

The Challenge of Universalism by Magdalen Lindeberg

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Reading

In the Christian Scriptures, the Gospel of Matthew chapter 5 describes a scene where Jesus gathers his followers together to deliver the Sermon on the Mount. This Sermon includes 9 blessings that we know as the Beatitudes. These are they:

³Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.

⁴Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.

⁵Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the Earth.

⁶Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be satisfied.

⁷Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.

⁸Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.

⁹Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called the Sons of God.

¹⁰Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.

I was raised in a Bible-reading Christian family in the Lutheran denomination, so these verses are very familiar. But I was prompted to think more about them after reading a recent interview with the Jesuit priest and Vatican emissary, Father James Martin. These quotes are taken from that interview:

“I often wonder why we don’t put the Beatitudes in classrooms. It’s always the Ten Commandments. What about “blessed are the poor,” “blessed are those who mourn,” “blessed are the meek,” “blessed are the peacemakers”? Why is there never a push for the Beatitudes?” (I’ll add here that the author Kurt Vonnegut said the same many years ago)

Why is that? Because it's hard, and it's stuff that we want to avoid. I mean, following the Ten Commandments is hard, too. But these days, the Beatitudes are harder.

I think there's a craving for moral clarity at this moment. People with very different viewpoints want to believe that God is on their side. I've been thinking a lot about Renee Good and her killing. No one deserves to be treated like that. But I'm seeing this coarsening of morality in the United States, where some people think she deserved it. When you think of people like the inmates on death row, migrants, protesters, L.G.B.T.Q. people, people in Ukraine, people in Gaza — everyone deserves to be treated with dignity. That's what we're losing. What's being set forth is, only *our* side deserves to be treated with dignity, and the other side is evil, maybe not even human. Which is a disgrace, because for Jesus, there's no us and them — there's just us. And all of us deserve to be treated with dignity. Everyone is a beloved child of God"

Closing Words

Closing words are from Victor Glover, one of the astronauts on the Artemis II mission that returned to Earth last week. Glover was asked by a journalist at CBS for an Easter message and this was his response

“You know, I don’t have anything prepared but I’m glad you brought that up. I think these observances are important and as we are so far from Earth and look back at the beauty of creation. I think for me, the really important personal perspective that I have up here is that I can really see Earth as one thing.

... you have this amazing place, this spaceship. You guys are talking to us because we’re in a spaceship really far from Earth but you’re on a spaceship called Earth that was created to give us a place to live in the universe, in the cosmos

Maybe the distance we are from you makes you think that we’re doing is special. But we’re the same distance from you and I’m trying to tell you, just trust me – you are special. In all of this emptiness, this thing we call the universe. You have this oasis, this beautiful place that we get to exist – together.

I think as we go into Easter Sunday thinking about all the cultures all around the world, whether you celebrate it or not, whether you believe in God or not, this is an opportunity for us to remember where we are, who we are, and that we are the same thing and that we’ve got to get through this together.”

SERMON

A couple months ago Keith and I arrived at a local venue for a musical performance. We had gone early and there was another couple who took seats behind us. They were debating whether to leave their coats on the seats so I turned and said, "Don't worry, I'll make sure no one takes them". To which one responded, "Oh I trust YOU, I mean, you're reading The New Yorker" Now, I know I've said things like that myself, but hearing it from someone else really made me think - What is the relationship between the magazine you're reading and trustworthiness? Would she have reacted the same if I'd been reading People Magazine? Car & Driver? Guns & Ammo? Well, there isn't a relationship, other than reading material being one of the markers by which we can judge others. Is this person of one of my tribe? One of my people?

Another story. And this is one you may have heard me tell before: I am an impatient driver. Stuck behind a slow or tentative car I am quick to mutter about the driver, making broad generalizations about them based on the make of the car or what little I can see of them. And I will do this right up to the moment that I recognize them as someone I know! Whereupon my impatience is immediately replaced with empathy. I have recognized them as "one of us" and somehow more deserving of empathy and forgiveness than a stranger.

This tendency toward tribalism is deeply rooted in us. It's part of the baggage of being human, where evolution has conditioned us to be alert to potential threats from outside our group. But it feels like this sensitivity is amplified many-fold in the current environment, especially when our online news sources feed us

content designed to reinforce our preconceptions, and present those with different views as caricatures who share nothing in common with ourselves.

Primed by the ways we get information, it's easy to slip into a state where one is always scanning for threats, hypervigilant and readying defenses. Focused on whether my side is "winning". It can damage relationships with even our natural allies if they don't seem perfectly aligned with "my side". It can be so draining to live this way that sometimes it feels easier to retreat from people altogether, into a world of Netflix and conversations with AI chatbots who always agree with us.

So, what tools do we have to nurture human connection and resist the slide into ever greater division? I believe our Universalist heritage suggests a path forward.

