

Jewish and Christian teachings, which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves; by Greg Monk July 21, 2019

Good morning. It's my privilege this morning to share a few words with you on one of our sources of the Unitarian Universalist Tradition - Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves. It's been a revelation in my life to realize just how hard it is to say three little words to another human being, with sincerity, and really understand their import. "I love you." I used to think the three toughest words to say and mean were, "I was wrong." And I still struggle with those, too from time to time. But to truly love someone, as I think we are called to do – not an easy task.

I'd like to start by giving you a bit of my own history with this word, then where my journey has brought me to, and finally the lessons I've learned about love, that stem from Judeo-Christian teachings, that I'm able to share with you this morning.

Last week, you may remember Joyce saying that some of us, when asked about our faith, have identified ourselves as "former" – former Catholics, former Jews, etc. In the community that my journey brought me to, we sometimes use the word, "recovering" – I have on occasion referred to myself as a recovering Lutheran. In Minnesota, where I'm from, Lutherans are much like Catholics, except you take away the incense, and add hot dish. And my parents were quite devout. So there were very strict rules to abide by, and it seemed to me that even God's love wasn't entirely unconditional, otherwise, why would such a place like hell exist? I was very confused by this as a child, and when I asked about that, it was explained to me that by failing to live by the rules was our choice – that people, not God, condemned themselves. But that didn't seem quite right to me.

And later, when I realized that I was different from other boys, that on Saturday morning television when they were all so fascinated by Jane, I seemed more interested in what Tarzan was up to, I knew I was in real trouble. God, the God I thought I understood, wouldn't love a guy like me. And I was already on thin ice – that's a Minnesota phrase – when it came to this Love business. My mother, who suffered with mental illness and a host of other problems for years, had tried several times before I came along to have children, but each time she was unable to carry them for the full term. So she and my father opted for adopting me.

A little over a year later, my mother became pregnant again, for the last time, and amazingly gave birth to a very healthy little girl, my sister – her miracle baby. My mom, who had a penchant for saying things due to her illness that probably should have been filtered, would on occasion refer to my sister as her only living child. And although I

understood what she meant, it really upped the ante in my mind of trying to earn love. But I could never seem to be good enough, or smart enough, or straight enough. And when I couldn't pray it away (and boy, I tried), when I couldn't pretend or deny anymore who I was, I took the mature approach – if God wasn't gonna love me, then I wasn't gonna love him right back. So there. And in doing so, I tossed the baby out with the bathwater.

But life has a funny way of teaching us lessons even when we aren't a particularly ardent student. Much like the biblical story of the Prodigal son, life circumstances (and a long series of really poor choices) brought me to a place where I had no choice but to seek guidance again. I had become desperately ill – physically, mentally, and spiritually, and I discovered that I was going to have to address all three to recover. So once again, I found myself squarely faced with the God question. But thankfully, the people placed in my path at that time were in many ways the living embodiment of this morning's message – people who, having found love themselves, were learning to love others, not just in words, but in their daily walk.

So, some things I've learned – one – Love speaks the truth. Ephesians chapter 4 talks about this, and sometimes those verses are used by Christians as a bully pulpit – but I've come to understand that love calls me to seek the truth within myself, to set aside fear, and people pleasing, and snap judgements, to search my heart, to seek the reality of others, and avoid dishonesty as best I can. And to demonstrate the reality of love by matching my actions and my words. My first lesson in this came from a spiritual mentor while we were on a trip, staying in a hotel room together. Our first morning there, I woke to the smell of coffee – he doesn't drink it, but I do. He asked me how I was feeling – and having been up much of the night worrying about what was going on in my life, I responded, "Lousy. Do you have any aspirin?" He got up, brought me a cup of coffee, a glass of water, and a bottle of ibuprofen, chuckling. I asked him what was so funny. He said to me, Greg, you and I have something in common this morning." I asked, yeah, what's that?" He replied, "We're both thinking about you." A lesson on truth in love I wasn't quite prepared for – but it stuck, nonetheless.

A popular Christian quote often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi is, "Preach the Gospel every day. Use words, when necessary." As a theatre major and occasional writer, I understand the importance of words. And I feel we need to be able to articulate what we believe – indeed calls for social justice, for ending racial inequity, for freedom from tyranny, and maybe most of all in our polarized world today, appeals to love one another – must be spoken persuasively and powerfully. But for love to be effective, I've learned we need to walk the walk ourselves, sometimes.

Early in my recovery and on this new spiritual path I've found myself on, I had entered what an older mentor once referred to as the "missionary stage" of my journey – that's when I know almost nothing about how this works, and I can't wait to share it with everybody. And I found a new prospect in one of my new neighbors in the transitional housing I was in – a man rescued from the streets with no belongings, no job, and no family. Having recently myself been upgraded to a room with its own bathroom, I was clearly going places, and felt it my duty to tell this guy all about it, how he could turn his life around, too. I had an extra blanket and pillow, so I bundled them up, to give as gifts (popular items in northern Minnesota in March), and as a pretext to get my foot in the door. Which I did, and proceeded to give him the big word, while he listened politely, clutching his new blanket and pillow. And that night I was really on fire, particularly expressive. Angels wept. But I didn't hear from him again, not right away.

Some time later, we crossed paths again, and he was glad to see me. But I was surprised to hear he didn't really remember much of anything I had said to him that night. What he remembered? The pillow and blanket.

