

Standing on the Side of Love
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Reading – Luke 10:25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶ He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” ²⁷ He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” ²⁸ And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

²⁹ But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” ³⁰ Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.

³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” ³⁷ He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Sermon

As the web site of our UU “Standing on the Side of Love” campaign describes its origins, it was launched after the 2008 shooting at the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville, which was targeted because they are welcoming to LGBTQ people and have a liberal stance on many issues. The Knoxville community responded with an outpouring of love which in turn inspired the UUA to launch the “Standing on the Side of Love” program with the goal of harnessing love’s power to challenge exclusion, oppression, and violence based on sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration status, race, religion, or any other identity.

Of course Unitarian Universalists gratefully do not have a monopoly on love. Unitarian Universalists are far from alone when we stand on the side of love in support of immigrants’ rights, gay and transgender rights, equal rights for all regardless of color of skin, nation of origin, religion or lack thereof, and so on.

But we do have these very cool bright orange/yellow “Standing on the Side of Love” t-shirts!

And it is really wonderful when bunches of us show up at rallies or marches for immigrant rights, transgender rights, Black Lives Matter, climate justice. Because when

we do, we are visible and visibly present and standing on the side of love as the Unitarian Universalist variety of human beings.

Which puts us in the lineage of a beautiful and universal story as old as humanity, the story of all the movements to make our world more peaceful and kind and just, movements which whatever the language and whatever the historical context and whatever the background of those in the movement... were about standing on the side of love.

Think of all these “standing on the side of love” movements and moments in our history and our collective lives, just a few examples:

The movement to end slavery.... because love says that all men and women are created with equal right to life and freedom.

The movements to welcome immigrants into our country, enriching our nation immeasurably – all of us here in this room after all descendants of immigrants – welcomed because love says all should be welcomed.

The movements for full rights and dignity to those who identify as lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender... because it doesn't matter who you love, it matters that you love.

The movements wherever and whenever to end war, to bring peace, to turn swords into ploughshares, spears into pruning hooks.

All those who help to heal the wounds of war or natural catastrophe, whether in Syria in the midst of war or Haiti following an earthquake or hurricane.

The movement for women to have the right to vote, and the movement still for equal pay for equal work, for dignity and safety in the workplace and on the street, because love says that women are (of course!) equal to men, deserving of equal respect and opportunity.

And so the outrage this week concerning the statements and reprehensible actions of a candidate for the president of the United States, that outrage coupled with support by other women and by men for women who have been victims of sexual assault: this too is a way we are standing on the side of love.

Yes, all who have been and are part of such movements and moments in time, whether Unitarian Universalist, Christian, Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, humanist, atheist, are standing on the side of love.

One further example, not about a movement, but about a book and the individual who wrote the book and the conversations recounted in the book.

Sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild has published *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. A self-described liberal – from Berkeley, California no less – she decided several years ago to “truly listen to the other side in order to understand why they believe – and feel – the way they do.”

Spending a good deal of her time in “arch-conservative Louisiana bayou country...” she talked with women and men, from pipefitters to truck drivers to accountants to salespeople. As it says on the flyleaf, she attended “fish fries, gumbo cook-offs, Pentecostal church services, and Trump rallies; visited schools, political party groups, and oil-soaked wetlands; and engaged in long conversations over cookies at kitchen tables and while looking through photo albums.....”

In short, Hochschild took the time (lots of time) and made the effort (lots of effort) to get to know, to become friends with, those who had very different views and backgrounds from her own.

In one conversation which took place over the course of several weeks – from a meeting of the Republican Women of Southwest Louisiana to a conversation over sweet tea at Starbucks, Hochschild talked with a woman named Madonna Massey, a gospel singer who “declared that she ‘loved’ Rush Limbaugh, feeling that he “was defending her against insults she felt liberals were lobbing at her: ‘Oh, liberals think that Bible-believing Southerners are ignorant backward rednecks losers. They think we’re racist, sexist, homophobic, and maybe fat.’”

“But you’re nice” she said to Hochschild.

The next time they met, as Hochschild reports, Madonna wanted to know if “it had been hard to hear what’d she’d said. (Hochschild) told her it wasn’t. ‘I do that too sometimes’ (Madonna) said ‘try to get myself out of the way to see what another person feels.’”

