

“The Compassionate Divine”

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD October 12, 2025

What is God to a Unitarian Universalist? I believe that each of us will have our own, unique response to this inquiry – which is a beautiful and blessed gift of our faith. We likely agree on some sort of love or wonder or awe. Perhaps this is in contemplating an otherworldly heaven or sacred realm. Perhaps this is found gazing up at an evening sky transitioning from deep blue to pink to a velvety black sprinkled with stars. The word “love,” to me, is synonymous with God. And there is a call from this sacred to embrace one another with dignity and worthiness. There is a call to recognize there is something divine present in all that we do. And there is a call to justice, tending to the broken and aching souls in our midst. We find this in budding flowers and waterfalls, our ancestors, the spirit of love. We find this in the cycle of life. In Goddess. God is – and this is critical in our exploration today – God is compassion. This stems from our Unitarian belief in divine and human goodness. From our age-old Universalist teachings of universal salvation – that everyone, regardless of their transgressions, is saved. This, in essence, is divine forgiveness. God is compassion. We saw this in our Time for All Ages: “You are not alone. I am here. You are not alone.”¹

Our Universalist ancestors held a deep belief in personal interpretations of the Bible; some Christians do as well. In this way, the perspective becomes unique to each denomination and sometimes even with each person within the denomination. The predecessors to our ancestors, the Calvinists, read the Bible through the lens of hate and damnation, leading to their belief in predestination. Predestination means that everyone is either damned or saved before they are even born. I do not believe these were how the parables were meant to be interpreted or that these were the teachings of Jesus who serves as but one prophet among many in our faith. And neither did the founders of our faith. Unitarian Universalists historically read the Bible through the lens of divine and everlasting love, goodness, worthiness, and compassion. Today we read

¹ “Tiny the God” by Becky Brooks

three stories that exemplify the Christian idea of God that translate into our own faith: That God is always waiting for the return of one who is lost, that God will search for each lost and broken soul, and that we must offer embodied love to the world.

I offer two caveats before we begin. I use the word God today because that is the language of the Christian faith. There are many names and understandings of that which is sacred and holy and I cherish that. Second is my understanding of sin. I do not believe in original sin or transgressions that lead to eternal damnation or acts that keep you from knowing divine compassion. I believe that sin means there are wounded people immersed in pain who have lost the way of this faith, but who are nonetheless always within the realm of ability to return to justice and love.

The Gospel of Luke offers the Parable of the Prodigal Son. In this ancient teaching, there were two brothers, one of whom asked for his inheritance while his father was still alive, while the other remained at the farm. The one son quickly leaves home and squanders his new wealth, spending his money recklessly and irresponsibly. He runs out of money just before a famine and finds himself poor and destitute. This lost and broken son returns home, and upon this return his father immediately embraces him and welcomes him with love and compassion. The joyful father puts together a great feast to celebrate the return of his lost son. The older son, upon seeing the celebration, becomes angry. “He does not deserve this!” he proclaims. The father offers, because your brother has returned after being lost and destitute, because he found his way and came back home, we will celebrate.²

This story is based on the compassion of all that is holy, personified in the father. Divine and holy love, in this story, is not that which is dependent upon past actions, but upon a goodness and love that flows generously through God’s essence. In this story we speak of those who have strayed from the sacred and holy path, those who find themselves aching and suffering whether in body or in spirit. By engaging in hate or anger, one's soul begins to disintegrate.

² Luke 15:11-32

This can invite a powerful and holy moment of realization that one may have the chance to return to love and goodness. In this story, the father patiently waits for the son to return. May we, in turn, welcome those who have lost their way, for it is not only the immortal and the infinite and the sacred from whom one needs compassion, but the mortal and the finite and the profane as well. We welcome the return of siblings that have strayed in spirit and morality. Kind beloveds who have lost their compassion in a search for power. When they are ready to return, when they genuinely repent releasing that which has led to these transgressions and return with authenticity to the practices and values of our faith, we welcome them with open and blessed arms.

I reflect, too, on the angry, undeserved response of the brother with a [self-righteous heart](#). “He has done nothing to deserve this!” he claims. The brother struggles to understand this immediate and profound loving response towards one whom he deems sinful. The responsible brother has seemingly never experienced what it means to be destitute and live in poverty. He struggles to understand what it means to return to love after suffering. He may never need to understand how crucial forgiveness is, how profound love is, how life-saving compassion is. The brother’s judgment comes from one who never knew immense pain or a fight for survival.

And it is this, our Unitarian Universalist response. We were each made for good and holy purposes, not damned in any way, but good and loving, inherently. Just as the lost son was. We embrace universal salvation – all among us, the righteous and the unrighteous, the broken and the whole. We all reside in the same blessed space after death, whether heaven or stardust. This profound acceptance and forgiveness was gracefully offered by the loving and compassionate father.