I've learned along the way, too (or perhaps, relearned) what the nature of love is. The Jewish author, political activist, and Holocaust survivor Eliezer Weisel once wrote, "The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference." And I believe he's right. After all, Love, like Hate, is passionate – it cares. It occupies our thinking, drives us in our decision making, and often – for good or ill – these states of being compel us to act.

Another of my favorite quotes of Weisel - "I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim." Oh, and one last – "Whenever an angel says "Be not afraid!" you'd better start worrying. A big assignment is on the way."

As an artist of sorts, I've always been intrigued by how two different pigments can so seamlessly combine to form a third – Yellow and blue making green for example. And lately as I reflect on the nature of love and hate, I can't help but wonder about the composition of hate. Could it be that hate comes from mixing in equal parts two other strong states - love and fear? After all, a man or woman who loves themselves and their family, and fears that something bad will happen to them, can quickly learn to hate that which they believe, or have been told, will threaten them. Makes sense.

With colors, if I want to bring the shade of my green paint closer to yellow, I simply add more yellow to negate some of the blue. Adding more green simply allows it to remain the same; adding more blue brings the color away from where I wanted it to go. I believe combating hate works similarly. Responding to hate with hate often seems to insure the hate remains; responding with fear can sometimes make it even worse. But

maybe if we heed the difficult call to respond to hate with love – or at least understanding and truth – we can shift the dynamic back a bit. Perhaps that's what is meant by the Gospel's teaching of 'turn the other cheek' – not a fearful turning away from troubled times and hiding, but a faithful, steadfast turning towards truth in the face of trouble, with as much dignity, patience, and love as we can muster.

Much of fear stems from a lack of understanding of the truth – in loving our neighbors as ourselves, I believe we need education. The Hebrew word Rabbi translates as 'teacher', and if we are to truly love others, I've learned I have a responsibility to educate – first, to teach myself. I need to strive to understand where others are coming from – to listen, to be open, to not too quickly pass judgement. If I'm lucky, in so doing I find many of my own fears begin to dissolve under the light of knowledge. And then to teach others – to let them know me for who I am, so they might see beyond what I am. To pass on my own truth when faced with misinformation. And to share with them our experiences, our beliefs, and to not be ashamed of where our journeys have brought us. As a U.U. (and recovering Lutheran), I am naturally given to a bit of skepticism when the word 'religion' comes up. Around the holidays, whenever I see a bumper sticker or hear someone loudly proclaiming, "let's put Christ back in Christmas!", I occasionally have been known to give in to the dark temptation to respond with, "How about we start by putting Christ back in Christians?" So when I myself am asked, "well, what do you believe?", I find that as a sort of apology for my past beliefs and background, sometimes I'm almost embarrassed to admit I belong here. Whenever I say, "oh, I go All Faiths", I have to clamp down on my almost instinctual need to follow that with, "...which is nothing like those other churches... I mean, we aren't really even a church, but a congregation..."

We have a wealth of information right here in our building on what we believe that I've found very helpful – not only in understanding for myself what it means to be a Unitarian universalist, but in helping to explain to others when I find my eloquence lacking. The sources from which we draw, and the traditions we follow, continue to be a source of inspiration, and of strength for me in this pursuit of life, and of love.

And I've learned, finally, that love is a commitment. As I've grown spiritually, I've come to see my mother in a different light. When my parents went through the adoption process, they picked me. They chose, that day, to be responsible for another human life, one they didn't create but wanted to nurture anyway. And they honored that commitment, through dark times as well as good – divorce, mental illness, financial losses, teenage angst, and theological dilemmas, even learning to love others again. They did the best they could with the tools they had, however inadequate they might have seemed at the time. And they remained, until their passing, my parents. My mother

never changed her stance towards being gay, or even worse, being liberal. And she never got better with being bi-polar. But I could see past what she was, to who she was, to the mother she wanted to be, and I could find acceptance and love for her in that space. And I believe she too, tried to see past what I was, to love who I was for her.

It's that way for many of the people, and the causes I believe in today. I need to be more than just "involved" for a moment or two now and again – I need to be committed, willing to give of myself however I am able to, sometimes putting my own plans and self-interest aside for a time and seek out ways in which I can give back, if I truly believe I am called, by God's love, to love others as I do myself. For some of us, the concept of a deity is still far-reaching; I've heard it said that people are God with skin on, and that's who I need to connect with, through love. I was told once, if you want to know the difference between being involved and being committed – have you ever had bacon and eggs for breakfast? Well, the chicken was involved, but the pig was committed.

I'll end with this quote, from the Jewish author Yehuda Berg: "To me, spirituality means 'no matter what.' One stays on the path, one commits to love, one does one's work; one follows one's dream; one shares, tries not to judge, no matter what." May it be so.

Rabbi Epstein was a particularly tenacious clergyman and couldn't stand seeing Jewish people getting drunk. So one day he went into a particular tavern frequented by Jewish patrons.

Rabbi Epstein walks into the pub and sees Stan from shul. "Stan, do you want to go to heaven?" The man said, "I do Rabbi."

The Rabbi said, "Then stand over there against the wall."

Then Rabbi Epstein asked another man he recognized, "Do you want to go to heaven?"

"Certainly, Rabbi," was the man's reply.

"Then stand over there against the wall," said the Rabbi. Then Rabbi Epstein walked up to Chaim Yankel Rabbinowitz and said, "Do you want to go to heaven?"

Chaim Yankel said, "No, I don't Rabbi."

The Rabbi was in disbelief, "You mean to tell me that when you die you don't want to go to heaven?"

Chaim Yankel said, "Oh, when I die, yes. I thought you were getting a group together to go right now."