

First Unitarian Universalist Church
Tolerance, Intolerance, and the Wisdom to Know the Difference
Rev. Sandra Fees
February 3, 2008



I met with Jean Wesner about a month ago to talk with her about today's service. She was the highest bidder for what we call the auction sermon. For those who are not familiar with the church auction, it is held annually and one of the items up for bid is a sermon of your choosing given by the minister. The topic Jean selected is tolerance. Jean wanted to explore what it means to be tolerant of others and how well we practice tolerance with the people in our everyday lives.

I asked Jean if I could share some of our conversation with all of you, and she very quickly agreed that would be fine. Jean described to me how she has been wrestling with the idea of being tolerant with the people and situations she encounters every day. She isn't so much worried about other people being tolerant of her. She is interested in exploring her own ability to be open and tolerant of others.

Jean had recently been watching a television interview of a well-known and distinguished man. The interviewer was a woman wearing a short skirt. Jean was distracted by that short skirt. But what seemed to bother Jean the most was not the short skirt but her own reaction to it. After all, how much difference does it make how short the woman's skirt was?

Interestingly, this is just the kind of question Jean's son would be likely to ask. Jean admires him as a person who truly models tolerance and has taught her, she says, the most about what it means to be tolerant. He isn't concerned about how other people dress, for example, and does not criticize or judge what other people do or don't do. He seems to have mastered the art of tolerance.

In looking at the history of our Unitarian Universalist faith, tolerance has been a core value and continues to be highly valued among us. While the word tolerance does not appear in our principles or sources, it has often been considered, along with reason and freedom of conscience, to be at the very heart of our tradition.

At core, we offer an accepting religious alternative to the religions and institutions that in one way or another are exclusive to certain groups of people.

I want to take a few minutes this morning to talk about why and how that happened. Our history of religious tolerance began with King John Sigismund in Transylvania. He signed the Edict of Torda in 1568, the first edict of its kind that provided a legal guarantee of some religious freedom. It was signed at a contentious time in religious history and repudiated the attempts to impose a single religion.

With the Enlightenment, came a new societal appreciation for tolerance. Voltaire and the 18th Century Enlightenment was based in reason and the belief that a better society could be built on principles of common sense and tolerance. Its legacy is an emphasis on human rights for those who are oppressed and tyrannized by religious conflict.

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We came to give religious tolerance especially high value because we were often the target of intolerance, hatred, and oppression for our non-orthodox religious views. Even in modern times, we are aware of what it means to be the target of religious criticism. A number of our congregations that have hung banners across their church facades in support and celebration of same-sex marriages have been subject to vandalism and theft.

The result of our being a tolerant faith is that we have long been on the forefront of including women as well as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals in the clergy. I note the inclusion in the clergy because ordination has historically been a higher level barrier than membership in churches has been. So, for example, some Catholic and Methodist congregations are open to gay people worshiping in their churches but not serving in their pulpits. We have also been on the forefront of recognizing diverse theologies in our spiritual community.

As King Sigismund's court preacher Unitarian Francis David said, we need not think alike to love alike. That means on any given Sunday morning we find ourselves sitting side by side with theists, agnostics, mystics, naturalists, humanists, and pagans, among others.

For us, creeds, doctrines, and these theological labels are necessarily subordinate to our deeply held values. What matters most to us is how we live our values in the world and how well we are able to be in right relationship with others.

When I hear people describe their ability to come to this church and be themselves, I often feel they are describing my experience. When I first became a UU one of the things I loved most was that I could come to church as I was.

I discovered I didn't need to hide part of who I am or simply be superficially polite. I could express myself in ways I hadn't been able to prior to that. I could come to church in the clothes I wanted to wear – whether that meant dressing up or wearing a pair of jeans. I found that I could speak out on issues that mattered to me. And in all that, I felt to a large extent, that I was accepted in ways I had not been before.

Being tolerant as a religious community has to do with being open to different religious ideas. That is one significant way of honoring human differences. But there are, of course, any number of other ways we are challenged to be tolerant – with differences of gender, race, age, differing abilities, social status, income level, physical appearance, speech and language, and mental or physical health. And let me add in this build up to a presidential election, the challenge to be tolerant of differing political perspectives.

