

Rev. DC Fortune
Sermon: “Begin Again in Love”
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Susquehanna Valley
January 7, 2024

Happy New Year to all.

This is our first Sunday together in the new year.

There is an instinct to treat it like the first day of school: with promises of good behavior, a commitment to do all my homework every day and keep my pencils sharp, but after coming through 2023, that seems a bit trite, as well as unrealistic.

2024 will require a lot of us. We are past the time in our late-stage capitalism world when we can look to a new year with hearts full of optimism and sparkles and unicorns. We know what’s ahead. Or at least we can make a pretty good estimate.

2024 will not require us to keep our pencils sharp or hair combed neatly. While those are admirable attributes, what is more vital to this world is that we face it with love, instead of fear and loathing.

How many of us have become habituated to nightly news programs of doom and gloom? How many of us have become overwhelmed by the vastness of the world’s problems?

That overwhelm is a killer. For real.

And it is also part of the strategy of those who would reorganize the world according to a narrow set of beliefs that benefit those who are white, straight, cisgender, affluent, Christian nationalists. The overwhelm is part of the strategy. It is not an accidental byproduct of the madness, it is *intentional*.

Fighting that madness with anger and outrage only feeds the flames.

It can be a real challenge to not respond to hate with hate. When someone behaves in a way that threatens the safety and well-being of you or someone you love, it is a natural instinct to want to lash out and hurt them back, or even hurt them pre-emptively.

Oh NO YOU DON’T, we think. And we lash out.

Dr. King told us that such behavior will not stop the haters, because hate will never be driven out by more hate.

The only thing that can overcome hate is love.

And isn't that just ... inconvenient.

And difficult.

And necessary.

A year ago, this congregation explored what issues were important to its members and then brainstormed accessible, manageable things we can do to help bring those big visions into reality.

That was a really great exercise, and it offered a clear illustration of how we can make progress if we work together. We all have different skills and different abilities, but the good thing is that, when we work together, we can do an awful lot.

In reflecting back on the year that was 2023, I was left feeling exhausted. Beaten up. Abused. Traumatized. Overwhelmed. Helpless, even.

How, then, do we move forward into a new year with any kind of positive energy?

Where are we to find the kind of hopeful, joyous spirit to engage with the difficulties that 2024 is sure to bring?

We find that positive outlook when we center love as our driving, inspirational force.

Love is an amazing thing.

I am not speaking here of the sappy, romantic, Hallmark card kind of love that sells flowers and chocolates in the depth of February.

I am talking about love as a verb. As an intention. As a commitment.

Love is not a fragile flower that will wilt at the first hint of frost or difficulty.

Love is strong, and constant, and unbeatable.

In his famous sermon "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity," early Unitarian minister Theodore Parker planted the seeds for what we now understand as truth that is being continually revealed.

The language around how we understand things, like our human relationship with the divine, that language changes as our understanding expands. But the love of God, Parker argued, THAT was permanent. That was constant. Consistent. Unbreakable and unshakeable.

The Apostle Paul – who certainly had his issues – famously said that love is kind and patient, and all the rest. He described what Parker wrote about nearly two thousand years later: some stuff is just noise, and some stuff is absolute, bedrock-solid truth. He gave us language, in the earliest years of the Christian movement, that still feels relevant today.

He wrote to the emerging church community in Corinth these words:

13 If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

⁸ Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. ¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. ¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Paul was writing to the Corinthians to encourage them to work together, that their spiritual movement needed all of their participation, that this new faith was like a human body with many parts: head and feet and arms and ears and all the parts. None of those parts can do much on its own. For things to work best, they all need to be connected and working toward a single goal. The hand cannot decide that it wants to stay home and watch Netflix if everybody else is gathering food for the community. The diversity of parts and people and skills and strengths are what makes a movement strong and viable, Paul said. But they must be in this thing together.

And to accomplish anything, they must work in love to get there.

If I speak truths but don't back them with love, I have nothing.

If I do good works, but do them for the accolades they bring and not out of love for my fellow human, I am but an empty shell.

We can fight for justice, but if we do it merely to bring down the powerful and not for the joy of lifting up the meek, then we are hollow beings.

2024 is going to bring us a lot of challenges.

It is an election year.

There is a LOT of stuff going on that will need our attention.

And we **MUST** be rooted in love as we work, or any victory will feel hollow and be short-lived.

Let us look forward, now, to seeking climate justice because we love our planet and the people on it. We know that those who have the least power are disproportionately affected by the catastrophic results of our changing global climate. Let us work to make life better, safe, more stable, sustainable, and secure for those who are living closest to the danger.

Let us seek political justice through love – let our love for humanity be the thing that drives us to support voter access around the country, and to support legislation and politicians that seek to lift up those who are most marginalized. Let us not attack with anger bills that seek to harm those who are already living on life's margins, and let us not attack with verbal violence those who promote such things. Let us work with love in our hearts for the liberation, affirmation, and celebration of who they are in all of the glorious ways they are made and choose to express themselves.

Let us not attack oligarchs for stockpiling wealth while others starve. Instead, let us work with love for those who hunger to establish rules and laws and financial structures that provide for those who need support.

We need not be angry to do justice in this world, although it is easy to do that. We will get much more done if we base our work in love for others instead of anger or hate for oppressors. We can acknowledge the humanity of those who behave badly **WHILE STILL HOLDING THEM ACCOUNTABLE** for the damage they do.

That is what love-based justice work is about. Setting clear expectations and boundaries, and staying in relationship so that we can hold ourselves and each other to account for how we behave.

This Sunday morning, I wish you the very best of the coming year. I celebrate with you the joy of making it through 2023 in whatever kind shape you managed. I pledge to you to do my very best to build all of the work that I do in love and invite you to join me on this path.

We have far to go. Very far. Let us travel together in love to get there.

Blessed be and amen.