

## “In the Spirit of Love”

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May  
at the First Parish in Wayland, MA  
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*Part of a series exploring the First Parish covenant: “In the search for truth in freedom and in the spirit of love, we unite for worship, community, and service.”*

As many of you know, I grew up as an evangelical Christian and for college attended the evangelical Christian Wheaton College. This is not the Wheaton of Massachusetts, but the Wheaton near Chicago, which proudly claims the renowned evangelist Billy Graham as alum. Graham, in fact, was the commencement speaker at my graduation.

Like many colleges, there was a lively music scene of various stripes—students with bands, students alone with their guitars singing folk songs, or students like me who enthusiastically sat back and *listened*. There was one band more audacious than the rest. I don’t remember what they called themselves. But I remember the lead singer—a tall guy who had a charming smile and a way of holding himself that simply made him the coolest guy on campus. This was not the kind of “cool” that people snickered about, not the *trying-too-hard-to-be-cool* kind of guy. He was the real deal—the kind of guy who caught your interest and you wondered what he would do next . . . knowing he was leading and we were following.

In 1992, that man left Wheaton, attended seminary, and then, went back to his hometown to start a church. There, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Rob Bell would found Mars Hill Church—a congregation that took over a mall where I used to shop as a teenager. The church grew to 10,000 people and the motto of the church, “Love Wins,” could be seen on bumperstickers all over town. Bell also developed a wider media presence through a series of short films called [Noomas](#) that “explore the world from a perspective of Jesus.” Bell also began to author very popular books. A star within the evangelical Christian world, in June 2011 Bell was named as one of that year’s Time 100—the 100 most influential people in the world.

Yet, also in 2011, Bell published his book *Love Wins: A book about heaven, hell, and the fate of every person who lived*. The book landed like a bomb within the evangelical Christian world by challenging the idea that only a select few would be welcomed into heaven. In his book, Bell wonders what excluding so many people says about the nature of God? What about the *love* of God?

To many conservative Christians, Bell had gone too far in his questioning. He had crossed over the line of theological truth and become a heretic. His heresy? He was accused of promoting the idea that everyone would be saved and enter heaven. In one word, he was accused of being a universalist. Within months Bell would resign as pastor at his church and drift off the radar of many. As one prominent evangelical pastor [tweeted](#), “Farewell Rob Bell.”

I tell this story because it helps us to begin to grasp how radical—and how costly—the idea of Universalism can still be for some. [Last Sunday](#), we heard a bit about our history as a congregation and its Unitarian roots. We are proud of this Unitarian history—indeed our monthly newsletter still carries the masthead “The Unitarian.” But while this particular congregation has its roots as a Unitarian congregation, today we are a Unitarian *Universalist* congregation—an organization born in 1961 by the merger of the two denominations, Unitarian and Universalist.

The Universalists, in fact, are the older of the two groups. As early as 1790, Universalists were holding national conventions. In 1803, at the New England Convention of Universalists, a creed was adopted that stated the beliefs of the Universalists. Known as the [Winchester Profession](#), it reads in part:

“We believe that there is one God, whose nature is Love, revealed in one Lord Jesus Christ, by one Holy Spirit of Grace, who will finally restore the whole family of mankind to holiness and happiness.” [*my emphases*]

The pithy core to this and other teachings of the Universalist faith is the simple claim: God is love.

From this claim about the nature of God as love, a whole host of questions arise. If God is Love, how can a loving God condemn people to an eternal life of torment, to Hell? If you and I as loving human parents would never desire such torment for our children, how could it be that a loving divine parent would ever send His children to Hell? As Rob Bell asks, “What kind of God is this?”

God is *love*, answered our Universalist ancestors. A loving God will embrace *all* of humankind, will welcome *all* into the embrace of love, into the joys of heaven.

Yet, to some, this vision of a universal salvation was—is—*dangerous*. How could a Universalist be an ethical and moral person if she didn’t believe in a final judgment that sorted people into the good and the bad? What would be the moral motivation for a person to be good and ethical if there was no judgment to fear for one’s immoral behavior?

To these questions, the Universalists again responded, “God is love.” The love of God, they argued, inspires people towards goodness and towards seeking to align oneself with this love by also living a loving and good life. If we know that we’re all in this together, that God’s love extends to everyone, well then, that means we too might want to try a bit harder to be loving to others as well.

Now today Unitarian Universalists talk less about universal salvation and who does, or does not, get into heaven. And as some Unitarian Universalists also talk less about God, there is also less talk about the *nature* of God. And yet, the legacy of Universalism is alive and well . . . or, in my view, *should* be alive and well within our congregation and the wider UU landscape. For universalism is a commitment to the idea “the fate of every person who ever lived” is bound together—that ultimately we are all live within the same reality, the same destiny.

Rather than hear this claim as a heart-warming platitude of togetherness, I confess that I respond with some trepidation. To explain, let’s start with a small example.

