

## A Universal Love

Rev. Peggy Meeker and Rachel Irato, 5/20/18

**Spoken Meditation:** a poem by Mary Oliver called “Morning”

Salt shining behind its glass cylinder.  
Milk in a blue bowl.  
The yellow linoleum.  
The cat stretching her black body from the pillow.  
The way she makes her curvaceous response to the small, kind gesture.  
Then laps the bowl clean.  
Then wants to go out into the world  
where she leaps lightly and for no apparent reason across the lawn,  
then sits, perfectly still, in the grass.  
I watch her a little while, thinking:  
What more could I do with wild words?  
I stand in the cold kitchen, bowing down to her.  
I stand in the cold kitchen, everything wonderful around me.

### A Universal Love

Our Universalist heritage challenges us to love and to know that *we* are loved. Both things. It’s a package, and I think it’s life’s central challenge.

I make this claim about our heritage based on what Universalism was all about just before the consolidation in 1961 with the American Unitarian Association. The last statement of faith officially approved by the Universalist Church of America, in 1935, read as follows, and it may surprise you: “... we avow our faith in God as Eternal and All-Conquering Love, in the spiritual leadership of Jesus, in the supreme worth of every human personality, in the authority of truth known or to be known, and in the power of [persons] [originally men] of good will and sacrificial spirit to overcome evil and progressively establish the Kingdom of God.” If we listen for the similarities between then and now, almost a century later, we find them: ultimate reality as love; the worth of every person; no authority over us but truth, whether known or still to be discovered; and human responsibility for the good of all.

From its earliest days in the 1790s, Universalism stood apart from most of the rest of American religion on the nature of God. Most Christians believed that human beings were sinful and separated from God by nature, and that God would condemn most people to hell.

The famous Jonathan Edwards sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” was typical, and I quote: “That world of misery, that lake of burning brimstone, is extended abroad under you. There is the dreadful pit of the glowing flames of the wrath of God; there is hell’s wide gaping mouth open; and you have nothing to stand upon . . .” [Enfield, CT, July 1741]. The Universalists—named for the idea of universal salvation—said that God was Love, and a loving God would not condemn anyone to eternal damnation, and in fact there was no hell beyond this life. Thus began our separation from Christianity.

Over the years, our beliefs about God and Jesus and the Bible have changed tremendously, but the idea that God is Love has remained, although many of us would not put it in those words. In 1803, the Winchester Profession stated “We believe that there is one God, whose nature is Love.” The 1899 profession of faith contained the very same words. In 1935, we find “God as Eternal and All-Conquering Love.” In the statement agreed upon at the time of consolidation—after much debate—we find “the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, immemorially summarized in the Judeo-Christian heritage as love to God and love to humankind.” And in our Principles and Purposes today, “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.” Over the years, the emphasis changed from the love that brought universal salvation after death to a universal love that embraces everyone in this life, no exceptions. As the Rev. Dorothy Tilden Spoerl said in 1976, in an address to the New York State Convention of Universalists, “the power of Love has remained constant throughout” [“We Do Not Stand, We Move,” *The Universalist Heritage: Keynote Addresses on Universalist History, Ethics and Theology, 1976-1992*, p. 6].

This is not a sermon about the differences between the Universalists, who were not yet completely divorced from Christianity, and the Unitarians, who were largely Humanist, but I couldn’t help but include this interesting quote that I came across: according to John Cummins, during the move toward consolidation, as members of the various congregations were asked for their views, “One Back Bay matron was heard to sniff that Universalists were ‘nothing but Baptists who could read!’ [while] Universalists complained that Unitarians didn’t feel they’d had a good sermon unless they didn’t quite understand it themselves” [“A History Lesson: The Consolidation of the Unitarian and Universalist Faiths”].

But this is a sermon about Universalism and about knowing that we are loved. I found an interesting commentary in the book *Universalism 101: God is Love* [© 2009 Richard Trudeau], by the Rev. Richard Trudeau. Trudeau’s thesis—and this was written about ten years ago—is that Unitarian Universalism is in need of renewal and that the Universalism of the 1950s, pre-consolidation, is the remedy. He starts with the symbol on the cover of the book. In case you can’t all see it, it’s a circle with a small cross in the lower left. It was

created to represent Universalism in 1946 by a group of Universalist ministers. Their intention was to distinguish Universalism from main-stream Christianity. Here's what two of those ministers wrote about this symbol:

The Circle is drawn to represent the all-inclusive faith of universalism which shuts no one out. In that circle is placed the cross, symbolizing the beloved faith out of which our wider insight has grown. [Many of us wouldn't call it beloved today, but that's part of the point.] We feel that universalism is not the product of any one cultural or religious tradition, but is in fact implicit in all the great faiths ... we consider ourselves to be "Universalists of Christian descent" [Albert Zeigler, p. 10].

