

First Unitarian Universalist Church
The Beauty in Each Heart: Principle 1
Rev. Sandra Fees
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This morning we begin a series of sermons on our seven principles. I remember when I first read the Unitarian Universalist statement of principles. Finally, I thought, a religion that gets it. A religion that can capture the essence of many of my values in a thoughtful and carefully crafted statement.

I found I agreed with much if not all of the statement of principles. Most of us – it turns out – affirm most of what is in the principles. Because of that, they provide a reasonable starting point for us to discuss the moral principles that guide our lives.

It has been interesting for me in the years that I have been a UU that my own response to the principles has changed. I have moved from simply affirming the principles to being in deeper conversation with them. Sometimes there has even been a tension.

The conversation varies a bit depending on the principle. But at the core there are some basic questions that have to do with discerning how the principles guide us in our daily lives. How do they shape our attitudes? Do they inform our community life? Are they more than a neat, tidy, and well-written statement of intellectual ideas we have become comfortable with affirming?

The truth is the principles evolved over time from our wrestling with them. They grew out of professions of faith and statements of purpose that predate the 1961 merger of Unitarians and Universalists.

They were last revised in 1985. As a denomination, we are now on the brink of a period of review that may lead to changes to them. It is as exciting as it is challenging to be a part of a living tradition like ours open to such change.

It makes sense to me that our statement of principles begins with affirming and promoting the inherent worth and dignity of every person. It suggests a particular view of human nature. It doesn't mean humans are the center of the universe.

I think of the familiar story of the writer who met a friend and talked for a very long time. The writer actually talked about himself for a very long time. And then finally, when he seemed to have finished, he turned to his friend, and said, "I have talked so long about myself. Let's talk about you. How did you like my last book?" (from Building Your Own Theology, Rev. Richard Gilbert)

Inherent worth and dignity isn't narcissistic. This first principle has to do with respect for humankind, not just my own individuality. It is theologically grounded in the belief in the goodness of life. This isn't the same, however, as saying every person is good.

Instead the principle holds that human life in and of itself has value and meaning. This value exists regardless of achievement, success and all the trappings of accomplishment. It exists whether we are good or bad.

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It seems to me we can't take this principle seriously unless we first ask a very basic question. Do we really believe that every person has inherent worth and dignity? In our heart of hearts, do we really believe this? This principle does not say that we affirm the worth and dignity of our friends and family or those we like. It actually says every person. Every single person.

Well, I'm fairly certain that each one of us dislikes at least one person – if you're lucky it's only one. And most of us probably dislike at least one other person rather intensely. There are people we find scary, dangerous, cruel, annoying, mean, and unsafe. There are people who have hurt us personally.

And there are others who have damaged whole societies. What does it mean to say that people like Adolf Hitler and Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden have inherent worth and dignity? Did any of us pay our respects upon Hussein's death? What about the Ku Klux Klan or neo-nazis or members of other hate groups?

When we consider all this, and also look at genocide, acts of violence, and the number of nations at war, being able to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person becomes tremendously challenging.

Despite the challenge, Rev. Kenneth Collier, who wrote a book about the Seven Principles, affirms the inherent worth and dignity of each person. He calls it the Profoundly Beautiful and says it exists in each human heart. He does, however, acknowledge that it may be deeply buried beyond our reach ([Our Seven Principles in Story and Verse](#)).

While most days I agree with Collier, on the days I don't, I have decided it's best to at least act as if I do. I think we need to act as if each person has inherent worth and dignity, even when we aren't sure.

The alternative does not seem ethically grounded. If we don't have this principle as an ethical guidepost, we could end up treating people in the all the ways we criticize. We could end up killing people who kill and torturing people who torture. We could end up responding to people who act badly by in turn treating them inhumanely.

If we decide that some people are less than human or less human than others, we might come to the conclusion that we can treat them as objects or machines. Revenge and exploitation may seem acceptable.

If, instead, if in the face of humanity's worst, we affirm the worth and dignity of every person, we retain hope for what the world and humanity can still be.

