

A Unitarian Universalist Gospel of Love  
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Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church  
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**Reading:** “The Preacher Is Tired Tonight” (Adapted) by the Rev. Gordon Atkinson

The Rev. Gordon Atkinson is a minister of a liberal Baptist congregation in Texas. While he is a parish minister and I am a parish minister, all of his views do not necessarily reflect those of the management. He writes:

*Sundays can be [really hard.]*

*I get up way before daylight and head for church. I open up the joint. I putter around and straighten hymnals. I make ready. I preach the sermon 3 or 4 times. I talk to myself. I talk to God out loud. I light candles and pray. Sometimes I throw a nerf football around the sanctuary while I get my mind straight. You should try that sometime if you can find a church that will let you get away with it.*

*None of this is what makes Sunday hard.*

*What’s hard about Sunday is that I don’t matter on this day. Sunday is for the folks who come to church. It’s their day and not mine. I must be “up” when everyone arrives. I must be emotionally ready.*

*Anyone who has children understands what I’m talking about. If you are a daddy, you always make the left turn and take your paycheck and yourself home to your kids. One day you may feel like turning right and leaving town, but you don’t. You love your children because you are committed to them. How you feel on one given day is not really the issue.*

*I believe love is primarily a choice and only sometimes a feeling. If you want to feel love, choose to love and be patient.*

*Okay, so when I made a commitment to shepherd these people, I made a conscious decision to love them. That commitment is more important than how I feel come Sunday morning. I will be there early. I will set things up. I will do the early morning candle/praying/nerf thing. I will be ready.*

*I do this every single Sunday. I do this when I am sad. I do this when I am depressed. I do this when I am hurting inside.*

*I do this many Sundays when I don’t believe in God.*

*On those days I stare at the door to the church in the dark. The silence of the building is reminiscent of the silence of God. I say, “[forget] it” and go on in. I do the candle/praying/nerf*

*thing. I make ready. I will be glad to see them. I will love the children. I will stop for a moment and talk to [those] who need...too much. I will preach, one more time....*

*Fidelity to commitment in the face of doubts and fears is a very spiritual thing. I don't suggest it for the weak of heart or if you are in a hurry. An old, African American preacher once told Martin Luther King Jr., "Until you've stood at the door for years and knocked until your hands bled, hearing nothing but silence, you don't know what prayer is"...*

I'd like to have met that preacher.

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One of the great gifts of attending seminary was listening to the faculty, learning not only their academic knowledge but stories from their lives.

One of my professors told our class a story about her father, also a minister but not a Unitarian Universalist. While I don't remember if he was a Methodist or Congregationalist, I do remember her account of his last Sunday with his congregation.

Her father had served his congregation for more than twenty years. In his lengthy pastorate, he had blessed countless children. In time, he officiated at marriages for some of these children and joined them in grieving the deaths of their parents. For more than twenty years, his life was intimately entwined with theirs and, as pastors do, they had laughed together, cried together, wondered about the future together. Then came the day when he announced his retirement and his time with this faith community would end. Such an announcement leads to the inevitable – the last sermon, preached during his last Sunday service with his people.

In his usual solemn fashion, he slowly approached the pulpit. With each step, the tension in the room mounted. *After all these years, what will he say to us?*

Straightening his back, the minister adjusted his glasses and gazed at the congregation. Before him sat pew after pew of people he knew so well, their sad and expectant faces shaded by the glow of the stained glass windows.

The minister took a deep breath and began. His sermon started with a question. "How," he asked, "do you make Tutti Frutti ice cream?"

If anyone in the congregation thought they had misheard him, there was no doubt, once he began reciting the recipe:

"Take one can of sweetened condensed milk, a quarter cup of lemon juice, 3 mashed bananas, a half cup of sugar, 1 can of crushed pineapple, a can of mandarin oranges and a jar of maraschino cherries and combine them all together. Once they are blended, add 1 cup of water and 3 cups of milk and mix well. Pour the mixture into a one gallon container, place it in the middle of this congregation...and watch it freeze."

