

## “Neighborly Love”

*A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May*

*First Parish in Wayland*

*December 4, 2016*

On Thursday, the Islamic Center here in Wayland received a hate letter threatening the genocide of U.S. Muslims under a Trump presidency. As a part of a chain letter sent to multiple mosques across the nation and postmarked in California, President Malik Khan of the Islamic Center did not feel that the letter represented an immediate material threat. But, the arrival of such a letter within a context threatening Muslim registries and deportations is gravely concerning. While there are certainly political reasons for rejecting such surveillance and exclusions, there are also *religious* grounds for standing in support of our Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Bah’ai, Christian, and other religious neighbors. Today, I want to make it clear why we, as a Unitarian Universalist congregation, reject such hate and embrace neighborly love.

While our story will end with the events of this week, it begins centuries ago. Some might even say it began with the start of the human community. In the face of the mysteries of life and death, of beauty and love, humans have long sought to express a worldview that gives some shape to the experience of life. ‘How shall we live?’ is the core religious question. To find answers, we look towards many sources—to sacred texts, to divine revelations, to reason and science, to personal experience, to systems of the natural world. Not all religious people look to all the same sources. The resulting array of religious perspectives creates the religious *diversity* that is a fact of our shared world. A fact that provokes a range of responses.

Our U.S. Constitution protects the freedom of religion and prohibits the government from establishing an official religion. Despite this legal framework of freedom, the cultural dominance of Christianity throughout U.S. history is clear. *Heck, our own history of First Parish includes a minister supported by the town until the 1820’s.* And yet, from the beginning, we have been a multi-faith nation. The Native Americans who have long dwelled on these lands possessed their own complex systems of belief about the world and their role within it. As Europeans arrived, they brought an array of beliefs as well—Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish. So also, African slaves forced to emigrate brought their religious beliefs—including Islam. On the West Coast, immigrants from China, Japan, and other Asian countries arrived with Confucian, Buddhist, Daoist, and more religious practices.

But somehow, ‘America’ has been known as a *Christian* nation. Perhaps this is because those in power, the legislators and business owners, the prominent families and the military, were led primarily by white Christians? As Unitarian Universalists, we often

celebrate some of those white Christian leaders as “one of us”—Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Clara Barton, Susan B. Anthony and many more. Next week we’ll explore more of the significance of the *whiteness* of these leaders, today I focus on the question of religion.

The U.S. has always been Multifaith, but Christianity has been dominant. Our own religious story *began* as a Christian one. Unitarianism and Universalism were Christian denominations, but then we changed. We changed because some of our ancestors fought for a more pluralistic understanding of religion.

Once again, the Transcendentalists, are a part of the story. By embracing the personal experience of the divine mystery, the Transcendentalists began reading various religions to learn what they might reveal about how other people in different places, with different contexts and cultures, experienced Life’s mysteries. Such encounters provoked new insights, broader perspectives, even critical questions against Christianity. In this way, the Transcendentalists and some Unitarian ministers began honoring various religious traditions as sources for broadening one’s spiritual understanding. They began to claim what our 3<sup>rd</sup> source today affirms: *Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires our ethical and spiritual life.*

And yet, such claims of respect for other religions contributed to a decades long Unitarian debate in the 19<sup>th</sup> century—a debate which continues to have resonance in the larger U.S. culture today. Some championed freedom of religious belief . . . but only within the bounds of theistic Christianity. Sure, you can believe what you want . . . about *Christianity*. Yet, some wanted the freedom of religious belief to expand beyond the bounds of Christian tradition. Some wanted to explore other religions, to dive deeply into personal experience, to track after reason wherever it may lead. In the end, the more liberal group won. Rather than be defined by any religious doctrine, the Unitarian Association would have an ethical basis—shared values and principles about how to be in relationship with one another as a network of congregations.

This history matters because it reminds us what is at stake today—not only for our nation, but also for our religious tradition that fought to create space for the recognition of multiple religious traditions.

This fight is both old and ongoing. In his book on pluralism and prejudice in the U.S., interfaith organizer Eboo Patel describes the need for resistance to intolerant forces. He writes,

“...[T]he great African American writer Ralph Ellison spoke on [how] “the irrepressible movement of American culture towards integration of its most diverse

elements continues, confounding the circumlocutions of its staunchest opponents.” That statement is true only because people have made it true. There are many times in American history when the staunch opponents of American pluralism have won the battle. They didn’t win the war because irrepressible people refused to forfeit their nation to these forces. Simply put, it is people who have protected the pluralism from the poison of prejudice.”

The forces opposing American pluralism remain with us—newly emboldened, it seems, in this new political era. The letter the Islamic Center received this week may have been postmarked California, but the hatred and Islamaphobia is also present *here*.

