

“Love Thy Neighbor, No Exceptions”

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(Note: It is my practice to write out portions of my sermon, and speak other portions without the full text. You will see bulleted portions below that are rendered completely in the recording.)

- Any other picky eaters out there?
- We, and I appreciate the opportunity to choose.
- My favorite restaurant as a child was in the cafeteria style.
- I would choose some salad...
- And then a lot of fluffy puddingy stuff...
- We can also practice cafeteria religion.
- Picking and choosing the pieces we want from various faith traditions or even just one.
- Not bad in itself.
- But you must be careful what you choose.
- Something that will sustain you over time -
- Not just satisfy your craving in the moment -
- Filling you with fluff, not substance...

There's a principle in Unitarian Universalism - the first of the seven principles - that were democratically chosen. I am fairly certain, that it

must not be skipped over - left on the buffet. It's first because without it, none of the other's matter. It also connects our faith tradition to all the other faith traditions, the world around.

We covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Seems easy right?

We all have inherent worth and dignity, right?

What's another way of saying this?

What have you heard from other faith traditions?

Yup - Love thy neighbor. Do unto others.

No problem.

- In my neighborhood...
- I can love the neighbor to my left... fun person.
- I can love the neighbor across the street... great family.
- I can love the neighbor catty-corner... swap garden treats.
- I can even love the neighbor catty-corner the other way... a little odd, but plays loud music...

- But can I love the neighbor to my right... She has made racist remarks. She has called the fire department on my supposedly too-tall garden! Can I love that neighbor?

There's a saying attributed to any number of wisecrackers - Robert Fulghum (to name one,)

Love your neighbor, but be sure to choose a good neighborhood.

This is a cafeteria mentality -

It's also common sense... but we can't really choose our neighborhoods - there's a world wide web we live in - just as much as any town. And that web includes Aleppo, the Chicago Streets, Putin's Russia...

You have come to me - many of you, at times of crisis.

Asking - did Hitler have Inherent Worth and Dignity?

How about the man who killed my friend?

What about the drunk driver... the distracted driver in our county who hit a 5 month old baby with his car?

The outright racist who can't even look me in the eye?

The Westboro Baptist protestors inflicting their hate on Military Funerals?

Love my neighbor?

We don't choose our neighborhood -

Our neighborhood is wide and deep... and at times it is terrifying.

Love my neighbor?

The books of the worlds religions are replete with exceptions.

All contain that gem of conscience - do no harm, love your enemy, love the stranger, we were all strangers in the land of Egypt. ...but the writers of those texts lived in neighborhoods - and sometimes their hate, their disdain for kindred or foe, their lack of integrity, shines though.

Do you know why (as the story goes) Jesus uses the good “Samaritan” in his tale about a moral agent - the good Samaritan who helps the injured, the rejected, the reviled man on the side of the road - who helps when no one else would? It’s because at the time the “Samaritans” were considered the bad neighbors. Depending on your perspective, substitute “Russians” for Samaritans or “Syrians” or “Republicans” or “Democrats.” The story about the good “Samaritan” is a call to abolish exceptions. We *all* have inherent worth and dignity - it says.

If you read the texts of the great religions closely, you’ll find a deep similarity to an institutions by-laws. Have you ever read by-laws closely. Have you studied them for those strange little tidbits that speak strange truths about an institutions history?

By-law 1.5a: Absolutely no live chickens allowed in the fellowship hall.
or

By-law 4.6b: Disagreements shall not be aired on company email.

You read these things (which are not in our by-laws by the way) and you learn a bit about the organizations history...

What happened to require that live Chicken law?

Stuff like this gets written into religious texts. Why is that line there in Leviticus about *how many oxen can pass through a crossroads at one time?* I'd bet anything that more than 4 caused a whole hullabaloo!

That's why Jewish scholars like Hillel work to capture the essence of the faith tradition... sans oxen and chickens:

As the story goes, Hillel is approached by a man who wishes to study the Torah, but first he wants to find the right teacher. To test the potential teacher, Hillel he asks - "Tell me the whole Torah, while I stand here on one foot." Hillel responds - "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation of this—now, go and study it!"

I love this story and the ideal it promotes - that perhaps one day, we can stand on one foot and recite our first principle - *that we covenant to*

affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of all people - and it will be enough. ...and nothing else will be necessary, save study. All the necessary work and learning will flow from there.

