

“Rooted in Love”

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

First Parish in Wayland

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In Islamic literature, there is a story about a time when Muslims needed to flee from danger in search of safety. The story occurs in the earliest days of Islam when the Prophet Mohammed and his followers were living in Mecca—a city located today in Saudi Arabia. However, the ruling Quraysh tribe persecuted them for their beliefs, their difference. So they fled for safety.

From Mecca, they journeyed across the Red Sea to the east coast of Africa to a country then known as Aksum or as Abyssinia—an area known today as the country of Ethiopia. In the story, the Prophet Mohammed tells his followers, “If you were to go Abyssinia [it would be better for you], for the king will not tolerate injustice and it is a friendly country, until such time as Allah shall relieve you from your distress.” (Ibn Ishaq)

The king and the country to which the Muslims fled was a Christian country. In one [contemporary telling](#) of the story by filmmaker Kamran Pasha, the arriving Muslims engage in a kind of religious dialogue about Christianity and Islam. The King learns that the Qur’an celebrates both Jesus and his mother Mary. When some of the King’s advisers wanted to point to the differences between the religions, the King smiled. As Pasha writes,

“For [the king], the differences between Christian and Muslim visions of Jesus were just semantics. He had tired of the kind of theological disputes that had torn apart his fellow Christians and had led to never-ending accusations of heresy and warfare between competing Christian groups. Arguments over complicated theologies about the nature of Christ were not what mattered to him as a Christian. What mattered was that God had sent Jesus Christ to teach humanity love. And the Muslims clearly loved Jesus Christ.” (*The World Post*)

In the early 7th century, when this story occurred, Christianity was the dominant religion of the Mediterranean world. With power came efforts to control the message and the resources of the Christian empire. Beginning with Constantine in the 4th century, Christian leaders met to create the official documents and beliefs of the Church. And while the dominant group formed what became the Holy Roman Empire, from the beginning there were dissenters and different points of view. However, as official policy was set, the ‘losers’ didn’t necessarily change their beliefs. Rather, after a 5th century council, the dissenters formed a tradition which included the Egyptian and Ethiopian Coptic churches. Indeed the

new Coptic congregation in Wayland that meets at the former Episcopal church on Rice Road is a part of this dissenting tradition.

So the 7th century was no stranger to religious dissent and diversity. When Islam emerges in this century, there is already a complex religious landscape of pagans, Christians of different beliefs, and Jews. When the young Muslim community were persecuted by their pagan neighbors in Mecca, they needed an ally. They reached out to a Christian kingdom that was itself in open discord with Rome . . . and the king of Aksum welcomed them.

I learned of this story several weeks ago when a group of us visited our neighbors at the Islamic Center. The prior week President Trump had issued an executive order halting immigration from seven predominantly Muslim nations. A move that many interpreted as a partial implementation of his campaign promise to ban Muslims. At the service that Friday, John Robbins gave the sermon. Robbins is the director of the Massachusetts chapter of the Council on Islamic Relations, or CAIR. An advocate for Muslim civil rights, Robbins organized the large rally held in Copley Square. Speaking just days later, Robbins shared this story of ancient Muslims to urge the Muslim community today to not be afraid to reach out to Christians in a time of need.

This taught me something about Islam—I didn't know this part of Muslim history. And it also reminded me of the core of Christianity: Love thy neighbor. Or, as Pasha writes, "What mattered was that God had sent Jesus Christ to teach humanity love."

In the scripture from Mark which I read earlier, Jesus himself made it very clear what religion boiled down to: Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength; Love your neighbor as yourself. Notably, in this passage Jesus is talking to scholars and leaders of Judaism about what *Jewish law* required. Loving God and loving your neighbor are the cornerstones of both Judaism and Christianity.

This resonates with one of the sources that Unitarian Universalism draws upon for insight: "Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves." Of the six sources of Unitarian Universalism, the relationship to Christianity can be one of the trickiest. On the one hand, there are those who would point to our historical roots as two Christian denominations—the Unitarian and the Universalist—and suggest that Christianity *is* our core. On the other hand, there are those who emphasize Unitarian Universalism's embrace of multiple religious sources and a movement towards an unique identity distinct from our Christian roots. Such differences of opinion create some tension in Unitarian Universalism.

Apart from the larger UU identity questions about our relationship to Christianity, there is also the very real experience many of us may have had in Christian or Jewish congregations. Having grown up as an evangelical Christian, I know that Christianity is not all about loving humanity. In reality, there was also a lot of judgment and harm handed down as well. And yet, at its core, the Jewish and Christian traditions do call people to love again and again.

Love the Lord your God.

Love your neighbor.

Love your enemies. (Matthew 5:43-48)

Love the stranger—even the ethnically different strangers such as the Samaritans.

(Luke 10:25-37)

Care for the sick, support the poor, visit the imprisoned. (Matthew 25:36)

Welcome the children. (Matthew 19:14)

Do not judge when you too have done wrong. (John 8: 1-11)

Through parables, actions, and directions, Jesus points again and again to compassion and love for humanity. After Jesus' death, one of his students would write, "God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them." (1 John 4:16) This is the story Jesus taught. This is the commitment the King of Aksum lived out when he welcomed the Muslim community as refugees into his land.

