice.

And once we begin to see clearly,
We are faced with a deeper question:

What do we do with what we now know?

On this Palm Sunday, we remember a moment of attention
— a crowd gathering, a teacher entering the city,
Hope rising in the air.

It was a moment filled with possibility.
But it was also a moment filled with tension.

Because beneath the celebration
were deeper questions about power, justice, and what it
means to live faithfully in the world.

And that tension has not gone away.

We live in a time that asks much of our attention —
so many voices, so many stories,
so many moments that call us to notice, to care, to respond.

Our Unitarian Universalist faith does not ask us to turn away
from that reality.

It calls us to engage it — with love at the center,
and justice as a living practice.

So today, we gather at a threshold.

Between noticing and acting.
Between reflection and responsibility.

And we ask ourselves:

What does it mean to live our values with courage?

Let us enter this time together
with open hearts, steady spirits,
and a willingness to be changed by what we see.
Let us begin.

**Sermon: “Faith with a Backbone: Attention Becomes Action” by Rev. Dianne M. Daniels
Sunday, March 29, 2026 – Palm Sunday**

WHAT — When Attention Changes Us

Our theme this month has been Paying Attention.

We began by paying attention to ourselves — noticing our inner lives, thoughts, reactions, and patterns.

Then we turned outward — paying attention to one another — practicing pluralism, learning to hold tension without breaking, choosing curiosity over contempt.

And today, we arrive at a turning point. Because paying attention, if we do it honestly, does something to us.

It changes us. And changed people do not — cannot - live the same way.

Changed people act differently.

There comes a moment when attention becomes something more than awareness.

It becomes discernment.

We begin to see not only what is happening, but what it means.

We notice patterns — who is being heard and who is not.

Who is safe and who is not.

Who is thriving and who is not.

And once we see clearly, something shifts inside us.

Because we cannot unsee what we have seen.
This is where pluralism meets its limit.

Pluralism teaches us to honor difference.
To stay present. To listen deeply.

But what happens when the difference we encounter is not simply
a matter of preference or perspective, but of harm?

What happens when paying attention reveals injustice?

This is the tension at the heart of faith.
The difference between tolerance and complicity.

Tolerance says:
“I will allow this to exist.”

But there are moments when allowing something to exist means
allowing harm to continue. And that is where faith must grow a
backbone.

Palm Sunday itself is a story of this kind of tension.

It is a story of people paying attention to a moment — a teacher
entering a city, a crowd gathering, hope rising.

But beneath that moment is another reality — power, oppression,
injustice.
And the same crowd that can celebrate can also turn.

Attention alone is not enough.
Attention must lead somewhere.

In our own time, we are called to pay attention to the lives of those
who are most vulnerable.

This week, we approach International Transgender Day of Visibility. Truly honoring that day is not simply acknowledging it. There is more that must be done to honor and recognize International Transgender Day of Visibility.

It is important to pay attention.
To listen to lived experiences.
To notice patterns of harm.
To recognize where dignity is affirmed — and where it is denied.

And once we begin to see clearly, the question becomes unavoidable: What will we do with what we now know?

Because attention is not neutral.
Attention is formative.
Attention shapes what we value.
And ultimately, attention shapes how we act.

SO WHAT — Why Action Matters

So why does this matter? Why does attention need to become action?

Because without action, awareness becomes stagnation.

We can think about what matters.
We can talk about what matters.
We can even agree on what matters.
But thinking alone can only take us so far.

One of the reflections I used in preparing this sermon made it clear, so I'm going to say it again: *Thinking about what you want*

can only get you so far. It requires genuine effort and action to bring it to life.

There is a reason the phrase “actions speak louder than words” has endured for centuries.

Because at some point, our values must take form.
They must move from belief into behavior.
And yet — this is where many of us hesitate.

Not because we do not care. But because we are afraid.

Fear is one of the greatest barriers between attention and action.

Fear of getting it wrong.
Fear of saying the wrong thing.
Fear of conflict.
Fear of standing out.
Fear of consequences.

And fear has real power.

It can disrupt our ability to think clearly, to regulate our emotions, and to act ethically. In other words, fear doesn't just make us uncomfortable.

It makes us less able to live our values.

So what do we do?
We do not wait for fear to disappear.
We learn how to move with it.

One approach is to name our fears.
Because unspoken fears grow stronger in silence.

But when we name them, we begin to see them for what they are
— possibilities, not certainties.

