

Love at the Center: What Is Unitarian Universalism?

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching

Sunday, July 7, 2024

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #203, All Creatures of the Earth and Sky, #1031, Filled with Loving Kindness; #126, Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing.

Personal Reflection by Dawn, Worship Associate [printed after the sermon]

Reading: “Shaving” by Chris Moore, *The Sun* magazine (June 2024) [printed after the reflection]

Sermon by Roger Jones

In a sermon two weeks ago, I said that the main reason that people start visiting a religious congregation like this one is a longing for community and hope for a sense of belonging. In a meeting with me last week, one member wanted to add that many people also come here because of the search for meaning in life. That resonates with my experience. Indeed, I think a spiritual and ethical community is a place where we can find meaning and put it into practice—a community like this one. Moreover, our congregation is part of the larger community of Unitarian Universalism. Our 1,000 or so congregations in this country join together as an association to support a free and responsible search for meaning.

Last month our denomination concluded a three-year process of reviewing how we describe ourselves as a religious movement. After many discussions, listening sessions, draft proposals, debates, and voting, we approved an update of Article II of the Bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Delegates from all congregations, including this one, approved this change by a vote of 80 percent to 20 percent. Not unanimous, but well above the 2/3 threshold required. It’s my impression that some people voted NO because they felt a lasting devotion to the UU Principles and the list of our spiritual Sources, most of which have been in the Bylaws since 1985.

Some of us voted YES for the recent changes even though we are also fond of the Principles and Sources from 1985. Over the decades, first-time visitors to UU congregations found them appealing, and kept coming back. Members adopted them as guides for action and reflection. Two generations of UU children grew up learning the Principles in story, song, art, and acts of service. Just when we were about to change them, I had finally memorized which of the 7 Principles had which number. I knew most of the list of Sources too. I do like them, but I voted for the changes. Not to worry: the Principles will remain available for all who treasure them—on websites and in our hymnals, for example. We have not erased them from existence. Nor have we abandoned the values that were enumerated in the Principles. Our foundational values continue, but in updated forms and words.

The newly adopted document is worth reading, but I won’t do that now. It’s too long. But I will note that Article II honors our heritage of reason, freedom, courage, and hope. It continues to affirm human dignity, human interdependence, and our part within the web of life. One remarkable addition to it, however, is a graphic representation of the five core values of UUism. [May we have the slide?] Here we have a flower design, with each flower petal representing a value. They are Justice, Equity, Transformation, Pluralism, Interdependence, and Generosity. As a guiding value, each one bears exploring—and celebrating. We’ve had sermons from this pulpit about a number of these individual values, and we’ll have more. Though there are new words and phrasings to describe our values, they have not gone away. In the recent revisions, our UU values have enlarged their embrace.

By the way, this graphic was designed by Tanya Webster, who is a member of the UU Fellowship of Redwood City.

In the middle of the flower, we can see the most notable addition to the UUA Bylaws. Article II places Love at the center of our faith tradition. The word Love is printed over a Flaming Chalice. A few years ago, when the Board of the UUA appointed the Article II Commission, it gave them freedom to come up with any words and format which their process might lead to. However, the Board charged them to make it clear/ that Love is at the center of Unitarian Universalism. [Please remove the slide now.]

In other words, Love is what motivates our affirmation of all the other values. Love inspires our compassion. It underlies respect for diverse identities and religious perspectives. Love energizes our actions for peace, freedom, social justice, and equity. When we feel discouraged or hurt, Love keeps us going. At the center/ is Love with a capital L.

It was a surprise for me to realize that the 1985 UUA Principles had not made that explicit. The Principles did not include the word Love! However, it’s worth noting where Love *did* appear. It was in the list of the spiritual Sources of our tradition. Number 4 on that list of spiritual Sources reads: “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.”

That source reflects the historical origins of Universalism and Unitarianism centuries ago, on the left wing of the Protestant tradition. To be sure, both of our ancestral movements were born of heresy. Yet for all their unconventional, radical beliefs, those early heretics kept a fidelity to the spirit of love and an ethic of care and compassion.

We often think of love as a feeling, and sometimes it is. Yet love also can be an attitude, an approach, an activity. Love is an ethic on which we can base our choices. It can be a source of meaning for us/ because it is a standard by which to hold ourselves accountable.

The ethic of Love is made evident in a short poem of Edwin Markham, who was a Universalist from California.[[1]](#endnote-1) Published in 1913, it is entitled “Outwitted.”

He drew a circle that shut me out
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in.

