

## To Love Alike

A sermon by Rev. Jackie Clement

Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington-Normal, IL

February 17, 2013

*We need not think alike to love alike.* —not Francis David

*Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike?* —John Wesley

*Give them ,not hell, but hope and courage. Do not push them deeper into their theological despair, but preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.*

—not John Murray, but Alfred S. Cole

Reading:

Forrest Church, *Born Again Unitarian Universalism*, p. 7

*Down the darkened mansions of the self there are many wonders far greater than the heraldic beasts, work-dolls, symbolic pictures and hieroglyphics of an Egyptian tomb. Do you ever walk along there with a torch of memory glistening on the walls in some places while other places were still in ominous shadows? Or, do you keep it all above ground where it is safe?*

*If you never get down into your own wonders and fears, religion will not exist for you, because religion is not a superficial matter. True religion does not ask how you are dressed, or demand that you act in a prescribed manner, true religion does not question your sincerity or respect your candor... True religion cares for you in your depth, demands that you live in that depth and that you respect all others in their depth.*

This requires, of course, that we begin to take our religion more seriously, as seriously as others take theirs. In the words of Carl Scovel, minister of King's Chapel in Boston: it requires "Not the self-indulgent tickling of self-realization movements, but disciplines—the disciplines of prayer, and praise and planning and study and service to each other and to our brother-sister humans on this pathetic and endangered globe."

In short, while freedom remains the watchword of our faith, each of these witnesses reminds us that we must take that freedom seriously. Each of us, as Unitarian Universalists, is charged to seek truth and meaning wherever it can be found. But in discarding answers others may have given us to life's essential questions, we must ever avoid the common fallacy of dismissing the questions themselves, dismissing them as if they were somehow tied to the insufficient answers we have chosen to reject.

**Sermon:**

A former parishioner of mine used to roll her eyes at Unitarian Universalism as the most overly introspective, navel-gazing religion imaginable so get ready to stare into the great collective navel of our denomination. I catch her point, but in a tradition that welcomes and encourages diverse views it seems unavoidable that a fair amount of self-reflection is necessary to define who we are, what we stand for and what we wish to accomplish. If we cannot decide who we are among ourselves, we leave it to others to define us. And if we cannot decide who we are among ourselves, how will we ever invite others to join us?

So what is it that makes us, inasmuch as we choose to identify ourselves as such, Unitarian Universalists? That question is fairly easy to answer on an individual basis. Just look at the seven principles printed in the front of the hymnal, and if some number of those make your heart go pitty-pat, you're probably a Unitarian Universalist. But widen the question and what is it that makes us, as a group of individuals each with his or her own reason for being here, what is it that makes us a closely connected faith community? Broaden it still further and what binds us as the Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington Normal to the churches in Peoria or Springfield or Chicago or Boston? What unites us and what defines us, collectively rather than individually, as Unitarian Universalists? These seem to be questions that have plagued Unitarians and Universalists and Unitarian Universalists for decades, if not centuries.

Unlike other religious bodies, we do not share a theology, one faith. As a matter of fact, I'd be fairly stunned if we shared 100 faiths. We cannot stand and say this is what we believe, and if you believe it, too, you're one of us. But if we share one *characteristic* in common it might be an allergic reaction to someone else telling us what to believe.

So the question of our unifying core has continued to vex us. Indeed, it has so troubled us that the Commission on Appraisal made it their area of focus in 2001. The Commission on Appraisal is that body within the UUA tasked with reviewing, and I quote, "any function or activity of the Association which in its judgment will benefit from an independent review," i.e. the biggest questions and challenges facing the denomination. Each review takes four years so they are highly selective in choosing issues of importance. After four years of study, surveys, and focus groups the Commission published their report in the book *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*. The conclusion reached, as articulated by Ken Oliff, is that "the strength of the contemporary liberal church lies in its openness, its respect for difference, and in the value that the church places on the sanctity of individual conscience." That is, the one thing, more than any other, we hold in common is the value of religious freedom as defined by 1) freedom of belief, 2) tolerance of others' beliefs and 3) the use of reason and individual conscience in religion. Yet, ironically, the Commission met a substantial amount of resistance, suspicion and even hostility in trying to articulate what it is that holds us together as Unitarian Universalists, what it is that makes us a closely connected faith community.