In all of this, then, both Arlie Hochschild and Madonna Massey were standing on the side of love, since love is not only about kindness and care and standing up for those who have been held down, love is also about seeking to deeply understand others, to put ourselves in the shoes of others as much as that is possible – and then to behave with one another accordingly.

Well, all this said thus far, my message this morning is not meant to only be about social movements or heroism on the grand scale, nor only about learning to respect and understand and listen to those who have differing opinions or political persuasions or backgrounds from ours.

For quite naturally, mostly we learn and practice how to stand on the side of love, how to, in Jesus’ words, love one another as he loved us, in much more intimate ways.

Think of your own lives:

Perhaps you can remember a time when you were going through some big challenge or grieving some terrible loss... and someone – maybe a family member, maybe a friend, quite literally stood by you or sat with you or walked by your side with care and concern... and love.

Think of the healing power of that presence of a friend or dear one, the healing power of love.

Sometimes standing on the side of love is quite simple indeed. I remember as a child, the night before I was to have a tooth pulled, a dear family friend took me aside and we just talked about my fears – for I was afraid. I can’t remember much about the conversation, but I do remember Ray’s presence – he was standing by my side (actually sitting), talking with me, listening to me with love.

Much more recently I am still and always will be grateful for the dozens upon dozens of sympathy cards and emails I received from you after my mother died... all sent with love, all helping me to heal.

And time after time I see the way you stand by, sit with, walk with, one another when you have suffered a loss or are in the midst of a challenge.

Now, sometimes, being human, we don’t see the need or fail to respond as we in our hearts mean to or wish too. Then it is time for another of love’s faces, the face of forgiveness and reconciliation in the midst of our imperfections and missteps.

How then do we get *better* at standing on the side of love? It’s a little like getting to Carnegie Hall – practice: practice reaching out, practice striving to understand one another, practice heeding the generous impulse to help whenever possible and realistic. Practice which deepens when grounded in whatever spiritual discipline enables us to

more and more thoroughly experience ourselves not as separate beings, but as part and parcel of one another, part of the whole of humanity, part of the web of all life on this dear earth.

Well, I said at the outset that UUs do not have a monopoly on “standing on the side of love” – rather, you might say that this is just our Unitarian Universalist way of talking about what a long time ago Jesus called the kingdom of heaven, this kingdom, this “reign of God” as it is sometimes translated, that Jesus invited us to, over and over again. And it’s worth remembering that Jesus once likened this “kingdom” to a mustard seed, the smallest of seeds that grows into the largest of plants... for love is like that: small gestures of kindness and care that ripple into the world in ways we mostly will never see, but that make the world far better, more loving, more kind, than it would otherwise be. Of this I am certain.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is, after all, precisely such a story of a relatively small act that could so easily grow into something very large indeed. After all, simply Jesus having told this story – which may or may not have taken place as he tells it or at all – has rippled through two thousand years, inspiring millions, as it once again may inspire us today.

This story, which reminds us quite clearly of one of the ways Jesus wanted us to understand love.

Love as present and active anytime we help anyone who needs help and who we are able to help – most assuredly including our neighbor with whom we might not seem to have much in common. Remember who the “neighbor” is in the parable: Yes, the man who was beaten and robbed was a neighbor, but the heart of the story is that the man who behaved with mercy and compassion and therefore was the neighbor to the fellow wounded by the side of the road was a Samaritan, the passerby in the story who Jesus’ Jewish listeners would have least expected to be the one who helped out. Yet it was indeed the Samaritan who turned out to be the neighborly one, the “standing on the side of love” guy. (Might be as if you a Democrat observed a Republican, maybe even a Trump supporter behaving with kindness and compassion – or as if you a Republican observed a Democrat, maybe even a Clinton supporter, behaving with kindness and compassion.)

Jesus’s message of course was that we help, we love, because whatever may divide us, however we might be different, what we all have in common is the light of God in our hearts, common humanity, shared life on this one earth we share – the kingdom of heaven however we choose to name it indeed.

So... may we go forth today determined as best we are able to stand on the side of love, walk on the side of love, work and live on the side of love.

Amen. So may it be.