Since I heard this story, I have thought about that Sunday morning. I have wondered what

inspired this minister to tell his congregation that they were so cold that they could turn milk into ice cream. I have wondered if holding up this mirror to his faith community was an act of courage or an act of cruelty or both. I have thought about what happened to the people in those pews, receiving this citrus-flavored indictment.

Like this minister, I, too, have stepped into a pulpit on a Sunday morning and I, too, will reflect on the absence – or, in this case, the presence - of love in a faith community. This reflection is at the invitation of Ed Moot, who purchased my sermon at our 2008 auction. “We talk a lot about love at church,” Ed said, “but what does ‘love’ mean, exactly?” Ed thought that exploring a Unitarian Universalist definition of love was too difficult but I was delighted by this challenge.

As someone who spends a lot of time in a Unitarian Universalist congregation, I began by imagining that I was more of an anthropologist, watching Cedar Lane at a distance, than a minister, more Dian Fossey than Roger Fritts. In lieu of “Gorillas in the Mist,” I imagined conducting a study titled “Unitarian Universalists in the Forest.” At the center of this fantasy study was the question “What do Cedar Laners love?”

Our lush grounds and our worship space that invites scenes of the changing seasons suggest that we love nature. The money we give our coming-of-age classes, who fundraise throughout the year for their pilgrimage to Boston, suggests we love...doughnuts. When I see the congregation listening to the choir, I know we love music. Through the enthusiasm with which we teach and celebrate our young people, we love children.

At a church conference, I was once asked to introduce myself and to say – if our congregation were a song – what song it would be. I replied that Cedar Lane was the hymn “’Tis a Gift to Be Simple,” played by a symphony orchestra. We love neutral colors and spaces and the appearance of ease. But we also love details and events requiring tablecloths and doing things well and doing them in collaboration with multiple groups and individuals. So much of religion is mystery and paradox.

But anyone who has loved or has received love knows that this experience is far deeper than a taste for fried dough and chocolate or the appreciation of a song or season. Love is much more than an object of human fascination or affection. Love is about relationship as much as it is an emotion. Recalling the words of Gordon Atkinson, “Love is primarily a choice and only sometimes a feeling,” – and resuming my role as minister – I turn to the history of our faith to further explore “a Unitarian Universalist gospel of love,” to discover what it means for us to “choose love.”

“Can two walk together, even when they disagree?”<sup>1</sup> Unitarian Universalist historian Conrad Wright lifts up this biblical passage from the book of Amos as it posed a critical question to our religious ancestors. In the early 1800’s, those who descended from the Puritans were in theological crisis. Some had rejected the trinity and belief in original sin, and their orthodox peers continued to see these understandings as cornerstones of Christian truth. In the end, these opposing groups concluded that they could no longer “walk together.” The church split, leading

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<sup>1</sup> Amos 3:3, King James Version

to what are now Unitarian Universalism and the United Church of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, even though our ancestors rejected the orthodoxy of their time, our tradition maintains essential elements of our Puritan beginnings. Wright observes that in the current expression of our faith, an expression that names diversity of belief and opinion as not only tolerable but treasured gifts, the question - “Can two walk together, even when they disagree?” – is still relevant. Yes, our faith says, we can walk together in the presence of difference and disagreement.<sup>3</sup>

Another tie to our Puritan origins is our practice of living a covenantal faith, a faith rooted in “promise.” We are governed through “congregational polity,” meaning that there is no greater authority than our congregation in the life of our congregation. There is no pope or bishop to dictate our actions. Through a practice of democracy, we choose our own ministers and leaders. And choice is celebrated on an individual level. As we believe that “two may walk together in disagreement,” we have no creedal test for membership.

In a faith with so much freedom, what holds us together? It is the practice of living in a covenant that transforms a group of individuals into a congregation. And it is adherence to this covenant that transforms a congregation into a truly faithful community. In choosing to live by the sacred promises of a community, we also “choose to love.”

