

Where is the Love?

by Scott J. Rubin at UUCSV, Northumberland, PA
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Before I get too far this morning, I have to start with a trigger warning. If you think the UU principles are truly words to live by, and perhaps even divinely inspired -- however you define the divine -- you may want to leave now. Or you can be polite and put on your earbuds or hum softly to yourself.

Don't get me wrong. I'm glad we have the principles and I admire our Seekers group for challenging us to think about them. I found the services prepared by Chris and Sabrina to be inspiring and thought-provoking. And I enjoy singing the children's version of the principles each Sunday.

The principles are fine, as far as they go -- to me, though, they're a bit too legalistic, just a little too carefully worded so no one would be offended, and generally lacking in inspiration. I don't find any spark of the divine in them. They were conceived by people, written by people, edited to death, and -- in my opinion -- that process sanitized them of anything remotely uplifting.

Now I believe that words matter. Words can inspire us; call us to action; help us understand the complexities of the world; nurture us; comfort us when we grieve; and elevate our spirits. Or not.

OK, you've been warned. Let's get started.

The old joke -- or maybe it's a complaint, or a simple statement about human nature -- is that most preachers have only one sermon ... and they preach it over and over again.

In a rare moment of introspection, I readily admit this is true about me. Obviously, I'm not a professional preacher -- far from it; I have no formal training in religion; I never took a course in theology. I am definitely not a minister or priest or rabbi. I don't even play one on TV. But I have been preparing services occasionally at UUCSV for more than 25 years. And in looking back, my sermon -- probably given 40 or 50 times -- is about justice. I try to find different ways to spin it, to make it interesting or funny or relevant, but the message always seems to be the same -- follow the Golden Rule, be fair, be kind, do justice, help those who need help.

Now you have to understand, I come by this focus -- some might say obsession -- honestly. I'm a lawyer, after all. And much of my professional life is spent fighting for the underdog, the David in the David versus Goliath story, except in the real world David doesn't win, at least not very often, and he pretty much never grows up to be king.

Justice, I think, also is ingrained in who I am. I was raised Jewish in a moderately religious family. And Judaism is grounded in mitzvot. That's sometimes translated as "good deeds", but more accurately, it refers to the laws, or commandments, handed down to the Jewish people by God. Some rabbi -- or I'm guessing maybe his grad students -- counted them centuries ago, and there are 613 mitzvot in the Torah, the five books of Moses. The laws cover everything a

society, and a family, need to function – criminal laws, civil laws, government, what to eat, what to wear, when to have sexual relations, how to wash, how much interest you can charge on a loan, how and when to pray, when to work and when to rest, marriage, divorce, and on and on.

In most print versions, the five books of Moses can be reproduced in less than 200 pages. That's an average of three laws per page, which is pretty impressive mixed in with the history and storytelling.

The Talmud contains rabbis' interpretations and applications of those laws. The Talmud contains more than 500 chapters -- usually reproduced in 40 volumes or so -- thousands and thousands of pages of interpretations of the laws contained in the Torah's 200 pages. Rabbis and their students study the Torah and Talmud much as lawyers study statutes and court opinions that interpret those written laws.

To orthodox Jews, religion is truly a way of life. Indeed, that very word -- orthodox -- tells you a lot about traditional Judaism. Orthodox in Greek literally means "the right opinion," and that opinion is based on enforcing the laws, doing justice.

Judaism, in other words, is defined by its focus on laws, commandments, justice. And UUism appears to have been heavily influenced by this focus on justice. Justice appears in the seven UU principles twice -- the second principle promotes "justice, equity, and compassion in human relations" and the sixth principle adopts the goal "of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all."

So please understand, I'm not abandoning justice, not by any means. But to say I've been fixated on justice from this pulpit is a bit of an understatement. It's an important message, but after 25 years it might be time for something a little different.

Hang in there with me as I try to move on. And, specifically, I'm trying to move in the same direction that Jesus suggested we need to move. To my untrained eye, Jesus called on us to temper Judaic notions of justice with love. Judaic law said the punishment for adultery was death by stoning. But Jesus admonished the crowd to let love guide their hands and put down the stones.

The Torah tells the Cohanim, the Jewish priests, to avoid contact with the dead, or anyone who might be dead. But Jesus teaches that if the priest is truly our neighbor, he should temper the literal meaning of the law with the love needed to tend to the traveler who was attacked and lying by the side of the road -- maybe dead, maybe not. Love, not just a strict adherence to law, should help guide our actions.

This is perhaps best summed up in the book of Romans where Jesus is quoted as saying:

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet; and any other commandment are summed up in this word; Love your

neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Love is the fulfilling of the law. It is not enough to seek justice; you must temper it, administer it, imbue it, with love.

Fast forward 2000 years. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in his autobiography: “Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.” And more recently Mother Teresa made this even simpler to understand when she said, “Justice without love is not justice. Love without justice is not love.”