The Parable of the Lost Sheep found in the books of Matthew and Luke likewise depicts a loving and compassionate Christian God. The story portrays a humble shepherd herding one hundred sheep, who learns that one of his sheep is lost. In an act of love, he left the masses to tend to

themselves so he could find that one missing animal. Upon finding the lost sheep, he rejoiced greatly.³ The book of Luke offers, “I tell you that ... there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.”⁴

Why is there more rejoicing in heaven? It is one who has returned from hate to love, from violence to peace, from despair to hope, from anger to joy. Finding love and practicing faith is far more difficult for those who have been lost than for those who have never strayed. For those who never had to traverse this lonely and hopeless path of despair and anger. The broken may need to be offered so much more compassion and acceptance because what they know is judgement and condemnation. As such, when we find the lost and wandering souls and guide them towards goodness, they become the most celebrated among us, for healing and repentance takes work. When one who has strayed and lost their way coveting power or acting with great anger, when they return with a calling to heal and commitment to our faith and our values, we celebrate. “There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.”

I offer one more short reflection. It is crucial to find this individual who has lost their way. Simply being found by all that is loving and compassionate is enough to save but one precious life. It is this – all that you hold divine seeks you out when you are most broken.

From our own Unitarian Universalist faith, we need to let those who are lost and wandering know that there is unconditional love. We can also offer ourselves these gracious reminders. That there is dignity and worthiness. That we are cared for. That in our repentance we become the most holy. That there is an essence of love who will never leave us but, in turn, can offer divine presence and compassion and love even in the most difficult of times. Whatever you hold sacred will never leave you, forget you, or give up on you. Stardust. Love. Goddess. Allah.

³ Luke 15:1-7; Matthew 18:10-14

⁴ Luke 15:7

The divine will leave heaven to find you in hell. And so, we can each find and create heaven in this earthy realm.

We end with the Parable of the Good Samaritan, another tale of a compassionate God. In this parable, a man who is understood to be Jewish lay beaten and left to die on the side of the road. A priest and a Levite passed and ignored the suffering man. And yet a Samaritan, understood to be a despised enemy, immediately and intimately tended to him. He bandaged his wounds and arranged care at a nearby inn. His compassion extended beyond intense prejudice or even convenience to attend to this lost soul simply because he was in need. True compassion extends beyond social divides to care for any aching soul as an embodiment of love.⁵

I share this story in part because it is so apropos to today's political climate. Who are our neighbors? A neighbor is not about proximity but about compassion. We are neighbors regardless of faith, race, nationality, socioeconomic status, any potentially divisive differences. Everyone in this blessed world is our neighbor as we live our values of love, justice, interdependence, and equity. We are even neighbors across political divides, and I think we need to remember that. To live as a neighbor as the Samaritan did, we need to care for someone simply because they are in pain. We do not need to agree, or like, or to condone another's actions or values in any way. We do not need to even forgive them. But we are called to be a neighbor. This is a key teaching of the Christian faith. The Samaritan had no obligation to help, but he did. Think if an enemy tended to us regardless of differences. Could this change our assumptions and perceptions, as we shift from a mindset of animosity or judgement to one of deep and profound gratitude? We do acts, as Unitarian Universalists, not because we fear hell or eternal damnation. We act because it is the just and moral thing to do. And, so, I offer two questions. First, do we want to be the priest and the Levite, or the Samaritan? I assume that for many this question is relatively simple. I offer a second, perhaps more difficult

⁵ Luke 10:25-37

question. If we passed someone with different political ideologies, with different values, with different political agendas, would we be the priest and the Levite, or the Samaritan?

So, we end with this intersection of the Christian and Unitarian Universalist faiths. With these theologies that overlap in this profound understanding of God or the sacred or the holy as an essence of divine compassion. Of love and wonder and awe and beauty permeating and saturating this earthly realm. We hold this commitment to reading the sacred and holy bible through the lens of a life-giving faith that serves the most broken among us. May we celebrate he who returned to goodness, she who lost her way, those who embody love. To those who need it, the spirit whispers, "You are not alone. I am here."⁶ So go out into the world with the mindset of compassion, tending to any broken soul with a goodness and respect that transcends all differences with the common goal of healing. Embrace with compassion those who have left with the intent of greed or anger or power as they return with an inward call toward faith and a healing love. Leave the masses of the content to find and save that one broken, aching, and destitute being, for they are worthy and they are loved. Welcome every being into all things sacred and holy. Embody the compassion and love of prophets of the ages. The compassion and love that the roots of our faith proudly and loudly proclaim. For all are beautiful. All are blessed. All are beloved, holy, and whole.

May it be so, and Amen.

⁶ "Tiny the God" by Becky Brooks