I’m a middle child between two brothers who are each about two years apart from me. Growing up, we were solidly middle-class. This meant that we had enough money for vacations, but that vacations were often places to which we could drive. Accordingly, many of my childhood vacation memories include hours and hours in the car with my brothers. More accurately, I usually sat *between* my brothers in the back seat. Overall, I loved these trips to different places. And we even had our moments of fun in the car. Yet, as siblings are wont to do, we very often bickered on these long car rides. For my parents, I *know* that the hours of close quarters with their bickering progeny was not fun at all. My parents loved us. I loved—and still deeply love—my brothers. But, sometimes being stuck on a shared journey with those you love can still be a place of tensions and challenges to get along.

I think that congregational life can be a bit like a shared car ride to an unknown destination. We’re all buckled into the pews together to share this journey as a community. Of course, there are not actually buckles in the pews. And it is a lot easier for any of us metaphorically get out of the car and walk away. Yet, for most of us, we stick around. We commit to being a part of this community—even when we bicker or get annoyed.

As a community, First Parish does have its differences. We live in a number of different towns—Wayland, of course, but also Natick, Concord, Framingham, Weston, Sudbury, Newton, and, probably more that I’m forgetting. We also have a range of political viewpoints—Democrat, Independent, and Republican. There is a range of economic capacity from those living on limited and fixed incomes to those living in relative affluence

and wealth. Among our community there is also a diversity of ages, ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientation, gender identity, and marital status.

Some of our differences are points of potential conflict and tension. While some of these places of tension are more minor—such as whether or not you like a particular hymn, there are also some significant places of difference within the congregation. There *are* a range of opinions—sometimes strongly held—about musical styles; the role and funding of social action; or the use of theological language such as prayer, God, or sin. From what I have learned thus far, major open conflicts are fairly rare, with perhaps the last major open conflict being whether or not to install a cell phone tower in the steeple. Fortunately, this is a congregation that is not debilitated by fractious infighting or open hostility to one another or to your minister. (Thank goodness!) And, yes, sadly there *are* congregations who do struggle with divisive dynamics that undermine community connections and simple goodwill.

I do not think that is our problem at First Parish. Rather, I have been amazed at how wonderfully kind and caring you are to one another. There is indeed a spirit of love that flows through this community. When one of you is hurting or in need, there are numerous small and big ways that you care for each other with calls, visits, rides, meals, or simply genuinely asking “How are you?” in coffee hour. I’ve seen the choir gather for an abundant going away party when a choir member moved away. I’ve heard how Malcom gave Lew a ride home, stopping to pick up a favorite snack—chicken wings—from Whole Foods. And yesterday, at Priscilla’s memorial service and reception, I humbly witnessed the outpouring of the gifts of your presence and of baked goods to help honor and remember the life of one we loved.

Such is the spirit of love at work within a congregation. The spirit of love seeks to care for one another’s needs—to be there on the shared journey of life and of death as a witness to the wonders and the challenges, the joys and the sorrows of life in this world. The spirit of love recognizes that we are in this together and that we are all called to be a part of helping to sustain and strengthen this community and one another as unique persons, each with inherent worth and dignity.

The spirit of love is a call to all of this—to recognizing our connections to each other as a community and to honor the inherent worth and dignity of every person. But, as I said earlier, this is not simply a heart-warming call to togetherness. Yes, there is a real and deep gift to belonging to a community of love and care. There is also a real and deep challenge to also be in relationship with those who are different than you, people with whom you may disagree or simply not really like.

To be a part of this congregation means that we are in community with a lot of different people—some of whom have quite literally become our best friends and others with whom we struggle to relate. Sometimes we experience a real synergy of shared viewpoints and other times we can feel the tension. That’s ok. To search for truth in freedom *and in the spirit of love* are two ideas that go together. We’re all searching for how to make sense of our own lives as well as our larger shared world. We’re all going to have different questions and different conclusions. This wonderful diversity is a reflection of the freedom we hold. But this freedom also emerges within community. Yes, we’re all in this together—with our shared commitments and values as well as with our differences and our conflicts. Yet, *how* will we be together? What does it mean to live both in the freedom of search *and* in the spirit of love?

Perhaps you’ve heard the UU aphorism, “You don’t need to think alike to love alike.” Our freedom to search means we do not need to always think alike. That would be a tall order! But, we are called to respond to each other in a spirit of love when we do disagree. Which is to say that we need to remember when we disagree that this person has inherent worth and dignity, that this person is not a demon, nor an “other.” It’s ok to disagree. It’s ok that we don’t all think alike. My hope is that we can actually become a bit *more* open about when and where we disagree. I think that acknowledging when and where we disagree allows us the gift of learning more about the diversity within this community. You can even disagree with me!

But how do we express our differences? How do we live as a community of diverse opinions and even conflicting points of view? We aim to do so “in a spirit of love.” In two weeks on Feb. 15, I’ll talk more about how I understand what love is, but for today let me say that I understand love as the recognition of the inherent worth and dignity of a person. Love is saying that even if I disagree with what you say or do, I still recognize that you as a person has value and worth.

Rob Bell declares, “love wins.” On a cosmic scale, this means that it is neither hate nor greed, arrogance nor selfish that is ultimate. Rather, love is ultimate. Love, with its capacity for generosity and kindness, compassion and joy is the ultimate, the eternal . . . love wins.