

**First UU Church of Berks**  
**UU Source 4: Jewish and Christian Teachings**  
**Rev. Sandra Fees**  
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I taught a course on the six Unitarian Universalist sources with young adults a few years ago. At the end of the class, we talked about what worked and what didn't. I asked them about the sources and which ones they found most meaningful and which of them held less value in their lives.

The group almost unanimously questioned having a separate source for Jewish and Christian teachings. They did not see why it was necessary to separate those two religions from the other religions of the world.

I was surprised. It had never occurred to me to include them with the world's religions. I guess it has always made some sense to me to have them be separate. But the class got me to thinking.

What are the reasons to keep them as a separate source? After all, Judaism and Christianity are among the world's great religions. Loving one's neighbor as oneself is part of the wisdom of the world's religions.

Today, as we focus on our fourth Unitarian Universalist source, we will consider what it uniquely offers us. This source is: Jewish and Christian teachings that call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.

For those who may have missed a week in this series, in the past three weeks, we have reflected on direct experience of mystery and wonder as a source of inspiration and meaning in our faith. We have examined the role of prophets in challenging us to love, compassion, and justice. We have gleaned the wisdom of the world's religions for ethical and spiritual inspiration in our lives.

My answer to the class about why we have a separate source for Jewish and Christian teachings focused on our roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Having a source dedicated to Jewish and Christian teachings is a way of acknowledging our own history.

Whatever theologies we now claim as our own individually, we still have collective roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition. But I think that is only part of the picture.

Consider that of the six sources, this is the only one that specifically uses the term God. There are several phrases and expressions throughout the sources that for me also point to what we might call the sacred – words like transcending mystery and wonder, forces that create and uphold life, the transforming power of love, and wisdom. Still, this is the only one to mention the word "God."

And what this source has to say about God leads us back to a central Universalist idea, that God is love. The Universalists believed that because God is loving no one would be condemned to an eternity of hell. All will be saved. Everyone will return to the same source of life.

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We see this theology reflected on our own pulpit here in the sanctuary. The pulpit proclaims “God is love.”

The Bible does too. And not only the New Testament or Christianity. Christianity upholds love as central to the Christian faith. At the same time, Christianity was not the first religion to proclaim the spiritual and ethical value of love. And it is not the only one to lay claim to the importance and value of love to people of faith.

The Jewish scriptures and the Jewish tradition taught love long before Christianity ever existed. For example, in Leviticus 19:18, God spoke to Moses saying, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” In verse 34, God tells Moses, “You shall love the stranger as yourself.”

In Deuteronomy 10:19, Moses declares that, “You are to love those who are aliens,” meaning strangers. And in Deuteronomy, we also find his instruction: “to love the Lord your God with all your whole heart and with all your soul.”

Jesus knew these scriptures well. He was steeped in the Jewish tradition. He often quoted Jewish scripture and taught Jewish beliefs.

He was, after all, a Jew. People sometimes forget that. When I was in theological school, my New Testament professor would start nearly every class by saying “Jesus was a ?..... Jew.” Jesus was a Jew.

You might be surprised how many non-Jews, including some Christian seminarians, think Jesus was a Christian or that he founded Christianity.

Jesus summed up what he learned about love in the Jewish scriptures and what he learned in the Ten Commandments into what are called the “Two Great Commandments.” They are: to love God with all our heart and also to love our neighbor. Jesus says,

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments (Mt 22: 37-40).

The first of these two great commandments is to love God with all our heart and mind and soul. When we have a center in our lives, we can have a sense of purpose and direction. When we recognize the web of existence that connects us all, we can feel we are part of something greater than we are. We feel less alone.

When we feel that there is love as a higher principle and unifying force in our lives, that energy becomes part of us. That intimate knowledge of what is most sacred and most holy permeates everything. It becomes part of the very fabric of who we are as human beings and infuses us with the breath of life.

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That love is what calls on us in turn to love our neighbor. Sometimes I think we struggle to be neighborly with others because we ourselves are not grounded in that kind of love. We may not trust the love and goodness of the world or of God.

We may not feel we ourselves are held in the embrace of the universe, or the embrace of humankind. We may not feel we are held tenderly when we were hurting. Bestowing love and kindness on others when we don't feel loved ourselves can be an enormous stretch, even an impossibility.

In our own UU tradition, we have long held that each of us is loved by God or to put it another way, that life is good, or at the very least benign. In other words, we don't need to be perfect or do certain things in order to be lovable. We are worthy of respect and care despite any mistakes or failings. That doesn't mean we are always able to live that way.

We all have times when we feel unloved. From time to time we all need to rediscover our connection with the sacred source of life and feel the power of love anew. When we do, when we feel loved ourselves, we are better able to be loving.

We are going to want to share that love with other people and also with all living creatures. How could we not? How could we speak of the world and God as centered in love but not extend that love universally to other people and other beings?

We can each probably think of many examples of being a loving neighbor. We can probably come up with numerous stories of helping out the people we naturally feel connected to – our family, our friends, our children. I actually don't think we need a special teaching to do this.

But what about being a loving neighbor to the stranger – to people we don't know or like? What about people we envy, disagree with in some basic and fundamental ways, or just find annoying?

It isn't always as simple as it sounds. I think we know that. We are called to a higher love, to a love that transcends our difference and our indifference. This is the kind of love that makes it possible to help a complete stranger or even an enemy. When we do, we are exercising a love based in the worth of every human being, and in our own worth.

A few years ago, I was asked to help someone I didn't know. The man was referred to me by a local social service agency for financial help with his utilities. He had suffered a stroke and had trouble communicating, even in his own language, Spanish. He had six children. The utility company was threatening to shut off his heat.

I knew I could provide some support through my minister's discretionary fund. That fund exists thanks to the generosity and love of this congregation.

I could have simply written a check to cover part of his most recent bill. But the bill was close to a thousand dollars – and that was just for a few weeks of heat. I knew the gentleman and his family could not afford to pay bills of this size at that time or in the near future. The small

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amount of money I could provide would only help them get by for another month. After that they would be back in the same situation.

So I called the utility company. I spent several phone calls and a few hours working back and forth between the utility company, a bilingual staff person at the social service agency, and the gentleman seeking assistance. I was able to advocate for him and help to develop a process for handling his bills. My ability to communicate in English and being a minister made it possible for me to achieve something he couldn't on his own.

In the end, the utility company forgave part of the bill, based on his family's financial circumstances. They put him on a special plan so that he would not find himself back in the same situation in a few months. I then paid what was still owed on the bill, which was around \$200.

I crossed the road to help this gentleman, not only by writing a check. I also took the time to go an extra step that I know has made a real difference in his life. I was called to respond in love by being a good neighbor.

In the end when it comes to this fourth source of ours, I agree with the young adults in the class I taught that Jewish and Christian teachings could be combined with world religions as one source. That may even happen some day. I don't know.

For now, I am glad they stand as their own source. I am glad the call to respond to God's love and to be neighborly stands on its own.

The message of love in this source teaches us the value of love – love of God, love of neighbor, love of self. It encourages us to practice basic human kindness.

I encourage each of you in the days to come to consider how God's love is at work in your own life. Who have you crossed the road to help? Who has crossed the road to help you?

Amen. Shalom.