I think of a story told by Margaret Wheatley, author of [Turning to One Another](#). She was touring Robben Island, the South African island prison where Nelson Mandela and others were imprisoned for their struggle to end apartheid.

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Those on the tour were shown a long, narrow room that was used as a prison cell for freedom fighters. The prisoners lived there with no cots or other furniture. The room was drafty and cold. There were a few narrow windows near the ceiling.

It turned out the man doing the tour had himself been a prisoner in that very cell. He described the suffering he and the others had endured. There were constant threats and brutality. As he looked around the prison cell, he said in a quiet voice, “Sometimes, to pass the time here, we taught each other ballroom dancing.”

It is incredible to think of them dancing. Dancing, there amid such suffering. It shows how our worth and dignity has not only to do with how we respond to those who mistreated us. It is also a matter of how we are able to respond to others after seeing the worst of human nature. Are we still able to reach out to others? Can we allow ourselves to be caring and keep an open heart?

There is another story of a pregnant Rwandan mother of six whose village was destroyed by a massacre. She was shot and left for dead, after being buried under the bodies of her six children. She actually survived. She dug herself out, buried her children, and gave birth to her new child. Then she adopted five children whose parents had been killed in that massacre (Wheatley, Turning to One Another).

She might have sunk into despair of the human condition. She might have decided that humanity was without hope. But she didn't. She dug herself out and embraced her own humanity as fully as she could.

Whether we are able to reach out to others depends on what we believe about other people. Wheatley says:

Courageous acts aren't done by people who believe in human badness. Why risk anything if we don't believe in each other? Why stand up for anyone if we don't believe they are worth saving? Who I think you are will determine what I'm willing to do on your behalf. If I believe you're not as good or important as me, I won't even notice you.

What we do for each other will depend on the value we place on human life.

That doesn't mean we have to accept anything in the name of tolerance and respect. Affirming worth and dignity doesn't mean we allow ourselves to accept behaviors that are damaging to us or our communities.

Let me offer an example that hits close to home. Churches are routinely faced with individuals who come to our doors looking for help. When I was in Cuba some years ago, we went to a morning mass and were mobbed by people asking for handouts.

Here in our church, we have had individuals come during coffee hour and ask for money. In response, we developed a disruptive person policy to set guidelines for how we will and won't provide assistance.

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While we want to be caring, we also don't want Sunday gatherings to be disrupted and we don't want our community to be taken advantage of. When we give money, we may think we are helping, but that isn't always the case. Sometimes we are enabling a person to buy drugs and alcohol. We may even place our own community at risk.

There is a young woman who tried to "sell" me an old typewriter as I was coming in the church one night. She said she needed money to fix her car – though it was about 7 o'clock. I told her I could make an appointment with her in the morning but she insisted she needed cash right then and there. I told her that was not possible.

A few weeks later she showed up on Sunday morning during coffee hour, again asking for cash. When I again told her I don't give out cash but could possibly help by writing a check to a landlord or utility company, she asked whether there was someone else she could talk to. Both times she was desperate for cash on the spot, and I was concerned she was looking for money to buy drugs.

Both times, my heart went out to her, and I felt the sting of having to tell her I could not give her money. But respecting a person's inherent worth and dignity is not the same thing as giving them what they want or allowing ourselves to be compromised in the process. It is never easy to be confronted by a person in great need who we cannot reach.

Affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every person is a tall order. It demands much of us. We are called upon to think and reflect and discern. We need to wrestle with the contradictions. And even as we strive to live out this principle, we know we will sometimes fall short.

When we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person we are holding up an ideal to which we can aspire. That doesn't mean we're always able to perfectly embody and live it. It does mean that it is worthy of our commitment.

This first principle is foundational to the other six. It urges us to honor life and to recognize the divine spark in each person. It is a statement of hope and promise for what we human beings can be. Affirming the worth and dignity of every person is a testament to the beauty in each heart.

May it be so. Amen.