

First Unitarian Universalist Church of Berks County
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The Universalist Spirit
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A few weeks ago, I received a phone call from a woman staying at a local shelter. I'll call her Karen. Karen was in the process of interviewing for jobs and was looking for help. She needed a bus pass and cell phone minutes. So I arranged a time to meet with her at the church. Karen arrived with a woman who volunteers at the shelter, and we went into my office to talk.

Karen explained to me that she needed a bus pass to get to job interviews and ultimately to a job. The cell phone would allow her to call potential employers and receive calls. Calls at a shelter are not always reliably passed along. Karen told me she was going to McDonald's later that afternoon for an interview. The bus pass especially would make it possible for her to get there. We worked out the details of how the church through me could provide this help for Karen.

As we were sitting there talking, Karen also mentioned that she had only one pair of shoes, the sneakers she was wearing. They hurt her feet. She didn't ask me to buy her new sneakers. She actually said that, while she needed a new pair, she wanted to wait until she knew what job she would have and what might be required before getting anything. If you can only expect to have one pair of shoes, you need to be sure they are the right pair. I doubt many of us have to worry about that.

As I was sitting there calculating in my mind how I might help Karen buy shoes later on, the woman who Karen brought with her was calculating something else entirely. She said, "what size shoe do you wear?" Karen said, "a size 10, I have big feet." "So do I" said the other woman. "Here try these" she added as she pulled off her sneakers. They looked nearly new to my eye. She slid them over toward Karen. Karen said, "but what will you wear?" The other woman said, "Oh don't worry I have other shoes at home."

Karen took off her shoes, put on the other ones, and circled around my office with a big smile on her face. Then she went over and hugged the other woman. Right there in front of my eyes, I watched someone literally give up the shoes on her feet to another person. Right here in this church in my office. Had I not been so stunned, I probably would have cried.

This story expresses the Universalist spirit.

The Universalist spirit got its formal start in America on September 4, 1793, when a group of people who called themselves Universalists gathered in the village of Oxford, Massachusetts. They spent the day preaching, praying, having fellowship, providing mutual support, and conducting organizational business.

This weekend we hosted a similar meeting of Universalists – the Pennsylvania Universalist Convention. This group consists of those churches in Pennsylvania that are historically Universalist. Our congregation is among them.

In honor of this annual gathering and to honor our Universalist heritage, I am focusing this morning on the contribution of the Universalist side of our Unitarian Universalist faith. What does Universalism have to offer as part of our contemporary spirituality?

From its beginning, Universalism was a saving faith. We don't use that terminology, saving faith, a lot. The word saving may even make some of you uncomfortable. Some of us grew up in faith traditions where we were told we needed saving because there was something inherently wrong with us.

The Universalists didn't agree. They rejected the idea that God was condemning and that people were sinful. Historically, the Universalists believed instead that every person would be saved, because God was a loving God. A compassionate God would not condemn human beings to eternal suffering, nor to suffering in this life.

The Universalist faith was saving because it offered a saving message of love, a theology of love. In contemporary terms, it offers a message of care and concern in this life. To love universally is to reach out to others in kindness and generosity. It is to be made whole through loving and being loved.

The Universalist spirit transcends time and space. It is Universalist in the biggest and broadest and most inclusive sense of the word. Universalism assures us that God by whatever name is a sustaining power within and around us. Every human is loved. Everyone has worth and dignity just by virtue of being alive.

There are not some of us who deserve the good life and others who deserve to live in poverty and despair. There is no separation into those who are worthy and those who are unworthy. There are no sheep and goats. Everyone has value. There is hope and dignity for all people.

This sounds so basic, so simple, right? The thing is, this vision of an all-inclusive love is desperately needed by people who are being told over and over again that they are not worthy of love. It is no less needed today than it was hundreds of years ago. It is as relevant now as it was then. It is an old idea that is as radical now as it was then.

I encounter a lot of people who don't feel loved – by God, by others. I see people who are struggling, scared, lonely. I see people who are angry. I see people who are beginning to lose hope. I see a lot of people who need a community where they can belong, and where they will be accepted for who they are.

