

“Living our Faith in Turbulent Times”

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD, March 22, 2020

As we just heard in our reading, “For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.”¹ The grace of nature, what about the grace of human goodness?

The videos are beautiful: Italians, alone, or gathered as friends or families, leaning out of windows, or standing on balconies, joining together in song, raising their voices together in familiar tunes amidst mandated isolation. The cameras pan across the housing complexes, ancient and modern, as children and adults alike sing together to ease the hardships.

I heard another story about two young children, 6 and 9 years old. These children studied the art of playing cello and had an elderly neighbor who was isolating herself at home. These two children, at the urging of their mother, totted their cellos across the street and put on a two-hour long concert for their home-bound neighbor, bringing music and delight to help ease her anxious soul.²

These are simple and beautiful stories of people helping people, communities helping communities. And there are so many of these stories. These are things we can all do! We can all do something, not matter how big or small. Even a smile, a simple smile, can help change a person’s day. Calling a friend, picking up groceries for a neighbor. And we do these things rooted in love. And as Unitarian Universalists, we do this rooted in faith. From the early beginnings of our Unitarian Universalist faith, and the separate faiths of Unitarianism and

¹ Wendell Berry

² <https://time.com/5804742/kids-cello-coronavirus-video/>

Universalism before that, we have been faiths of love, acceptance, and tolerance. And knowing this history is important because it shapes who we are as a faith today – it shapes our Seven Principles, our covenant on how to engage with each other and engage with the world. This faith is what roots us in community, a community we need now more than ever.

Universalism was born in the 1770s when preacher John Murray’s ship from England crashed on the shore of New Jersey and he began to preach. And what he preached was radical! He preached a message of hope. He preached a message of salvation for all. He preached that we were all, each and every one of us, “elected.” No one was damned. We were all saved.³ Hope, universal salvation. These ideas that were so radical at the time lead to communities of love, of people who do not see each other as damned but as saved, everyone.

And as time went on those who identified as Universalist began to realize that this term, “universalist,” was applicable not only in salvation but the universal community of all folks – everyone who inhabited this planet. They realized a profound need to work for a community with peace and justice here, not in the afterlife, but here. On earth. Peace and justice. Our roots.⁴ Roots that dictate who we are today as we continue to create every day a community of peace, a community of justice.

And Unitarianism – this idea of not the Trinity, but one God – this faith not rooted in the divinity of Jesus, seeing this prophet instead as an ordinary – and yet remarkable – human.

Unitarianism - also steeped in profound love and acceptance! Early Unitarians, denouncing Calvinist beliefs at the time, emphasizing “God’s benevolence, humankind’s free will and dignity

³ *The Unitarians and the Universalists*, David Robinson, 3

⁴ *Ibid* 6

rather than depravity of human nature”⁵ Seeing God as good, and seeing people as good, and allowing this goodness to dictate lives. A loving God was radical to many, no matter what God may mean to each and every one of us today. And William Ellery Channing, our namesake, was foundational in American Unitarianism; preaching and spreading the word of inherent goodness of all people – words that are echoed today in our principles – the values that bind us together.

Universalism. Unitarianism. Religions with histories embedded with love and hope and toleration. And in 1961 these religions combined to create who and what we are today – the Unitarian Universalist Association. And every day when we gather and live our lives we are doing so with centuries of wise folks behind us, our cloud of ancestors, bravely living lives of tolerance, of love. We need bring this with us each and every day. We need bring this with us as our world navigates a scary, anxious time.

In the words of Unitarian leader Francis David, “We need not think alike to love alike”⁶ We can join together across difference to love this aching world.