But that is not the world-wide-world we live in. The cafeteria is still open and serving some unsustainable stuff...

Exceptions to the rule abound.

1 Samuel - “This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel ... Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.’

An exception to be sure. Love your neighbor - as long as she’s not an Amalekite. (Or did it say Aleppian? or Drug user in the Philippines, if your name is President Duterte?)

Here’s another from the buffet -

Ephesians 6:5 - “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ.”

Now there’s some sticky sweet justification -

And *we* used it plenty. Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederate States during the American Civil War, said that slavery “was established by decree of *Almighty God* . . . it is sanctioned in the Bible, in both Testaments, from Genesis to Revelation” he said.

...and the subjugation continues today...

- Ashburn Colored School was defamed.
- Built in the 19th Century to educate African Americans.
- Defamed with white supremacist nonsense just this past week.

And from the Koran: “So let those fight in the cause of Allah who sell the life of this world for the Hereafter. And he who fights in the cause of Allah and is killed or achieves victory—We will bestow upon him a great reward.”

A study by the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence found that this verse is the most cited of any in English-language Islamic terrorist propaganda.

The propaganda materials don't included this, also from the Quran: “Serve God, ...and do good- to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, those in need, neighbors who are near, neighbors who are strangers...”

Cafeteria religion makes gluttons out of all of us.

We take what justifies our craving - what allows our indiscretion, what allows us to love or hate.

If any of this is making you uncomfortable, perhaps you can take shelter in this next passage from first Corinthians: "As in all the churches of the holy one, women should keep silent in the churches, for they are not allowed to speak...If they want to learn anything, they should ask their husbands at home." :) I guess I best go home now...

And finally, many - who have fallen out of love with the Abrahamic religions - Christianity, Judaism, Islam, for just these hypocrisies - turn to the Eastern faiths of Hinduism and Buddhism, to name a few, in the hopes of finding purity. And there is sustenance there and beauty, but there's also some pretty dangerous choices in the cafeteria line:

Child brides are justified by this Hindu Text from the Yogi Vasistha:

“For fear of commencement of puberty let the father give his daughter in marriage while she is still going about naked. For if she remains at home after the marriageable age sin falls upon the father.”

What do we do with all of this?

...Run kicking and screaming from the cafeteria, from the great religious traditions... loath them for their hypocrisy.

We are all inconsistent and fallible. We want to love our neighbor but we struggle with that one neighbor that tests our patience, or that other neighbor that hates us for being our true unique self, or that other neighbor that has done us serious and unreconcilable harm. We want to affirm everyone's inherent worth and dignity but...

I think May West said it best:

“Love thy neighbor - and if he happens to be tall, debonair and devastating, it will be that much easier.”

There is something in us that wants the ‘golden rule,’ that wants to be honorable and just and just plain good - but we are human, inconsistent, jealous, and at times, down right vengeful. Right?

Our scriptures tell this truth, perhaps better than any other recorded wisdom, (even our by-laws) because they are *us*, turned inside out - their stories and parables, their laws and histories - they illustrate the human conscience, at war with itself... aiming for some godlike goodness, and falling short, anon and anon.

This faith tradition, this Unitarian Universalism asserts whole heartedly that every document we praise, prize and use to guide our days is a human document and therefore subject to human faults. To read the Bible, the Constitution, the Yoga Sutras with this Unitarian Universalist lens, is to reflect not on the immutability of the words, but on the persistence of human fallibility that laces and binds every word, every passage.

Darwin says it this way:

Even the humblest mammal's strong ...parental, and social instincts give rise to 'do unto others as yourself' and 'love thy neighbor as thyself'.

But these are not the only instincts we embody.

We are also Mae Wests - drawn to love some of our neighbors more definitively than others.

We too will go for the fluffy puddingy stuff from time to time, choosing to justify our anger, our jealousy, our less-than-honorable actions with stories of how others did the same in the past, whether these stories are written in sacred texts, global histories, or inscribed on our souls...

But that's why we return and must return, daily even, to that first principle - to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person - Not because we've got it.

Right?

But because we don't. We don't have it - not yet, maybe not ever.

But we practice, because we must. Because we give a darn.

Amen.