This call to love is why so many Christians today are speaking out against efforts to ban Muslims, deport undocumented immigrants, and undermine the social safety net, including affordable health care. One clever protestor made this point through use of humor when she made a sign with the heading "Alt Jesus". Beneath this heading she wrote: "Fear everyone. Expel the stranger. Blame the poor. Ignore the sick. Feed the rich. Love only thyself. Trust only Caesar. Throw lots of stones."

Whatever you may think about the supernatural elements of Christianity, the moral vision is clear: Love. Care about other people beside yourself. Help the sick, the poor, the imprisoned. Reach out to your enemies. Offer hospitality and support to those who are different than you.

In my own journey from evangelical Christianity to Unitarian Universalism, I spent a lot of years identifying as a progressive or liberal Christian. While my childhood taught me a very rigid understanding of Christianity with black and white perspectives on beliefs and actions, I also experienced years of Christians joyfully at peace with the love they felt from

God and committed to doing what they could to share that love and joy with others. All others . . . because everyone is a beloved child of God.

From this place of abundant love, I encountered Unitarian Universalism—a tradition committed to the inherent worth and dignity of every person, which is to say... love your neighbor. A tradition which values actions that support justice and love as more important than right beliefs. A tradition that does not fear eternal damnation, but insists that the ultimate nature of the universe—of what some call God—is love, not judgment.

In these ways, the Jewish and Christian commitment to love remains in our DNA as Unitarian Universalists. While we may not hold the Christian Bible or Jewish scriptures as unique sources of divine revelation, we do look to them as sacred sources for insight. For millennia, these scriptures have called people to love inspiring all kinds of bold and small actions of love from hiding Jews during World War II to speaking kindly to a stranger on a city street.

To love is to recognize the dignity in another, to see value and worth. To love is to seek kindness as well as justice. To love is to desire goodness for another. To love is to promote the flourishing of life for all—and to mourn the loss and degradation of life. Love's energy to care for others compels actions that make an impact. Love is more than a feeling. Love is action.

In the passage in Mark, the man who asked Jesus what matters most, listens to Jesus' answer, then says, "you got it right" before repeating Jesus' answer in brief. Now this could be a good rhetorical tool of the author of the book of Mark—repetition always helps people remember better! Or, it could be a kind of 'mansplaining'—the arrogant expert assuring the itinerant, poor teacher that he was doing ok. But I like to think of it instead as a man excited to have finally found someone who agrees with him. "Yes, yes, it's about loving God and loving your neighbor . . . this is so much more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices!" You can almost hear his frustration from years of being told to focus on the burnt offerings...*"how many burnt offerings have we sold this month?...is there a decline in sacrifices?"*

I wonder what would be today's Unitarian Universalist equivalent distraction from our core purpose? Certainly we're not in the business of encouraging burnt offerings of animals! But, are we also distracted by traditions that might be getting in the way of love?

Yesterday afternoon, I attended a Black History month event at the Islamic Center. One of the panelists, Karlene Sekou of Black Lives Matter in Boston, left me deeply questioning

how effectively we engage our world in love. Responding to a question about religious activism, she suggested that the lack of engagement, especially by younger folks, came from a desire for an integrated life. Too often, she explained, there is a dissonance between the high ideals held up in religion and the lived experience of folks facing the violence of poverty, the school to prison pipeline, and more. With a passion I cannot recapture, she suggested that coming to church to hear pretty words about loving your neighbor simply fails to connect with the lived experience of so many.

Having just taken a break from writing my sermon on “loving your neighbor,” I felt stung. While a part of me wanted to raise my hand and say, “wait a minute, religious organizations are doing all kind of good!” Another part of me understood. I had been that young person for a time—desperate for a meaningful life and only finding platitudes at church. And, frankly, even now I worry about becoming too comfortable with an elegant turn of phrase while forgetting that our purpose is not to be pretty but to change lives. I hear in this critique a real need for people to live in ways that their actions and their ideals are integrated. That we don’t just talk about the world and the lives we want to live, we actively work to make them happen.

When the Prophet Mohammed sent a group of his followers to the King of Aksum, he assured them that this Christian “king will not tolerate injustice and it is a friendly country.” Would this be said of us . . . as a nation, a state, a local community, a congregation? What would it look like for our neighbors to say—“oh yeah, First Parish. They’re the place that won’t tolerate injustice and it is a friendly community”?

In these days of increased hate and policies of exclusion, loving your neighbor has plenty of opportunities to move beyond pretty words to actions that change lives. From Islamophobia and anti-Semitism, to increased deportations and surveillance, our neighbors need us to take actions that see their humanity and respond with care . . . with love.

A sermon is not a great place to lie out a detailed blueprint for action. Plus I think such actions are best planned as a group. We have different passions, resources, and availability. For some love will look like public acts of justice. For others, love will show up most in kindness shown to one’s literal neighbor—in one’s house or across the street. However you are able to act, I hope that we all leave today inspired by the Christian and Jewish core lesson . . . Love the god of your understanding. Love your neighbor as yourself.

So may it be. Amen.