

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES ... REALLY?

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The title of this message this morning may seem to some to be, well, a little flip. Or perhaps obvious, for this day in memory. Or maybe you find yourself saying, “another sermon on *this* ... really?”

Or maybe you just wonder what there might be to say on the subject that hasn't already been said – especially at a time we've been plastered by the media at every turn commemorating an event that manifested the worst in humankind ... and the best.

Me too.

You see, we preacher-folk have to give sermon titles fairly far in advance of the time we actually sit down to the page and begin the conversation. And so most often I come to the task by first writing the title across the top of a blank page – and then saying to myself – “Why in the world did I say that?!”

And then ... ask myself again ... Why – in the world – did I say – that.

What, in this subject, wants to be explored? What cries out to be clarified, edified, sanctified? What is waiting to be revealed? What needs to be said? What needs to be heard? What do *I* need to hear? Because, truth be told folks, preachers rarely preach anything except what they themselves need to hear. I am, frankly, more than a little afraid some of you may expect me to make some sense out of history and humanity this morning – when really the only way I know to make sense of anything is for us to make sense ... together.

And so, we begin -- love your enemies ... really?

In the sixth chapter of the book of Luke in the Christian scripture, Jesus says, “I say to you, love your enemies and do good to those who hate you ... “ Likewise the first evangelist, the Apostle Paul, said, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (*Luke 6:27; Romans 12:21*)

In the Hebrew book of Exodus, God says, “Resemble me; just I repay good for evil, so do you also repay good for evil.” (*Exodus 26:2*)

Taosim teaches that to attain goodness, we must not only treat those who are good with goodness, but also treat those who are not good with goodness. (*Tao Te Ching 63*)

A Zoroastrian prayer goes, May truth triumph over falsehood; may love triumph over contempt.” (*Yasna 60.5*)

And as Gary's song amplifies, the Buddhist Dhammapada imparts, “Hatreds never cease through hatred in this world; through love alone they cease. This is an eternal law.” (*Dhammapada 3-5*)

In the Qu'ran it is said a righteous person will “repel evil with a better deed” (*Qu'ran 41:34*)

The Tablets of Baha'u'llah of the Baha'i faith read, "ye were created to show love to one another and not perversity and rancour." (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, 136)

And the Hindu Ramayana proclaims, "A superior being does not render evil for evil."

This is **not** something we did ... not ... know.

We **know** that religions the world over proclaim that the love of our neighbor is the highest spiritual law, second only to the love of the Great Mystery at the center of our being – by whatever name one calls that Mystery.

We know **who** the neighbor is that we are enjoined to love – both the persons sitting with us in this moment – and the ones a world away. The ones we rather like. And the ones we don't.

We know **why** we must do this – for it is the only path to real and lasting peace – in body and in spirit.

We **know** that wise and inspired men and women of every age have proclaimed this as THE essential truth -- essential not only for the enlightenment of the individual, but for the elevation of society and indeed the very survival of the species – for we have learned far better how to destroy one another than how to love one another.

And we know that these men and women we would follow have not only **proclaimed** this principle, but learned to **live** it with their lives, moment to moment and day to day, not as some pinnacle to someday be attained, but as the practical matter of their every-day conduct.

These were not prophets of old, but people who started out in the world just like you and me - Mother Theresa, Nelson Mandella, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. to name but a handful. These people do not materially or spiritually or psychologically or emotionally possess anything we do not.

And yet we also know that for us – here in our safe, clean and cool shelter with our safe, clean and cool friends – it seems an easy thing to **say** we believe. Easy to talk about. Easy to sing about. Easy to color picture-books about in Sunday School.

Yet – still so hard - a decade away from a day our hearts were shattered. While so many of us are yet picking up the pieces, knowing very well that the key that turns the lock on the door to the world we dream of is learning to love our enemies – we... don't ... know...**how**.

Love your enemies, the wise ones say.

Really? *We don't know how.*

I don't know how. If you came here today for tidy answers, I apologize, because I don't have them. Contrary to popular belief, most ministers don't become ministers because they think they have the answers – and, well, for those who think they do, seminary pretty well whups that notion right out of you. No, I became a minister because I can't stop **SEARCHING** out answers and I want to do that search out loud and in broad daylight, and most of all, **WITH YOU!**

I want us to search - however hard that search might be – together. I want us to search – however messy that search might be – as Unitarian Universalists.