Some charged the Commission with imposing a creed on Unitarian Universalism in attempting to articulate our points of shared theology. This is not too surprising considering our history fraught with rejections of creeds and creedalism, which has often set us outside mainstream religion. As a consequence our history is not exactly a linear progression, where event builds upon event, action occurs in reaction. Though the sources of Unitarian Universalist history lie in

ancient times, the history itself has not continued as an uninterrupted stream. Its course is more like an underground spring that continues to bubble up at different points in human experience. Ours is more a history of ideas than of institution. Those ideas that have remained constant in identifying our forbearers include

1. free religious thought: no one else can tell us what to believe
2. religious tolerance: accepting people with beliefs different from our own, and
3. the use of reason and individual conscience as a source of religious authority

Sounds familiar, no? These three central ideas explain pretty readily why it is we reject creeds and why we have no common theology on which to hang an “open for business” sign. Yet ironically, we are the only denomination I can think of named for a theology. In fact, named for two theologies – unitarianism, which held that God was one, in opposition to the doctrine of the Trinity, and universalism which held that all people would be saved by a merciful and loving God. While we no longer, as a whole, espouse either of these theologies, we retain them as our name.

From each of our forbearer denominations we have inherited, along with half of an unwieldy name, a quotation summarizing who we are as a people. Each is attributed to one of our ancestral luminaries, and each defined the thread that once held our religious ancestors together as a faith community, as Universalists or as Unitarians. The two quotations are given at the top of your order of service. For Universalists the words attributed to John Murray, founder of Universalism in the United States, are these:

*Go out into the highways and by-ways of America, your new country. . . . You may possess only a small light, but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. Give them, not hell, but hope and courage. Do not push them deeper into their theological despair, but preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.*

This passage spoke to the Universalist insistence on the use of reason and a God so good that he would not damn even the most reprehensible human being to eternal hell.

On the Unitarian side Francis David, preacher to the 16th century Transylvanian royal court, is reported to have said, “We need not think alike to love alike.” This spoke to Unitarianism’s ideals of religious freedom and tolerance.

The problem, as historian Peter Hughes pointed out in last fall’s issue of the UU World, is that both attributions are wrong. The John Murray quotation was actually written by a 20<sup>th</sup> century Universalist minister, Alfred S. Cole, for a denominational pamphlet published in 1951, not 1771. The quotation attributed to Francis David cannot be substantiated in our tradition at all, and is most likely a paraphrase of Methodist founder John Wesley’s line in a sermon, “Though we cannot think alike, can we not love alike?” Off by only a few words yet several centuries.

But, here’s the thing, does it matter? Yes and no, I would say. It matters because, as Peter points out, a religion that puts high value on the use of reason ought not be sloppy in its scholarship. But in another way no, it doesn’t matter at all, because these lines still tell the truth of who we are, what it is that holds us together as a closely connected faith community. They may no longer

define a view of God we all hold, but they encapsulate our core values of freedom, tolerance and reason. They also speak to some of the wider values captured in our principles: the dignity and worth of all human beings, the shared search for truth and meaning, an optimism for healing a broken creation.

Despite our abhorrence of creeds, the Commission on Appraisal report held that a healthy diversity requires a common ground, and I believe we do have that common ground, a ground beyond our embrace of freedom, tolerance and reason. Or perhaps, not beyond, but *because* of our embrace of those three. As expressed in our misattributed quotations, that common ground is love, that we choose, not to think alike, but to love alike. The love we're talking about here is multifaceted. It is the love of neighbor, the love that allows us to offer each other hope and courage rather than seeing each other as essentially flawed creatures in need of eternal hell fire. It is love of that mystery that extends beyond ourselves, that which we call by many names if any, that which moves us beyond our own concerns and at which we marvel.

