A Love that Binds

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD November 8, 2026

The stranger who pauses during a hurried morning commute to help someone who has lost their way. The neighbor who checks in on an elderly resident, making sure they have what they need. The person who stands beside someone being treated unfairly, refusing to let them face it alone. These moments, both ordinary and extraordinary, remind us of the goodness we are capable of offering one another. They reveal something beautiful about our capacity for connection and care. They reveal love. And yet, we know this is not the whole of our human experience. We have witnessed relationships fractured by betrayal, communities divided by fear, and people treated as though their lives matter less than others. We know our world has its cracks.

Unitarian Universalist Elizabeth Nguyen writes, "Love can be understood in many liberating ways, and yet many harms and even atrocities can be committed in the name of 'love.'"[1] I think of religious conversions. In the name of saving souls, people impose their beliefs upon communities already bound together by deep love. Perhaps devotion to country becomes a justification for turning away those seeking safety and belonging, as though caring for our own requires withholding compassion from others. Perhaps a desire to protect the family becomes a justification for denying dignity and acceptance to those whose identities or relationships differ from our own. Throughout history, and in our daily lives, care and devotion have sometimes been used to justify exclusion, coercion, and harm.

How do we, as Unitarian Universalists, respond to the ills of the world and tend to its cracks? In our faith, we embrace a love rooted in relationship, one that binds us together. This is at the center of our faith, giving rise to our shared values. Today, I want to explore what it means to live this understanding.

So - our independence. How are we connected across time and space? Each of our actions reverberates outward. In affirming the dignity of someone struggling with addiction, we affirm

[1] *Love at the Center: Unitarian Universalist Theologies* "When Love Is Criminalized." Elizabeth Nguyen

the dignity of all human beings. In caring for those who are vulnerable, we honor the truth that each of us depends upon one another. Coercive religious conversion, anti-immigrant rhetoric, has no place in this web of affirming and life-giving relationships. In fact, we are called to embody a love that actively resists these harms, urging us to affirm and promote equity and equality. So, what if this is not something we feel, but something we embody? What if it is the thread that binds us together, weaving the strands of our lives into the greater web of life?

If we are going to delve into contemporary understandings of our Unitarian Universalist faith, let us take some time to explore our history. Each faith – before they merged in the sixties – had their own understanding of love and the divine. Universalists expressed this through the doctrine of universal salvation: no one is eternally damned; all souls are held within the boundless embrace of the divine. Unitarians emphasized our commitment to expressing love toward the sacred, one another, and the larger world. Here, this commitment is embodied. It speaks to our innate human goodness and our capacity for compassion. Together, these traditions gave rise to the faith we practice today. A faith that welcomes an array of beliefs, each blessed and beloved. Though our understandings of the sacred may differ, we are bound by the values we hold in common. And at the heart of those values, we place love.

Interdependence – love recognizes that we are deeply connected within the web of all existence. We each have a role to play in its well-being. Pluralism – Love calls us to honor our diversity of culture, experience, and theology, learning from one another and remaining open to perspectives different from our own in our shared search for truth and meaning. Justice – Love calls us to cultivate a diverse and welcoming community where everyone has the opportunity to thrive, and to challenge the systems and practices that prevent this from happening. Transformation – Love invites us to adapt to an ever-changing world, remaining open to personal growth and change within an evolving faith tradition. Generosity – Love inspires us to embody gratitude and hope by sharing our faith, presence, and resources, offering what we can to nurture and sustain others. Equity – Love recognizes the inherent worth of every person and affirms everyone's right to flourish with dignity, compassion, and the

support they need.[2] I read a book in preparation for this sermon - *Love at the Center*, a compilation of writings from Unitarian Universalist leaders from which many of the ideas for this sermon arose. As I read, I noticed a common thread running through these reflections: a commitment to interdependence and relationship, and love.

There are many ways to embody this understanding, extending well beyond our personal relationships. Can we think of love as a butterfly feeding on nectar, participating in the intricate relationship between flower and pollinator? Nature is bound by relationships that enable all creatures to flourish. What about the relationship between an expanse of mountains – towering and snow-capped – and the woman who observes this? What of that which exists between the humble devotee and the expansive divine? We are not separate from the vastness of life; we are an interconnected part of it.

And it is more than this, because love is never a solitary act. Goodness and compassion spread throughout our human relationships. This is both cosmic and tangible. Cosmic in that each act becomes part of the greater fabric of existence, woven together across time and space. Tangible in that someone who receives compassion may offer it to another, and another, and another. Or someone who witnesses an act of justice may feel inspired to do the same. In this way, we build networks of relationships, both seen and unseen, that deepen our interdependence. Love ripples outward.