Unitarian Universalists whose very principles acclaim and confirm the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, honoring human worth and dignity, practicing compassion, acceptance, modeling respect for the web of all being, with the goal – the GOAL of a world community with peace, liberty and justice for all!

Oh yes, these are mighty principles set forth for us. Mighty and worthy and surely essential if we are to transform our confused and chaotic world. But as much as we love these principles – we have yet to fully learn HOW we would **LIVE** them. However much we yearn with all of our being to **find** peace, **make** peace, **spread** peace to the far corners of our existence – we still don't know **how**.

We don't know how to make peace in the world, this day of all days being the only evidence we need. We don't know how to make peace as a nation, arguing about who gets what money while families in all 50 of our United States struggle just to survive. We don't know how in the cities, when mothers and fathers just down the street from here woke up this morning wondering how they'll feed their children today. We don't know how between neighbors, in a place we too often don't really meet our neighbors until hurricane winds blow us together. We don't know how in our homes, with the divorce rate slowing only because in this economy couples are stuck together in houses the can't afford to sell.

We don't know how – we **can't** know how – to make peace anywhere, until we make it in our own hearts.

This, too, is nothing we didn't already know. But do we really?

Ruminating on the conversation we would have this morning – marking this particular moment in history and humanity – I found myself measuring how far we HAVE NOT come. I found myself in moments of anger, resentment, even indignation contemplating how so many opportunities to really and truly change the world have been squandered in the last ten years. You do **not** want to know what I said back to the television or the talk radio in my car this past week. And at what **volume** I said it. Just let me confess it left a bitter taste in my mouth. How could we have fallen so short? Don't these politicians see what we have lost? And that we risk losing even more? Can't these pundits see the truth? Can no one see the suffering all around us? Why can't they see how far we HAVE NOT COME? Will humanity ever WAKE UP!

And then ... *I* woke up.

As it so often happens, in the midst of anguish, the voice of understanding spoke in my heart – this time saying, “My dear one, it is **you**. It is **you** - who have not come far enough.

I have met the enemy – and it is ... me.

What is it in **me** that keeps me from building the world I dream of? How is it that I can drive along one moment meditating on how you and I will talk about hope and healing today, and the next moment find myself arguing – loudly – with a radio host with whom I deeply disagree? What a study in paradox at the best and hypocrisy at the worst – that I would presume to prepare a message on loving one's enemies at the same time I struggle to communicate with my own ultra-conservative little brother?!

So it really is true -- if I hope to transform the world, I must first transform myself.

Humbled and chagrined, I had to ponder this awhile.

A whole lot that I can work on came to mind. But finally, following the labyrinth of introspection step by step I arrived one ... hard ... word – forgiveness.

Forgiveness. Confused as we sometimes are about what that means, Bishop Desmond Tutu's reflection on it helps me; Bishop Tutu says, "Forgiveness does not mean condoning what has been done. It means taking what happened seriously and not minimizing it; [yet] drawing out the sting in the memory that threatens to poison our entire existence. It involves trying to understand the perpetrators and so have empathy, to try to stand in their shoes and appreciate the sort of pressures and influences that might have conditioned them. . . . By forgiveness we are saying here is a chance to make a new beginning." (*Tutu, Desmond. "Truth and Reconciliation", Greater Good magazine, vol. 1, issue 2, Fall 2004, p. 10-12.*)
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The Buddhist meditation teacher and author Jack Kornfield tells a story about forgiveness I particularly love.

He tells the story of a fourteen-year-old boy who was convicted for shooting and killing an innocent teenager in a gang related incident. The victim's mother attended the trial. She sat quietly and impassively throughout the trial. When the verdict was announced and she was asked for her words, she stood and staring directly at the youth said, "I'm going to kill you."

The youth was sentenced to several years in a juvenile facility. After several months, the mother went to visit her son's killer. She talked quietly with him, not mentioning the murder of her son. She gave the young man some money for cigarettes. She started visiting him regularly bringing him food and small gifts on her visits. When after three years, he was eligible for parole, she asked him where he would go and where he would live. He had nowhere to go. She invited him to come and live with her until he got on his feet. She helped him get a job. One evening after he had been there a few months, she came into his room and sat down.