[The Cross] is placed off-center in the circle of infinity to indicate that Christianity is an interpretation of infinity but neither the only interpretation ... nor necessarily for all people, the best one. It leaves room for other symbols and other interpretations. It is, therefore, a symbol of Universalism [Gordon McKeeman, p. 11].

Trudeau goes on to say that *that* Universalism, rooted in its Judeo-Christian heritage but open to the truth of other interpretations, is something we need today. He says that Unitarian Universalism is largely intolerant of Christianity and thus lacking important pieces of truth. It reminds me of our story last week about Old Turtle and the Broken Truth, and how the piece or pieces we might be holding are important but are best when connected with the pieces that others are holding.

I like the openness of this symbol, all the empty space in the circle. I might rather see the chalice in it, but still it seems to say that there's so much more, so much other than us, so much not yet defined, so much that is mystery. I like that it leaves room, room for all of us, for whatever we need, for whatever anyone needs. And this very space, I think, is one of the ways we are loved. I'm one of those UUs that would rephrase "God is love" to something like this: there is a grace in the world, there is something that holds us, there is room for each of us, for whoever you are. That is our Universalist heritage.

I asked Rachel Irato to join me in this sermon. As I was thinking about Universalism, and about the part of our faith that is open to other religious truth, I asked Rachel—who is a seminary student and intends to be a UU minister—to help flesh out the ideas of inclusiveness and pluralism.

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One of the required courses in my degree program is entitled "Faith and Christian Responses to Pluralism." I took the course two years ago and actually found it to be

very illuminating. What is religious pluralism? The simple answer is the fact of religious diversity coexisting in the world. A more difficult question would be am I a pluralist? What does that *mean*? Modern Unitarian Universalism is inspired by many aspects of the different religions in the world and historically speaking, Unitarians and Universalists held Christian ideologies. If to hold a pluralist position is to accept that more than one set of beliefs or religious practices is Truth, are we then as Unitarian Universalists religiously pluralist? Hmmm ... perhaps. We are individuals, and each of us embodies our Unitarian Universalist identity differently. It may be that some of us fall more in the category of the inclusivist, recognizing the religious Truth of each faith tradition while also believing only one tradition to have the Ultimate expression on the matter.

I personally am of the opinion that it can be difficult to embrace a fully pluralist perspective, especially if you have been on the receiving end of religious prejudice. In all honesty it was one of my biggest fears about attending an Ecumenical Christian Seminary. Could I learn to accept the beliefs of my Christian classmates as Truth, even if their Truth claims that I will not be “saved?” I think I can. It is certainly not easy, and it is going to hurt sometimes, but I think I would be doing my Unitarian Universalist heritage a disservice if I did not at least *try*. After all, we are Unitarian Universalists, we are beautiful in our complexity, and joyous in our acceptance of each other and the world.

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About a month ago I told you about my Dad harvesting sap from the maple trees behind our house. Imagine my surprise when last Sunday I discovered a photo—that I don’t remember ever seeing before—taken in the spring of 1958, when I was 7, showing my family gathered in the yard around a galvanized tub of maple syrup-in-the-making. Now this I *know* you can’t see, but my Mom and Dad are there, and my two older brothers, and my Mom’s mother, Grandma Keith, who has her arms around me. I have no memory of that day, let alone of being held. But I was held that day, and I believe that in many ways, I have always been held. And you are held, too.

We best understand that when we are at our most open, our most pluralistic. Again I think of the Old Turtle and the Broken Truth. “You are loved,” the people read, and much later they found the other half of that truth, “and so are they,” and then they began to find truth everywhere—in the trees, the animals, the breezes, and in other people. At our best we are open and inclusive, making space for everybody, seeing truth and love everywhere.

Yes, there is much in the world that is not of love, but there is more that is. We find it everywhere, because a love that embraces everyone, no exceptions, does after all include you and me. We find it deep inside ourselves when we most need it. We live in a world with the music of Bach and Arethra Franklin, with lilacs and wisteria, with maple syrup, with each other. We see the salt shining behind its glass cylinder, the milk in a blue bowl, the cat sitting perfectly still in the grass. The world is shot through with love. May you know it to be so for you, and Amen.