And it is also the love we extend to ourselves. Ah, that's the one we are quick to forget, the love for ourselves that allows *us* hope and courage rather than self-negation; the love for ourselves that calls us into relationship with each other and with God, however you see God. This is the love that calls us into our own spiritual work, to go deeper in exploring those fundamental questions rather than tossing them aside because the answers we received in the past don't fit.

And therein lies our future as people and as Unitarian Universalists, in that deeper quest. What we, what our tradition, can offer people is a way to engage in the spiritual quest, in closely connected religious community, without imposing the answers on them. But I think that our insistence on freedom might be getting in our own way a little. The problem is this. Freedom *of* religion is too easily translated into the emptiness of freedom *from* religion.

In our insistence on freedom we too frequently turn respect for the individual into individualism. They are not the same thing. In our insistence on freedom we have been loath to evangelize, to spread our Good News to others, to testify to life saving possibility.

In our insistence on freedom we have, perhaps most to our detriment, been so wary of imposing our own religious views on others that we have set them aside for ourselves. That we have turned from being a religion into a movement. Do you know that in those Seven Principles that make our hearts go pitty-pat there is exactly one word that has any reference to religion at all? As Gene Pickett, former UUA President once said, "they describe a process for approaching the religious depths but they testify to no intimate acquaintance with the depths themselves." In dusting off the layer of imposed belief we have, perhaps, also brushed away faith. Faith is not dependent on a particular set of beliefs, but rather what helps us get through each day and particularly the worst of days. Faith is what calls us to the deeper quest for truth and meaning. Belief merely insulates us, but that's another sermon.

Henry Whitney Bellows, nearly 150 years ago, said this about Unitarians, "Our work hitherto (so far as the world is concerned) has been essentially a negative one—denying error, contending for entire freedom, disowning dogma and discipline." As important as he acknowledged that is,

Bellows went on to say that, “Freedom, whether political or religious, has no power to produce anything. It merely leaves the faculties free to act.”

Freedom by itself is not enough. It is important, but it is not enough. Respect for the use of reason is not enough. Important, but not enough. Even religious tolerance is not enough. Critical, but not enough. As an association and as autonomous congregations we need not only the breadth of diversity that tolerance brings but the depth of those fundamental questions that are the starting point of religion. Without the depth of fundamental religious exploration in community, the use of individual conscience runs the risk of becoming individual whim and freedom of belief runs the risk of becoming just what critics accuse us of regularly—believing whatever you want.

As the reading warned us we must take our religion seriously. Spiritual growth is not just an idle notion for the privileged few but a way of sustaining what is real and true, a way of coming through the hard stuff, and a way of defining what it is of true importance in order that we will be able to build on a firm foundation. We need the free and responsible search to our own inner depths, *and* we need to bring those searches back into the community for the enrichment of all. From these we will build a wider diversity, secure on that common foundation.

We have these amazing strengths on which to build. Centuries-old traditions that have become the very fabric of who we are – freedom, tolerance, reason. Upon these we can build that which *is* enough, for this time and this place, for our future. Upon these we can build a global consciousness that does not separate into us and them, but that takes on a spiritual and theological depth to back up our ideals. As Peter Richardson writes, “The concept of conversion from ‘other’ to ‘us’ is obsolete, even destructive, for spiritual growth. It cannot be a condition of membership when a congregation is intentional in its global affirmations.” But to get there we have to stretch beyond freedom, tolerance and reason. We have to include the love that molds freedom into joy, tolerance into embrace and reason into wisdom.

In our diversity lies our unity. In spiritual depth combined with commitment to freedom lies our strength. So let us embrace both the ideals and the love of our wayward quotations for they define both who we have been and where we might go.

Namaste.

Por lo tanto puede ser.

© 2013 Jacqueline R. Clement