Here in Wayland one of our own parishioners, Charlie, experienced an incident of religious prejudice. As some may recall, two weeks ago the Islamic Center hosted the Wayland Interfaith Thanksgiving service. Because parking was limited at the mosque, Charlie walked over from a nearby lot along the main road clearly headed toward the mosque. As he peaceably walked, a man driving slowly in the busy traffic rolled down his car window to shout an obscenity at Charlie. Relaying this incident on his Facebook page, Charlie states, “I want my Muslim neighbors to know that I’m glad they are here—I’m proud they are here. I don’t know how to make the hate go away – I want to learn how. I don’t know how to protect them from hate—I want to learn how.”

I, too, don’t have all the answers about how to make the hate go away or how to protect our neighbors from hate. But I do know that we need to stand together. I know we need to speak out as Charlie did and speak up when we see incidents of hate and prejudice. And I know that as Unitarian Universalists, we stand within a tradition of those who have refused to forfeit our nation to the forces of prejudice. By honoring religious freedom and recognizing that religious experience and expression emerges in many ways, our *religious* values encourage our support for pluralism.

More than toleration for diversity, pluralism calls for an active *embrace* of diversity. As the Pluralism Project led by Diana Eck explains, “For those who welcome the new diversity, creating a workable pluralism will mean engaging people of different faiths and cultures in the creation of a common society. Pluralism is not a “given,” but an achievement.”

How then do we *actively* engage religious diversity?

Sometimes we do so by including readings and practices of various religious traditions in our life together here. We light the chalice and the advent wreath, the menorah and the Yule log. This is not thoughtless inclusion, but an effort to actively engage multiple religious traditions that bring meaning to some of us and to expand the understanding of others.

And sometimes we actively engage religious diversity by showing up when our neighbors have been threatened. With only a few hours notice on Friday afternoon, over twenty of you, from ages 17 to 98, showed up to stand in the cold to hold signs of support for the Islamic Center. Standing there, as the evening traffic slowed to read our signs, we received many honks of support as well as thumbs up. Looking through the windshields, you could see happiness and hope dawn on faces of those driving by. But there were also many eyes that did not leave the road from apparent indifference or perhaps deliberate avoidance. And there were a handful who gave us some very deliberate finger gestures and one who rolled down his window to shout an obscenity. The same man? Another?

The forces of hate and prejudice are real. They are not ‘fake news’ or far away. They are here in our neighborhood. If we wish to promote a pluralism that refuses to forfeit to these forces, then we too must engage our neighbors. Though we live so near one another, do we know who are neighbors are? Their names? Kids? Dogs? Cats? I wonder what difference it would make if we simply knew more of our neighbors. Or, what difference might it make if we knew the names of the cashiers whom we often see when we shop? What if we found new ways to bring people together socially or even perhaps in a service or social justice project? What if we started to learn new ways to really see those around us—in all of their fullness as human beings, with their struggles and hopes, their disappointments and perhaps prejudices?

For me, the practice of choosing to engage and to see the fullness of our neighbors is what I mean by neighborly love. Love, I believe, is the recognition of otherness, the capacity to see another as fully human apart from oneself. I resent the reduction of ‘love’ to a saccharin sentiment of affection or attraction. Love is not shallow, nor flighty. Love is an active engagement with another. Love is the most powerful statement of solidarity and shared humanity. I see you. I see your inherent worth and dignity as a person.

This power of love is what we can bring to the fight against intolerance. Resisting the forces of prejudice, we can stand on the side of love—as the hymn proclaims that we will shortly sing.

What more can I say? I started laughing last night as I was trying to finish this sermon. Even as I was trying to find the words to describe how we might respond to this hate, I continued to be interrupted by emails from an array of people asking the same question. I laughed because I found some irony in this. I was struggling to finish the sermon about what to do, because I was also actively engaging with our neighbors to plan responses. This list of who I connected with includes all the clergy of Wayland, clergy from neighboring towns and even out of state, members of the group Standing Up for Racial Justice—both the chapter in Boston and the newly formed Metrowest group. I’ve also been in touch with Wayland town

leaders—both political and those who organize for promoting diversity in town. Most importantly, I have been in conversation with President Malik Khan of the Islamic Center and other Muslim leaders.

I tell you this so that you'll be ready to participate in an event in the near future—to be a part of the resistance. And, I tell you this so that we know that we are not alone in our disgust for such hateful speech. There *is* a powerful force of love present in our community. And, there are also forces of hate and intolerance. With our spiritual ancestors and with our neighbors, let us stand on the side of love.