Our practice of congregational polity derives from the Cambridge Platform, articulated by the New England Congregational churches in 1648.<sup>4</sup> This document illustrated the model of congregational independence and authority and articulated the expectation that these congregations live in an interdependent way, offering “care, consultation, admonition, participation, recommendation and relief” to one another.<sup>5</sup> The independent congregations then crafted the covenant by which they would live out their faith, the promise that members would freely make with themselves, with each other and with their God. Consider this 1629 covenant from the Salem congregation: “We covenant with the Lord and one with another; and do bind ourselves in the presence of God, to walk together in all His ways, according as he is pleased to reveal himself unto us in his blessed word of truth.”<sup>6</sup>

As foreign as this language may sound, we continue to live in a covenantal way. Wright affirms that “a bond of fellowship, a covenant or even a statement of purpose as a preamble to...bylaws may be...the same thing.”<sup>7</sup> The Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism are technically a covenant by which all UU congregations promise to “affirm and promote” to be part of the Unitarian Universalist Association – our contemporary institution of congregational interdependence.

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<sup>2</sup> Wright, Conrad. *Walking Together: Polity and Participation in Unitarian Universalist Churches*. Skinner House Books: Boston, MA, 1989. 25-26.

<sup>3</sup> Wright, 27.

<sup>4</sup> The Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association. *Interdependence: Renewing Congregational Polity*. The Unitarian Universalist Association: Boston, MA, 1997. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Commission on Appraisal, 18.

<sup>6</sup> Wright, Conrad in “Congregational Polity and the Covenant.” Hertz, Walter, ed. *Redeeming Time: Endowing Your Church with the Power of Covenant*. Skinner House Books: Boston, MA, 1999. 39.

<sup>7</sup> Wright, Conrad. “Congregational Polity and the Covenant,” 41.

When I think about congregational covenants, about choosing to “walk together,” about choosing to love, I remember an event in the life of my home congregation. When I moved to Boston in 1994, I was searching for friendship, community and purpose in this new city. I began attending the Arlington Street Church – my first Unitarian Universalist congregation – and was transformed. By the minister’s wise and heartfelt sermons, the inspiring music, the compassionate and justice-seeking people in the pews, I found a sanctuary, in all senses of the word.

As I have shared with you before, each Sunday we would recite our covenant together:

*“Love is the spirit of this church  
And service its gift.  
This is our great covenant:  
To dwell together in peace  
To speak the truth in love  
And to help one another.”*

The promise I made each Sunday to “dwell together in peace” was tested when our congregation received a proposal from a local homeless shelter. The shelter was searching for a new location for their nighttime drop-in center. They asked our church if they could rent our Parish Hall for this purpose.

I was excited by this opportunity to offer sanctuary to so many in our city who needed it. But, to my surprise and dismay, a number of people began speaking against this idea. The presence of the homeless would put us at risk, they said. The neighbors do not want people and ambulances coming into the area at all hours, they said.

And these concerns about the impact on the wealthy neighbors surrounding the church came from people I cared for and respected deeply. “What,” I wondered, “is church for, if not to serve and care for people in need?” The gulf between the supporters and opponents of creating a shelter at our church widened.

I remember a church meeting where the leadership set up two microphones in the sanctuary, one for the proposal and one against. How I longed for our Senior Minister to step up to the “pro” microphone! In my eyes, the moral integrity of our congregation was at stake. But Rev. Kim stepped up to neither microphone and, instead, stood nearby, bearing only her hallmark expression of calm concern. In retrospect, I understand that while she was standing and observing, symbolically she was “walking together” with everyone in that room.

No decision emerged from this discussion and, over time, the feelings and rhetoric intensified. Then, suddenly, the debate was over: the shelter withdrew their proposal. They had received so much pressure from the neighbors around the church, people who were also donors to the shelter, that they decided to look elsewhere.

