

Inviting Love into the Center

Sermon by Emily Richards, September 22, 2024

My beloveds. When we speak about the love that is at the center of our faith, we are speaking about that which I am gazing upon right now. You. All of you.

This summer Unitarian Universalists from all over the country came together to vote on a statement of values and beliefs for this faith. That statement, often referred to as Article 2, from the section of the Unitarian Universalist Association, or UUA, bylaws where these words reside, passed decisively with over 80% of votes in favor of the changes. This was a process that took years and multiple votes from the members of this faith.

Part of those changes include this statement.

“Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values. We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the discipline of Love.”

But, I’m not here this morning to talk about the politics of changing a part of the bylaws of the UUA. There is information about the new values in your Order of Service, and more on the website if you are interested.

My understanding is that this was challenging work and, in the process harm was done and repair had to be made.

And isn’t this often the way it goes with change? Transformation can be painful. We leave parts of us behind. We do damage, to ourselves and one another. But we also invite in the possibility of something better. We invite in the possibility of an even greater love.

So, now thousands of UUs, myself included, voted to affirm this change.

But what does that even mean? And does it really change anything at all? Or is it just semantics and can we expect the continuation of the status quo only with new graphics and marketing materials?

Regardless of whether you are excited about this new way of describing our shared faith or are wrestling with feelings of loss, or even anger, over the removal of the beloved principles and sources from the bylaws, change is a part of life. In fact, transformation is one of our new values. It reminds us that “Openness to change is fundamental to our Unitarian and Universalist heritage.”

Holding this truth about who we are, how do we move forward into a new understanding of ourselves with love at the center of our beliefs?

UUA President Rev. Dr. Sofia Betancourt, Cornell graduate and once an active member of this congregation, tells us:

“There is a love that sets us free. Not free as in having the power to do whatever we want but free as in not weighed down or bound by the patterns of hatred and control that get passed from generation to generation.

Free as in Restless called to solidarity wherever we witness Injustice.

Free as in knowing without a doubt that we are worthy and that it is ours to invite others into the same wisdom for themselves.

Free to imagine a world where children are never In Harm's Way.

Where the violence and Desperation of generations has served instead as a sight of sacred repair, interrupting the cycles of war and dehumanization.

Free to express our highest values and what we believe in, as many poetic forms as there are people in the room, free enough to build communities that love us so deeply that we are held when we falter and invited back into sacred Covenant when we fail...”

There is a love that sets us free. There is a love that has made a place for all of us.

A love that can build communities that hold us when we falter. That invite us back into covenant when we fail one another. Because we will. We are imperfect beings.

We invite that love into the center by inviting one another in. By lifting up our covenant, our promises to one another and this community, as the foundation of this faith.

And I want to acknowledge that this is easier said than done. We can't just say, great, love is now at the center. Now all of the changes that we dream about will come to pass and everything will be simple. Because, love, right? What more do we need?

It turns out we need a lot to do this work of “living our shared values through the discipline of love.”

We need one another, and relationships and community and communication are hard.

Even as I settle into my fifth year serving this congregation I continue to struggle with navigating the complicated, and often opaque, structure of this community. I find myself surprised and

perplexed at times by the information that I am simply supposed to know. Community members I've never met but am expected to recognize. Acronyms that I am supposed to understand.

And then chagrined when I recognize the ways that I, in turn, expect long-time community members and newcomers alike to understand the often unstated expectation that this knowledge is somehow implicit in what we do and who we are.

Unitarian Universalist CB Beal, who is an educator, consultant, writer, and facilitator, and who founded Justice and Peace Consulting, which uses the framework of Preemptive Radical Inclusion in their work, shared some of their writing recently, which really resonated with me on the challenges of being in community together, and the unspoken assumptions that come along with it.

As an introduction to the piece they wrote:

I have never worked with a congregation or other gathering of community life that did not struggle with Unstated Expectations And Lingering Resentments.

Like the ubiquitous Acronyms We Forget Aren't Actually Words And Tell Newcomers Nothing, unstated expectations interfere with building a beloved community. We can notice and name our needs and give those we have expectations of, an opportunity to clarify how they can show up.

And finally, they share, "although I wrote this from a particular perspective, I have been on all sides of this piece more times than I can count."

This piece by CB Beal is titled.

On Building Community II:

They write:

I want to show up for you, but
I didn't know I was meant to be a mind reader

I didn't know I was to anticipate needs
that had not been spoken.

I didn't know
that you are the one who always brought the pie,
the potato salad, the mac and cheese,
who brings the flowers for the front
or fills in at the nursery;
and that I ruined it
when I asked someone else.