I was reading through my inbox the other afternoon and saw an email from the Unitarian Universalist Association President Rev. Susan Frederick-Grey. Her email read, “As Unitarian Universalists, we know we are deeply interconnected and love guides us. May we not turn on each other, nor stigmatize those who are ill or may become ill, nor our global neighbors who have been suffering as we are. Let us instead turn toward each other in stronger care and shared commitment.” We are deeply interconnected and love guides us. What affects one

⁵ Ibid 4

⁶ *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism* John A. Buehrens and Forrest Church, pg 58

affects all, and if we are guided in our actions by love, we can make the world better even through simple acts of kindness. Rev. Frederick-Grey asks us not to stigmatize but to turn toward each other. We can do this connecting here at Channing and in our larger community – turn toward each other in stronger care and shared commitment.

I turn to another renowned Unitarian Universalist, Rev. John Buehrens, former President of our Association, who wrote of the power and importance of ordinary people. Buehrens wrote, “It is not just celebrated martyrs and heroes who help to redeem the world, who confront ‘the powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.’ Even today, the difficult, ordinary heroism of unknown people in their daily lives is often more important than the inspiring words of their better-known leaders”⁷

This idea of ordinary heroism seems paramount to the world today.

I spoke recently to an Emergency Room resident. An ordinary woman doing extraordinary things; a woman simply doing her job in the midst of a pandemic. Working long hours, putting herself at risk, in order to follow her calling as a doctor, her calling to heal people. She shared stories of mask shortages, of wearing goggles to work, of lists of people scared that they are sick, scared to be with people they love. And she shared stories of heroism. Of people, like her, doing remarkable things; joining together to save lives; to save the lives of countless strangers. Pursing their callings.

⁷ Ibid 60-61

And every day, not just when we are struggling, but every day, we are guided by our faith. Our faith steeped in love of all humans, of acceptance, of hope, of tolerance, of radical ideas of living together, everyone, in peace and with good will. I invite us to take a look at our principles. Those seven things we affirm and promote – those seven things that bind us together as a faith; a faith not of common beliefs, but common values.

We affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Every person – those we disagree with, those we argue with, those who we would rather not see. Every person – those with different beliefs. Every person – those who face marginalization every day. This principle asks us to consider the least of these. For as written in the book of Matthew, Jesus said, “truly I tell you, just as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” The poor, the vulnerable, the downtrodden. During this time of fear, the ER resident expressed, “populations that are most vulnerable are still the most vulnerable” The least of these. The least of these are always the most vulnerable. The poor, the homeless, the marginalized – these are the folks who will be most affected, the elderly, the sick.

And our faith calls us to action, as we affirm and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations. And in affirming and promoting there are things we can do! I’ve seen folks working to get food to those who need it: the homeless, children who can no longer get free meals at school. Folks gathering resources to share with their communities. Neighbors helping neighbors, offering to do errands for those at risk. People helping people. Some of us are at capacity, and so I lift-up the importance of sharing a simple song, of sharing a smile. Any act initiated with love.

As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm and promote the acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations. This encouragement to spiritual growth; whatever give someone strength, hope, perseverance – whatever is most sacred; whatever is each individual's truth; most true, most known – now more than ever let's not only accept that but embrace that; not only encourage but inspire the spiritual growth of each and every one of us. What feeds your soul? What keeps you going? We have unique ways of finding and expressing our truth.

We affirm and promote the respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. Let us join together in kinship.

Our web looks different these days. We aren't hugging and shaking hands or sitting next to each other or even worshipping in the same room. But our web has not weakened, it has strengthened. We are spiritually together, even if we are physically apart. I think of this web of people connected like the threads of a spider web; threads made to withstand wind, rain, snow, all of the elements in order to maintain life. These strands connecting us, binding us, in holy ways, through times of joy and times of pain.

We are here together as a community. We are here together as Unitarian Universalists. From our humble beginnings of radical love and acceptance, through the centuries and now expressed through our Seven Principles. This means we have a rich history of love and acceptance, of universal salvation, of a benevolent God no matter what God may mean to us today. And we can live this faith in powerful, radical, simple ways! Ways guided by our history

of love and acceptance. People helping people. Even if just a smile. One small act initiated by centuries of love. “For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and I am free.”⁸

May it be so, and Amen

⁸ Wendell Berry