I was disappointed that we lost the opportunity to give this “gift of service” to the people of

Boston. But our Associate Minister shared a different regret. In losing the proposal, we – a congregation in conflict - also lost the chance to make a difficult decision. We lost an opportunity to really see if “[two can] walk together, even when they disagree.”

When I joined Arlington Street Church, I chose to “walk” with this liberal religious people. And, in making this choice to walk with them and to live by our shared covenant, I chose to love them – to stay present to them – even when we disagreed. With my own strengths and challenges, as a member of this congregation, I also chose to be loved by them. In walking together, we chose to love each other even when we didn’t like each other very much.

As the chance to complete a path through conflict disappeared, I would like to think that, no matter the outcome, I would have still chosen to walk with this people, but I will never know.

When I first arrived at Cedar Lane almost four years ago, I joined this congregation and, through this act, made a conscious decision to walk with you as member and minister. All of us who have joined this congregation – through our signature or ongoing participation or both – have chosen to walk together. While we do not read a covenant aloud every Sunday, the commitment and patience required for all of us to walk together in freedom remains the same.

And so, I say to Ed Moot and all of us here this morning that – as illustrated by our way of practicing faith - a Unitarian Universalist understanding of love is an understanding that there is something greater than ourselves, the promises we make in relationship. Gordon Atkinson said it best when he affirmed that “love is primarily a choice and only sometimes a feeling. If you want to feel love, choose to love and be patient.” Love is committing ourselves to living responsibly and staying connected even when it is hard to fulfill this promise. Again, as Gordon Atkinson affirms, “Fidelity to commitment in the face of doubts and fears is a very spiritual thing. I don’t suggest it for the weak of heart or if you are in a hurry.”

Perhaps you are a parent and the demands of parenting inspire you to live a different life. Yet, you commit to your children and, by staying present, sometimes you feel love – that heady mix of contentment, connection, excitement, trust and pleasure. Or, perhaps you are a partner and the vows you made on your wedding day feel far away and impossible to uphold. Yet, you commit to your relationship and, through your patience, sometimes feel love. Or, perhaps you are a member of a faith community and – like the debate about the homeless shelter - something has called into question the values of the institution. Yet, you commit to the congregation even when the process is painful.

But true love does not demand absolute commitment. For survival and salvation, no partner can commit to an abusive relationship. And sometimes a faith community goes astray from what is truly right and holy. Just 63 years after the Salem Puritans promised to “walk together in all [of God’s] ways,” some of these faithful imprisoned 150 people and executed 20, in what is now remembered as the Salem witch trials. In times of extreme deviation from sacred promises, sometimes the conscience demands that we stop walking together.

As I studied for the ministry, I heard a story about a minister standing before his congregation and naming a profound absence of love. Today, I stand before you and see so many places in

which love is alive.

When someone in the church dies, members of the Alliance offer a reception for the memorial service. In many cases, the volunteers never knew the deceased. Their selfless service is an act of love.

I heard a story from a We Care coordinator of neighborhood support, seeking volunteers to bring food to a family in need. She reached an elderly member of the church who was confined to a wheelchair. “Because of my infirmity, I cannot cook,” the woman said, “but I could order a pizza.” Her generosity, in a time of her own vulnerability, was an act of love.

Whenever we come to church, knowing that we are not interested in the subject of the sermon but wanting to be with our faith community, we choose to love. As we have had our own conflicts and, as a community of diverse beliefs and opinions, we are bound to have more, the many ways and the many times we stay present to each other – hearing, considering, seeking to understand – we choose to love.

And sometimes, through these choices and our patience, we feel the human emotion called love, perhaps a similar feeling to what we experience gazing at a beautiful tree, listening to moving music or the pleasure of biting into a doughnut.

For all these moments, and all the moments in-between when we are choosing to love and waiting patiently, let us be thankful for the opportunity to live in covenant with this community.

Amen.