Born in 1852, Markham was a teacher in the counties of El Dorado, Solano and Alameda. There are six public schools named after him in California and another five in other states. He is known for his longer poems exploring themes of injustice and calling for social reform. The spirit of love is reflected in his life as a teacher and activist. It is the turning point of the poem, “Outwitted.” Once more:

He drew a circle that shut me out
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in.

In the New Testament, Jesus of Nazareth charges his disciples to love their enemies. This kind of love doesn’t feel easy or appealing. For his followers, it must have brought up all kinds of questions and many hesitations, like: “He can’t really mean that, can he?” “but, wait…” “What about…?”

In the Gospel of Luke, in the leadup to the famous Parable of the Good Samaritan, a lawyer asks Jesus how he could “inherit eternal life.” Jesus asks *him* to explain what the Jewish law has to say. He recites the words: “You shall love … your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself.” From this comes the question, “Who is my neighbor?” The question rings through the ages. It continues to challenge us, to ask us how we act and speak toward others.

This is the ethic of Love. It is not a feeling, it’s a challenge. Unfortunately, showing love to strangers, enemies, or neighbors has remained an exception rather than a regular practice over the centuries of human history. Perhaps this is why the value needs to be explicit. In our shared faith as Unitarian Universalists, when we work for equity and justice, when we practice respect for our common humanity, it may not feel easy or nice, but it’s what our values point us toward. If it were easy, we would not need to remind ourselves that Love is at the center of our values.

 The 4th of July, Independence Day, came *this* year during a week of bad news for many people who care about representative democracy and equality under the law. A Supreme Court ruling has provided an opening for the former president to avoid punishment for attempting to overturn election results. Now he arguably can defend his actions as part of his official duties rather than a violation of his oath of office. It’s outrageous. On television recently, an unsteady debate performance by the current president has raised fears that the former president might get elected in November, allowing him and his followers to take over the government in an aggressive spirit of revenge, attacking the civil service and our democratic system of checks and balances.

All of this is confusing and worrisome. It is heartbreaking. I don’t have any words to say to make it go away. I do have some ideas of things I am trying out for myself. In addition to thinking about other ways to be involved in protecting democracy, I continue to make monetary contributions to various campaigns. I want to stay informed, but as an act of self-care, I limit how much agitation I expose myself to. I don’t need the loud, harsh voices on radio, television, and online who are misrepresenting alternative perspectives or demeaning other people.

In this and other ways, I take care of myself spiritually and physically. I want to be as rested and strong as I can be in order to embody my values. I want to be strong especially in confronting the forces of untruth, hatred, and violence. Also, I remind myself why I care enough in the first place about what’s happening. I think and hope that the motivation is Love. And I believe that I share this motivation with many other Unitarian Universalists.

 What I mean is that we care about democracy and freedom because we care about people, and we want them to be free and safe. We want everyone to flourish because this is what Love calls for. We work toward this vision. We support those who help to make it happen.

We recognize that we all depend on one another to improve our country and our communities. We act and speak for the common good, because the common good includes all of us. Acting on this kind of love might look like tending a community garden or doing military service; it might be feeding hungry people or making non-violent protests against injustice and *for* human rights; it might be teaching or caring for children or mobilizing citizens to vote locally or in other states. In some people we know, the ethic of Love looks like doing all of these things together, in the same lifetime.

If we treasure life and appreciate its gifts, then compassion and love cause us to help others to achieve the blessings of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. To be sure, we have no certainty about the outcome of our efforts. We have no guarantees about the results of putting love at the center of our actions. We never did have guarantees.

However, I think we can take heart in being clear about what motivates our concern and inspires our actions. We can be sustained by knowing that we belong to others who share our values and commitments. We can be clear about who we are and what we care about. And that can help us understand ourselves and accept ourselves and one another. *It’s worth it* to keep Love at the center of our values.

When I think about what love looks like in ordinary life, here are some things that come to mind: generosity, showing respect, practicing patience, deep listening to another person. Love looks like letting go of the urge to judge, condemn or dismiss others. It can look like letting go of our impulse to fix someone else’s life. When reactivity or defensiveness rises up in us, love nudges us toward mindfulness and curiosity. When we recognize Love as the basis of our actions, we not only care about the world, but we also respect ourselves. We treat ourselves and our neighbors with compassion.

This makes me think of the reading we heard. Fourteen years ago, Chris Moore started offering free haircuts and shaves to other inmates at San Quentin state prison. By trial and error, he became an amateur barber, first in order to help one young man look respectable in court. As he puts it, he violated the prison rule of “mind your own business.” It was the spirit of Love that called him to do this, an ethic of compassion, dignity and generosity.