When I’m asked about UUism and what we believe, I usually say something like: We’re a religion that believes every religion has something to teach us. We learn justice from Moses, love from Jesus, wisdom from Mohammed, introspection from Buddha, and so on.

I believe this is true, but words matter.

I can point with pride to the UUA’s website for the Side with Love campaign we learned about this morning. The page begins like this: “Unitarian Universalists affirm unconditional, universal love as a foundation and grounding for our actions in the world.”

I believe this is true, but words matter.

We read words and sing hymns about love, as we did this morning. I believe in what we sang and read, but words matter.

So -- with apologies to the Blackeyed Peas, and Roberta Flack and Donna Hathaway before them -- I must ask: Where is the love?

I look at the UUA’s principles -- the words each congregation commits to affirm and promote -- and I must ask: Where is the love? Nowhere in those seven principles does the word “love” appear. We mention justice twice. We talk about peace and unity and compassion. But where is the passion? Where is the love?

We mention love as being referred to in the sources from which we draw inspiration, but that’s not the same as affirming and promoting love itself. It’s not the same as saying we will fight for love, we will seek love, we will act with love, and we will honor love in all its forms.

I ask again: Where is the love?

We can sing “love will guide us” but where is that in our governing documents? I looked at the UUA’s bylaws. They’re 30 pages long! See, I really am a lawyer. Justice or injustice is mentioned 17 times. Love, zero. And I’m not translating a tennis score. There’s no mention of love in the UUA’s bylaws. No mention of it in our principles. Where is the love?

I have a modest proposal. (My high school English teacher would be so happy that I still remember Jonathan's Swift's brilliant satire.) Let's stop studying the UU principles. Stop printing them in our bulletin. Replace them with one word: Love.

We read our Congregation's covenant this morning. The wording is simple and direct and it tells the world who we are and what we stand for: *We are a welcoming and caring spiritual community, providing a home for inspiration, social justice, and service.* Justice is there, but again: Where is the love? Is it time for a new covenant, as Ann suggested last week? If I may be so bold, should our covenant emphasize love and justice?

Words matter.

Words guide our actions. Words help direct our decisions. We stand for justice, which is important, but standing for justice and love is so much more powerful. Remember the admonition and inspiration of Mother Teresa -- justice without love is not justice. We cannot stand for justice without being inspired and directed by love. Jesus teaches that love is the fulfillment, the completion, of the law.

Laws and justice alone do not correct wrongdoing. Justice by itself does not root out corruption. Laws do not, in and of themselves, create a better society. We have all seen the misuse of laws, the perversions of justice perpetrated by our political and business leaders.

The just response to murder or rape is to seek punishment. The loving response is to see that we are protected while forgiving the criminal. Justice without love is not just. And love alone is not sufficient; justice also must be done to protect us and guide our actions.

Words matter, so we must ask ourselves, our congregation, our denomination, our political leaders, our business leaders, our friends and neighbors: Where is the love?

A couple of years ago, the UUA faced a crisis over its handling of serious complaints about racism and other forms of discrimination. Harsh words were spoken, people lost their jobs, there was a bit of an upheaval. These results were surely just. But was that justice tempered with, guided by, love? Was love guiding our leaders' actions in the first place when they dismissed concerns about institutional discrimination?

I stand here today a year away from a presidential election, and perhaps weeks or months away from a presidential impeachment. Should the President be removed from office or voted out of office or kept for another four years or maybe declared incompetent?

Everyone seems to be debating whether a crime was committed, or whether this or that action will protect the Constitution and our democracy and ultimately be a just result. But I have to ask: Where is the love? Where is the love of country? What action would be right when we acknowledge the importance of love? Where is the love of our fellow human beings? Where is the love of immigrants? Where is the love of gay and lesbian and transgender people? Where is the love of refugees? Where is the love of people who live in other countries? Where is the love of our citizens who are different -- differently abled, different ethnicity, different skin color,

different economic circumstances? Where is the love? Do we expect our leaders to act in a just and loving manner? Do we expect it of ourselves?

When we argue with that arch-conservative, evangelical, gun-toting high school friend -- we all have them, don't we? -- we may be trying to pursue justice, at least as we see it. But are we living the love we proclaim? Are we tempering our pursuit of justice with love? Are we trying to understand what's important to others? Are we trying to put ourselves in their shoes? Are we working as hard to understand their concerns, their life story, their needs and desires ... are we spending as much time honoring them, respecting them, loving them -- as we are in fine-tuning our own arguments?

Love is how we are commanded to treat our neighbors.

Love is how we define our innermost circles, our closest relationships.

Love is how we tell others who and what is important.

Words matter. Love matters. So we need to continually challenge ourselves: Where is the love?

And then we need to do something. How would your life be different if your actions were guided by love? How would the work of this Congregation change if we specifically acknowledged the importance of love in our work? How would our communities change if we elected leaders whose hands were guided by love?

Justice without love is not justice. Love without justice is not love.

May it be so.