I see a lot of people who want something so basic, so seemingly simple. What they want – what we all want - is someone who will reach out to us in love. We want to be loved. It's incredible how many of us have never been taught they are loved.

I think if we are to be honest, we can probably all name times in our lives when we have felt we were unlovable or unloved or unloving. We may have made a mistake. We may have hurt someone or been hurt by someone.

There are sadly too many ways that we humans have come to feel there is something wrong with us, that we are not worthy in some way. We may feel we are not smart enough, not good looking enough, not young enough or old enough, not talented enough, not spiritual enough, not nice enough or tough enough. You name it. We may sometimes feel we can never do enough to be made whole. For anyone who has ever felt this way, Universalism offers a powerful and healing message.

Our keynote speaker at the gathering of our Universalist churches yesterday was Rev. Richard Trudeau. He talked to us about “Universalist Spirituality.” And one of the things he said that caught my attention is this. He said, “We don’t have to do anything to be saved. It is a free gift.” He was not talking about being saved in the next life. He was talking about now, right now!

At first glance, this can seem a little sugar-coated, a little feel good. But this theology of love is not about cheap grace or cheap love. It’s about transforming people’s lives in a real way. As simple as it is to say it, it is in the living it and the feeling it that we are most challenged. People who are hurting need a new vision. They – we - need to feel good about ourselves.

But it isn’t just that. The Universalists didn’t sit around just feeling good about themselves. They weren’t complacent. They weren’t hedonists. They sure weren’t reading a lot of self-help books either. They were activists. The Universalists rolled up their sleeves and helped out. They knew that someone who was hungry needed to feel worthy. But let’s face it. The hungry also need good food.

In our contemporary liberal tradition, we inherit from the Universalists their theology of love. We also acquire their example of love. Not only do they teach us that each of us is loved just the way we are, but that we live that out by being loving.

We give someone the shoes off our feet. We join in advocating for legislation for equal rights for gays and lesbians. We feed the hungry through a food pantry such as the one we run here or by making or delivering a meal. We strive to create a just economic community. We comfort the sick and the dying. We seek common ground with those with whom we disagree. We also live it out by being willing to accept the love and help that others offer us. That’s what we do when we know love is in us and around us.

Universalism lets us know we are all in this life together. We share in it. What we do in love and receive in love benefits everyone.

This is a truly universal universalism. It takes to heart the moral and religious responsibility to be universal. It transcends the particular. It transcends our differences –

of religion, of culture, of age, of gender. It transcends our fear of one another so that we can embrace the task of living rightly with each other and with creation. According to Trudeau, part of a Universalist spirituality is the understanding that “humanity is a community of moral equals.”

If we really believe that, I mean think about what it means to be moral equals. If we believe it, then our faith can't help but be broadly inclusive. The recognition that we are all moral equals makes room for other people and other ideas. It makes room for the stranger in our midst. To be fair, it does far more than that. A spiritual community that sees everyone as morally equal invites the stranger to participate in meaningful ways. Everyone has a place at the table.

I think that's part of the reason the Universalists tended to be evangelists. They wanted to share their faith. Their enthusiasm and desire to be inclusive could not be contained. Itinerant preachers took the good news west across America. They wanted to reach out and touch the lives of other people. They wanted to spread the good news. This is the kind of enthusiasm a genuinely loving faith inspires. People want to go out and talk about it – it's that good.

And I know we have a few evangelists in this congregation who talk about this faith every change they get.

John Murray, the founder of Universalism in America, did that. And he encouraged others to go out and spread the word. Early on, he knew Universalism had a strong vision. He told people, “Go out into the highways and by-ways. Give the people something of your new vision. Give them not hell, but hope and courage; preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.”

Universalism offers a vision we can take to the streets. It offers just the kind of saving we could all use a little more of. It's the kind of contemporary spirituality that can transform hearts and minds. It can save lives. It can help to heal us. It can help to heal this world of ours, this world we all share.

Amen and blessed be.