Chris writes that he has come to regret the harm that he caused to other people earlier in his life. He has come to appreciate the shared humanity of those he hurt. And by offering free haircuts to other prisoners, he has come to respect himself as part of that shared humanity. He now sees himself as capable of compassion, generosity, and respect for others.

This is the lesson of his story for me. When we notice that we are making the choice to follow our core values, we can appreciate it. Every day, we can celebrate the fact that we have the ability to choose to live by an ethic of love.

In the days ahead, I have an assignment for you. A suggestion, at least. Every day, notice when you have acted or spoken as expression of your UU values. Notice when it happens. Did you demonstrate respect and kindness? Maybe you showed patience and affirmed another’s dignity? Catch yourself choosing to put the ethic of Love into your day.

What did you do to promote social equity and inclusion? Reflect on it at the end of a day. How does interdependence or compassion or generosity/ show up in your day? Notice when you embody your Unitarian Universalist values. And when you do, celebrate yourself and your values and our shared faith. Give thanks for the freedom to choose to live by an ethic of love. So may it be for you and for all of us. Blessed be and amen.

Personal Reflection by Dawn, Worship Associate

I hope you will indulge me if I take a moment to read an excerpt from the description of today’s service:

*Delegates to the UUA General Assembly recently voted on a significant, historic revision of the self-description of our UU movement –– But what, really, has changed?*

There was something about the phrase, “historic revision of self-description” that jumped out at me. It made me think of my own seismic shifts in identity, and the extent to which they did, or didn’t, change me.

When I was 24, I married Jim. You might guess from his name that he was a man…and you’d be right. As a young person, I simply assumed I was straight. Why wouldn’t I be? Everyone around me was, or so it seemed.

Our marriage was “fine,” like many marriages are, except about 20 years in, I became aware of what Al Gore would call an “inconvenient truth." I was attracted to women. But I had this whole life: A husband. A home. A child. A career. And to make matters more complicated, Jim got sick. I loved him, and I felt committed to him, so I decided to stay until he died, which he did, 13 years later.

And suddenly, I was a widow. An identity foisted on me not by choice, but by circumstance. Anyone who has been widowed can tell you – it stinks. Regardless of the circumstance, it’s just so, so hard.

And yet, after I made my way through the pea-soup of fresh grief, after I mourned and cried more than it seemed humanly possible to cry, I realized something. This was also an opportunity. The chance to make “a historic revision in self-description.” So, I did.

I dug out that long-buried attraction to women, and acted on it. Fast forward – my marriage to Lisa, who then identified as a trans woman. And a haircut that pretty much screams, “I’m a rainbow person!” A new identity. And yet, what really had changed? Is it fair to say everything . . . and nothing?

I think a lot of change is like that. We find ourselves swimming in the sea of something new, whether by choice or by circumstance. The new thing re-defines us.

We are suddenly a parent. A disabled person. A widow. The things that make those words true *do* inform who we are. And yet, who we *really* are - like at our core – I would argue that that remains the same.

When I stepped across the sexuality aisle, there wasn’t anything that changed about me fundamentally. I was still me, only, somehow more. More genuine. More centered. More alive.

I wonder if it’s like that for us as UUs. We’re still us, committed to the Core Principles even though they’ve changed in form. New labels, and an organic flower-like shape, rather than a list. But still centered in love, as they’ve always been. As we’ve always been. Even when we, perhaps, weren’t quite as clear about that as we are now.

Reading for the Sermon: Shaving

This is a reading by Chris Moore from the June issue of *The Sun* magazine, in a selection of readers’ contributions on the writing prompt or topic of shaving. Moore is a prisoner at San Quentin State Rehabilitation Center in Marin County. He writes:

**THE INCARCERATED MAN** had an unkempt Afro and a long, ragged beard. All he wanted was a haircut and a shave so he would look presentable before a judge the next day. Yet none of the prison barbers would touch him because he couldn’t afford to pay.

“I’ll cut your hair,” I said, violating the prison rule of minding your own business.

I spent the next three hours trimming his hair and shaving his beard with a razor blade attached to a plastic comb. I had no experience as a barber, but I was determined to humanize this man: to the judge, to himself, and to the barbers who had dismissed him. My childhood experience in foster care and my prison sentence/ had taught me how it felt to be written off.

When I was done, he shook my hand and expressed gratitude. I was blessed to get a glimpse of a part of me I hadn’t realized was there, the kind of compassionate and courageous man I wanted to become.

I’ve been cutting hair and shaving beards for free ever since that day fourteen years ago. Every shave comes with a conversation that draws me deeper into our shared humanity. Every haircut stirs within me an ever-growing sense of remorse for the harm I once caused other people, who I now see were just like me.

1. <https://www.universalist-herald.org/biography-5.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)