These reflections on our interdependence bring to mind a familiar experience: flying in an airplane. High above the earth, we can open the small window shade and glimpse the massive expanse below us. Miles of open land, towering mountains, farmland arranged in intricate patchworks, and dense cities giving way to sprawling suburbs. As the plane descends, we begin to make out hundreds of individual cars on a highway. We imagine the vast amount of people going about their daily lives below us. Such an abundance of life. We may never meet these people. We may know nothing of their lives. And still, we are connected to them. We share this

[2] https://www.uua.org/beliefs/shared-values

earth, this finite and extraordinary place we call home. Even when our paths never cross, we remain connected, each of us part of the same unfolding story of life.

I invite us to pivot and reflect upon our relationships with the sacred – the connections between our individual, finite lives and the great, abiding mystery of the divine. For some, it may be an essence of love; for others, a personified presence; and for still others, simply mystery. Each understanding has a place in our faith.

Divinity is "accessible and relational," writes Unitarian Universalist minister Abhi Janamanchi. Goddess, Allah, our God of many names—the divine is not confined to private or communal rituals nor is it confined to distant, inaccessible realms. We connect through prayer, yes. Through our experience of nature, yes. These are both foundational in my own faith. But God is found in our relationships with one another. "When we love," Rev. Janamanchi offers, "we touch the divine."[3] When we take to the streets for justice, we touch the divine. When we hold the hand of a scared child, we touch the divine. When we raise our voice for those who cannot speak, we touch the divine. When we look into the eyes of a beloved and whisper sweet nothings, we touch the divine. Through these relationships, we both encounter and participate in the sacred. Through these interwoven acts, both sacred and profane, both significant and seemingly insignificant, we help make the world a more just and beautiful place.

I spent ample time in seminary, pen poised on a notebook, writing down the wisdom and knowledge of scholars. Throughout my time in theological school, I studied the many theologies that inform our liberal faith. One that stood out in particular was process theology. This theology is relevant to our reflection because it understands reality as fundamentally relational. Nothing exists entirely on its own. Everything is shaped by its relationships with everything else, and each moment contributes to what comes next. Unitarian Universalist Dan McKanan offers a beautiful image of this. I appreciate his description: "Neutrons and protons and electrons want to dance with one another and make atoms."[4] This is what I call a cosmic dance. From the earliest building blocks of matter, new relationships emerged, forming atoms, then molecules,

[3] *Love at the Center: Unitarian Universalist Theologies* "Love Is God." By Abhi Janamanchi
[4] *Love at the Center: Unitarian Universalist Theologies* "Love Is the Heart of This Church" by Dan McKanan

and eventually the extraordinary complexity of life. Think of a forest, where towering trees, blossoming flowers, buzzing insects, and a quiet rainfall all exist in relationship, contributing to the health of the whole. And what does process theology offer us in understanding the divine? God does not control the world or dictate its fate. Rather, God continually offers possibilities and beckons us toward beauty and flourishing. We are not compelled to answer that invitation. We can turn away from it. We can cause harm. But the divine call remains, inviting us, over and over again, to choose lives of greater compassion and care. This ties flawlessly to a quote by Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg: "I do believe that the Universe has embedded within it a will towards goodness and flourishing, and that every human innately has an inclination to align with that will."[5] Beautiful. Blessed. Beloved. And we do this in community.

I'm drawn to another quote by Dan McKanan: "Cities and gardens, forests and flowers, even our own beating hearts are made of love and by love. The love story began long before we were born and will continue long after we're gone."[6] Nearly sixty years ago, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was leading the struggle for racial equality. Two thousand years ago, Jesus' teachings and acts helped inspire a new faith tradition. Twenty thousand years ago, people were making art and telling stories. And long before that, protons and neutrons began their cosmic dance. And here we are, each of us a small but meaningful part of this unfolding story. And after we're gone? Hate will continue. Violence will continue. But, more importantly so, too, will love, justice, and the struggle for equity. McKanan continues, "I come to church to be reminded that I am part of the love story of the universe."[7] We are a tiny but not inconsequential piece of all that.

So, I leave you with this invitation: Immerse yourself in nature and see what emerges within you. Make your next action one of kindness and compassion. Express your care. Touch the divine. When you encounter hatred, violence, and suffering in the world around you, do not let these become the whole of our story. Notice the people who show up for one another, who protect the vulnerable, who work for justice, who choose compassion even when it is difficult.

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[5] Quote in *Love at the Center: Unitarian Universalist* "Death and Glory, Love and Evil" by Ashley Horan
[6] *Love at the Center: Unitarian Universalist Theologies* "Love Is the Heart of This Church" by Dan McKanan
[7] Ibid

Those who weave the web. Know that love is always within your grasp, if only we listen for that divine whisper, that sacred murmuring, and answer it, again and again.

May it be so, and Amen

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith November 2026