Then she started, "Do you remember in the courtroom when I said I was going to kill you?"

"I sure do," he replied.

"Well, I did," she went on. "I did not want the boy who could kill my son for no reason to remain alive on this earth. I wanted him to die. That's why I started to visit you and bring you things. That's why I got you the job and let you live here in my house. That's how I set about changing you. And that old boy, he's gone.

*So now I want to ask you, since my son is gone, and that killer is gone, if you'll stay here. I've got room, and I'd like to adopt you if you'll let me." And she became the mother of her son's killer, the mother he never had – transforming her sorrow, and his rage, into hope. (*The Art of Forgiveness, Lovingkindness, and Peace, Jack Kornfield, p. 44-46.*)*

Kornfield teaches forgiveness comes not only with compassion, but with courage – courage that recognizes the sufferings of the past with the resolve to never again permit it to come again to ourselves or others.

Once, in a seminary theology course, I was given this essay prompt: “What most challenges your faith – and what most restores it?”

At first pass, I had pretty hefty lists on both sides of that question, but getting right down to my gut I arrived at this: What most breaks my faith is the things we humans do **TO** one another – and what most restores my faith is what we humans do **FOR** one another.

Ten years ago today, we bore witness to both. Up close – and personal.

It was a day of horror and of heroism, that changed us. We say the world changed, but it didn't really – we did. History abounds with both horrors and heroes. Our choice – as it has before and will be again – was how to respond.

This decade later, we see the consequences of some of our choices. Most have not moved the world forward at all. Our world continues to prove that hatreds never cease by hatred – and that genuine peace cannot be won with violence. Human history is strewn with evidence of truth. And human history is torn with trying to figure out a new way.

Unitarian Universalism IS a new way. And our world needs us now more than ever. The world needs our message of hope and healing – of acceptance, and patience and freedom to work out our pathways to truth – of connectedness and courage and spiritual awakening not bound to any creed or hierarchy – but most of all the world is **dying** for our message of **compassion** for one another in the magnificent web of all being, woven together with my heart and your heart – and the hearts of all humanity – even the ones named as our enemies. No, not “even” those – *especially* those. For if we would be who we proclaim ourselves to be, we must **live** the wisdom of Mahatma Gandii when he said, that “To befriend the one who regards himself as your enemy is the quintessence of true religion.”

And so today, -- I like Lao Tzu said and Gary sang -- I make a new beginning with my own heart. And my own struggle with my own brother. Today I stop hollering epithets at talk-radio hosts. Today, I begin with praying for those whose words anger and frustrate me, and whose deeds dismay and frighten me. Otherwise, how dare I speak of peace, of forgiveness, of compassion, of loving our enemies. Really!

Opening these thoughts this morning we sang,

*This is my song, Oh God of all the nations,
A song of peace for lands afar and mine.
This is my home, the country where my heart is;
Here are my hopes, my dreams, my sacred shrine.
But other hearts in other lands are beating,
With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.*

Now we will close these thoughts with another text set to the same music, much as I pray our time together has helped us move through those words to another state of mind, another state of heart. “This is my song,” reminds us that other hearts in other lands are beating with hopes and dreams as lofty and as urgent as ours.

“We would be one” brings us a step farther - to resolve. Resolve to pledge ourselves anew to that high cause of greater understanding of who we are and what in us is true, pledging ourselves to building a new community, to greater service, to the courage to continue to seek justice and love with every fiber our very being. Of carrying the light of Unitarian Universalism to a troubled and trembling world – the world at our doorstep, the world within our reach, the world hungry for the hope we have found.

A world where we resolve to love our enemies – **really**.

If you would now rise in body or spirit as you are able and join with me in this pledge that binds our hearts and points us on our way.

*We would be one as now we join in singing
Our hymn of love, to pledge ourselves a new
To that high cause of greater understanding
Of who we are, and what in us is true.
We would be one in living for each other
To show to all a new community.
We would be one in building for tomorrow
A better world than we have known today.
We would be one in searching for that meaning
Which binds our hearts and points us on our way.
As one, we pledge ourselves to greater service,
With love and justice, strive to make us free.*

Amen.

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