Another approach is to adopt what has been called a “do it
anyway” mindset.

We acknowledge the fear.
We respect it.
But we do **not** allow it to decide for us.

Because courage is not the absence of fear.
Courage is action in its presence.

This is where transformation begins.
Because action not only changes the world, but also the
circumstances and the other people around us.
It changes us.

Action is not simply a response to change.
It is the **catalyst**, the **driver** for change.

When we take action, we become *participants* in shaping the
world rather than passive *observers* of it.

And every action, no matter how small, creates a ripple.

A conversation.
A vote.
A moment of advocacy.
A decision to show up.

Each one extends beyond itself.
Each one influences something we may never fully see.

Even the smallest step can have far-reaching consequences.
You've heard me say it before: Baby steps forward are **STILL** steps forward. They are a form of taking action.

That is both humbling and empowering.

Because it means that what we **do** matters.
And it also means that **inaction** matters.
When we choose not to act, that choice also ripples outward.

So the question becomes: What kind of ripple do we want to create?

Our Unitarian Universalist values call us toward:

Justice — not as an idea, but as a practice
Love — not as sentiment, but as commitment
Interdependence — recognizing that our lives are connected
Transformation — believing that change is possible

But values alone are not enough. Values must be lived.
And lived values require action.

NOW WHAT — Practicing Faith with a Backbone

So what does this look like in our lives? What does it mean to practice faith with a backbone?

First, it means moving from intention to action.
Many of us already know what matters to us.

The question is not always, not simply “What should I care about?”

The question is: “What is one step I am willing to take?” “What is one action inspiring me to make a move, make a difference, start walking in the direction of my goal?”

Because action does not require perfection.
It requires movement. And movement can begin small.

One conversation.
One decision.
One act of presence.
One moment of courage.

We do not need to change everything at once. We only need to begin. Because small steps matter.

They build momentum.
They create progress.
They strengthen confidence. And over time, they transform us.

Second, it means planning for sustainability.
Because action without care can lead to burnout.

We live in a culture that often equates urgency with worth.
But urgency and anxiety are not the same thing.

We are called to act — but not to exhaust ourselves.
We are called to engage — but also to rest.
We are called to care — but also to sustain our capacity to care.

That means creating rhythms that allow us to continue showing up over time.

It means recognizing that justice work is not a sprint.
It is a lifelong practice.

Third, it means leaning into community.
We are not meant to do this work alone.

Interdependence reminds us that we support one another.

We encourage one another.
We hold one another accountable.
We remind one another of what matters.

When one person takes a step, it makes it easier for another to do the same.

When one voice speaks, it creates space for others.

That is how movements grow.

That is how communities strengthen.

And finally, it means trusting that action transforms possibility into reality.

We are moving toward Easter.

Toward a season of possibility.

But possibility does not emerge out of nowhere.

Possibility grows where attention and action meet.

We pay attention.
We see clearly.
We act courageously.

And something new becomes possible.

So today, I leave you with this invitation:

Pay attention to what moves you.
Pay attention to what troubles you.
Pay attention to what calls you.

And then — take **one** step.
Not every step.
Not the perfect step.
Not a huge step.

Just one.

Because faith with a backbone is not about having all the answers.

It is about having the courage to act on what we already know is true.

And when we do that — together — we become part of the change we long to see.

Closing — A Step Toward the Next Sermon and Easter

As we keep on moving, starting and continuing to take action, we move toward the rebirth and renewal of Easter and our next sermon.

Where does that leave us here, we who have gathered and spent valuable time and earnest effort?

What do we do with what's been stirred up this week? The attention we've given to what moves us, troubles us, calls to us...

Go now, not having solved everything,
But having seen more clearly.

Go with the courage to pay attention — not only to what is easy, but to what is real.

Go knowing that love is not passive.

It is something we practice — in our choices, in our voices, in how we show up for one another and for this world.

When fear rises, may you remember that courage does not require certainty — only willingness.

When the path feels unclear, may you feel the courage needed for you to take one step anyway.

And when you wonder whether your actions matter, remember this:

Even the smallest act of care, of truth, of presence, creates a ripple far beyond what you can see.

So go with faith that has a backbone.
Go with love that is lived.
Go with the quiet strength to turn attention into action.

And as we move toward the season of Easter,
May you trust that what you nurture with courage
will grow into possibility.

Amen. Ase. Blessed Be.