I don't always think about the Universalist part of our Unitarian-Universalist identity. I refer to the UU church, FUSIT, or to Unitarians – less often to Universalism. As a quick historical recap, the American forms of Unitarianism and Universalism were shaped in the late 1700s and early 1800s in opposition to some of the dominant themes in Protestant Christianity at that time.

- American Unitarianism gained momentum in New England, where leaders emphasized reason, individual conscience, and a human-centered approach to faith instead of unquestioning obedience to church dogma. And Unitarianism continues to carry associations with more elite, academic traditions centered in the Northeast.
- American Universalism, meanwhile, emphasized a hopeful, inclusive theology centered on divine love and compassion, and with a greater presence in rural communities and in the Midwest. In an era when Protestant ministers threatened their congregations with God's anger and the threat of hell,

Universalists preached that God is love and that all are saved. The term Universalism derives from that belief in Universal salvation. The idea of a literal hell may seem a little quaint, but in Googling Universalism I discovered a large number of YouTube videos describing the awful heresy of Universalism.

To me, Unitarianism and Universalism feel like the head and the heart of our faith. I'm generally more at home with Unitarianism and its emphasis on reason and conscience. But in this moment, leaning into love and human connection feels like the most important means we have for resisting the forces that seek to tear us apart. I also believe that Universalism's enduring ties to our Judeo-Christian sources are part of its strength.

As we've seen with Pope Leo's statements about the ongoing conflict in Iran, sometimes the language of Christianity is the most powerful means to resist Christianity's misuse. As Leo has recently said, "Woe to those who manipulate religion in the very name of God for their own military, economic, or political gain, dragging that which is sacred into darkness"

In a similar vein, the Lutheran minister Nadia Bolz-Weber has said, "scripture and theology are too potent to be left in the hands of those who only use them to justify their dominance over other people. We cannot cede our scriptures to them". This is part of my rationale in highlighting the Beatitudes today.

So what lessons can we find in Universalism?

Universalism holds forth the concept that every human is precious and worthy of love. Do I personally feel love toward all the people I encounter? No - but in those moments when I find myself condemning the unknown driver or casting judgement on someone of whom I know little, I strive to be more mindful of my

attitude. Would I extend more compassion if this person were known to me? Am I able to extend grace to someone whose words or actions are bothering me, recognizing that I may not know all their struggles? No, not always, but as Father Martin said, living the spirit of the Beatitudes isn't easy.

I do want to add that while Universalism invites us to interact with one another in a spirit of blessing and grace, this can't be commanded. Core to our identity as Unitarian Universalists is the discernment and freedom of conscience to decide what feels right for ourselves. There are people and situations where a heightened threat level is warranted. There are individuals whom I am unwilling to extend grace at least right now.

I think part of the tension is that love, blessing, listening - deep down these can feel like weakness. Like we are giving in to ideas we abhor. In the 3rd Beatitude Jesus says, "Blessed are the meek". You might be thinking, "this is no time to be meek!" Likewise, I've heard ministers on the religious right describe preaching the Sermon on the Mount only to be accused of promoting woke nonsense. But meekness is not weakness. It's a synonym for humility. And in a world where people are blasting one another with aggressive and often unfounded certainty, humility is the acknowledgement that one always has more to learn. That one's own truth is not the whole truth. Humility is the resilience and self-awareness that seeks to better understanding. To listen while remaining strong in one's own values. Emily quoted Valerie Kaur in one of her recent sermons, "Listening does not grant legitimacy. It acknowledges their humanity and preserves our own"

Which leads me to a final lesson from Universalism and that is - the preciousness of human connection and community as a whole.

I attended the Braver Angels workshop last Sunday and really appreciated the focus on finding connections even in the most challenging interactions. Nurturing the interconnected web of human relationship is our most important tool for resisting the forces that profit from and feed on our division and isolation from one another. For resisting those that amplify division for their own power and profit, promoting the tantalizing fantasy that a life without others is more comfortable and easy. Powers that set us against one another so that we fail to recognize the vast inequalities of wealth and power that are at the root of our disfunction.

I think of watching the Hungarians dancing in the streets after their recent election. I think of Minnesotans standing shoulder to shoulder day after day in almost unimaginable cold to protest the abuses of ICE. They were and are humans like us with the messy, complicated, amazing, sometimes irritating potential we all share. But together they achieved things that had seemed impossible. And I look at all of you – at us! I see your unique stories and passions. Fierce commitments to this community and wider world. I see expectant parents and rapidly growing children. I feel the presence of those no longer with us – Jim’s spirit near the back door. And Connie, and Hans, and Oliver, Amelia, Mark. All of us connected.

In this month of contemplating possibility, may we open ourselves to the path that Universalism offers – to consider blessing and not only judgement. And accept the invitation to see our fellow humans as part of us. Thank you for being here today, in this space, together.