I didn't know
when you said you wanted me
to visit you sometimes,
that you meant every week.

I didn't know the paint color I called "interesting," was
chosen in honor of the beloved founder, Fred, and his
unique bow ties, or that he was your ex-husband.

I didn't know that when you said that you
didn't need anything that I was supposed to ask you
three more times;
until you told me the truth.

And I didn't know
that by believing you the first time
I would become the bad guy who didn't
help you properly
during your hour of need.

There's a mysterious set of rules here.
Opaque. Surprising and puzzling in turns.
No one told me,
but everyone believes I know.

I'm not even sure you know you expect it of me.
There's a blank space between your need
and my response,
full of assumptions that because of my role
I will automatically meet that need.

And worse, the belief that if I don't,
it is because I don't want to.

In the end, which may come unnecessarily soon,
you may say I failed you.

If so, it will be because I didn't know
I was meant to be a mind reader,
and you failed to notice that you
kept your true needs to yourself;
tightly wound in an unturned compost pile
of assumptions and "the way we've always done it."

It won't be me failing you;
we fail one another.

But if this continues, you will have a story to cling to;
a story of failure, again or still.

It might be an easy story that leaves you
with a predictable and familiar
righteously aggrieved disappointment,

but that will be in place of
what might have been the more subtle
and complex stories of our
developing relationships and growing community.

I believe one purpose of this community of ours
is to practice being in healthy, whole relationships.

You believe that, too.
It's the how that's tricky.

Making a community anew in times of change
is incredibly complicated.

It's unpredictable, frequently messy, and vulnerable.

Although we mostly don't like that feeling,
we can choose patterns of communication
that will move us toward more wholeness.

Here's a thing we don't often talk about:
Many of us were never taught how to
do this complicated thing of telling the truth
about our needs.

Some of us were taught that there is shame in need.
We can begin the work of unpacking that and reject it as nonsense.
We can choose to lean into one another.

If I begin to ask you, "What else do I need
to know in order to support you?"
and "What do you need?"
will you tell me the truth?

I don't know if you found yourself similarly affected, but this reading spoke to me in a visceral way. Putting words to the complexity of being in relationship with one another and navigating the complicated history of an organization that has been in existence since 1865. There are unspoken rules and assumptions that we don't even realize exist until they are unintentionally broken.

And while these words were specific to our experiences in faith communities, the same dynamics exist in all communities that we are a part of. Other organizations and workplaces and schools and families and friend groups.

If you listen closely to these words they tell us something about what placing love at the center means.

It means telling the truth about our needs. About our limitations. It means working to unlearn the shame associated with even having needs to begin with. Because acknowledging those needs means acknowledging our own imperfections.

But, as CB tells us, it's the how that's tricky.

How do we, as individuals and a community, let go of years of unspoken expectations and the lingering resentments that accompany them, and honestly, and truly, invite love into its place?

If I'm being honest, I don't know the answer. I'm not an expert in communication or cultural change.

And, I myself am terrible at sharing my own needs. I have, at least, as I've grown older, become more self aware when it comes to my own struggles around expectations, communication, shame, and perfectionism.

But that doesn't mean I know how to evolve into the version of me that easily and clearly shares what I need. That I know how to allow myself to be vulnerable and open enough to make meaningful change.

And I don't expect you to either.

What I hope, for all of us, is that we are willing to try.

What these new values do by placing love at the center is give words to our aspirations.

They invite us to aspire to this ideal, that "Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values. We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the discipline of Love."

They remind us that love can make a place for all of us.

And doing the work of love is going to look different for each and every one of us. For some of us it might look like bringing a meal to a family in need. And for others it may be tending the garden, or spending time with the children of this congregation, or partnering with outside organizations that are working to further our shared values of justice and equity in the world. Or simply being there for someone in their time of need.

It's showing up. It's finding the things that inspire you, the ways to engage that feel like restoration and renewal, as opposed to obligation. And encouraging others to do the same.

When you engage with the community in this way, you aren't just doing the work that needs to be done. You are living out our shared values. You are deepening your connections.

There are needs here in this community that are not being met, needs both spoken and unspoken. And I am going to ask you to open up to the possibility that in being brave enough to speak these needs to others, and to listen deeply when someone else communicates their own needs, that we are, in fact, inviting love into the center.

We can choose to lean into each other. We can choose patterns of communication that will move us toward more wholeness.

If I begin to ask you, "What else do I need to know in order to support you?"
and "What do you need?"
will you tell me the truth?