I like to think of myself as a fairly tolerant person and I'm pretty sure most of the rest of you do too. Yet, like Jean, we may have to admit there are some things and some people we may not be quite as tolerant of as we would like to be. Or maybe we aren't always as tolerant as we think we are.

One of the reasons is that we don't always recognize that we have strong ideas about certain people – maybe even prejudices. We don't always see or admit that we have been influenced by family, friends, and the media to have certain perceptions about people. We may jump to

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conclusions and not take time to get to know people for who they are and to appreciate their motivations and struggles.

It can be a real act of humility to withhold judgment and be open to difference. It means acknowledging that we don't have all the answers and that our ways of being in the world are not necessarily right or better than another person's. It is best not to be too sure of ourselves.

Being tolerant of other people isn't simply about avoiding uncomfortable conflicts or being politically correct. As people of faith, we are called to go deeper than that. We are called to strive for respect. To choose love.

Tolerance acknowledges the worth and dignity of the other person. When we are tolerant, we are recognizing that each person carries within them the spark of the divine and the integrity of being human.

By not jumping to conclusions or disagreements, we make it possible to get to know another person's experience and grow in relationship. This means moving beyond a superficial kind of tolerance. Civility has its place and it is far better than its counterpart.

But if we are to learn to be tolerant, we may need to do more than simply put up with differences. We may need to do more than feign being okay with other people's differences. It may not be enough to simply ignore what we don't like or avoid people who rub us the wrong way.

There is a cost to superficial forms of tolerance. It seems to me that we all pay a price for this form of tolerance. When we haven't learned to accept people in our hearts, then we are still carrying around our criticisms and our judgments, even if we aren't giving voice or action to them. This can be a tremendous burden. What I call superficial tolerance does not get to the root of our negative feelings and eradicate them. It masks them. The intolerance may still be present even if we don't act on it.

Many of us have internalized cultural messages and criticisms. It is extremely difficult to unravel the prejudices we have internalized. We carry them around and we even turn them against ourselves.

We can find it difficult to accept the differences in ourselves, even more so than in others. Despite our strong urges toward freedom of expression, we also have a strong desire to be accepted and to fit in. So for many of us, the challenge is not only being able to be more tolerant of others. It is that we are so often so hard on ourselves and need to learn to be more tolerant of ourselves.

When I was in grade school I had a mild lisp. It was serious enough that my parents were advised to have me do a bit of speech therapy at school. I remember being deeply embarrassed.

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I don't however remember anyone making fun of me. Still I do remember being incredibly self-conscious. I was upset enough that one day I skipped my therapy session and just hung out in the hallway. I wasn't a kid that skipped class so it was a really big deal for me.

Even though the therapy was designed to help me overcome the very thing I was embarrassed about and ultimately did, it also brought more attention to my "problem," which I dreaded. It reminded me that I was somehow different. And different was not good.

Unlike Jacob in this morning's sermon reading, I was not able to believe that nothing was wrong. I was not able to move past my fear and embarrassment. I was afraid people would laugh at me. Given the amount of judgment I placed on myself, it is clear to me that I learned that somewhere. I worried that others would criticize me, or reject me. It is no wonder. I was doing that to myself.

In her book Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life with the Heart of a Buddha, Tara Brach offers a guide to the practice of Radical Acceptance. Brach is a clinical psychologist and teacher of Buddhist mindfulness.

She says, "we practice radical acceptance by pausing and then meeting whatever is happening inside us with this kind of unconditional friendliness. Instead of turning our jealous thoughts or angry feelings into the enemy, we pay attention in a way that enables us to recognize and touch any experience with care."

Radical Acceptance teaches that "nothing is wrong" – with us or with others. We can encounter ourselves and each other with "unconditional friendliness." Imagine how freeing, how accepting, how comforting that would be. Imagine doing that for yourself and for others in your life. This is what it means to say yes to life, to be open to life in all its fullness and diversity. That, I believe, is what it means to be tolerant.

May we find ways to say "yes" to life. May we learn to offer unconditional friendliness. May we extend the reach of our love to embrace others who may be different from us.

So be it. Amen.