

I cannot tell you in my short life—and in my short career as a minister—how many different variations and iterations of Unitarian Universalist church I have had the pleasure of attending or for which I have led services. One of the great joys of the pandemic—if there was any joy that could be ascertained from it—was the opportunity to provide pulpit supply over Zoom to congregations in nearly 35 states and Canada. It was fascinating to me to meet UUs from all over North America and to experience the culture of each individual church (as best as one could virtually). But, even more important—and this should come as no surprise to those of you who know your minister as the liturgical nerd that he is—was getting a chance to see how different congregations constructed and put together their services. How many hymns did they include? Was there a Story for All Ages? Did they light candles or did they use another ritual to share their Joys and Concerns? Did they extinguish the chalice before the end of their service (believe me, that one is bigger point of contention and a greater source of debate in the UU world than you would think). And also—which is the most important question for the purposes of this sermon—did they include an Affirmation and what did it say?

Unitarian Universalism is ultimately a non-creedal faith tradition. At its most basic level, what this means is that there is no point in the service where we as a congregation come together and say in unison the words “I believe in...” There is no required belief in the existence of a higher power. There is no required adherence to any particular set of religious traditions. We are an intentional and pluralistic gathering of many different individuals who can count within our members and friends people who identify as atheists, agnostics, humanists, Christians, Jews, Muslims, pagans, Buddhists, and others who are often an esoteric combination of many of these traditions. But the logistical question is,

when we come together in sacred space for our Sunday services, what is it that we can find in common with each other? Or perhaps better stated, as one UU ministerial colleague puts it, what are our most important loyalties as church members?

To help answer this question, a man by the name of L. Griswold Williams—a poet, anti-war activist, and Unitarian minister who served congregations in Ohio and New York at the beginning of the 20th century—published a book of meditations in 1937 titled *Antiphonal Readings for Free Worship* (how's that for a title) that included the reflection that has been adopted by many of our congregations and has come to be known more commonly known in UU circles as our Affirmation Statement. Each congregation (including ours) has adapted the statement in some way to better reflect the character of their own membership, but the original words that L. Griswold Williams wrote are as follows:

Love is the doctrine of this church,

The quest of truth is its sacrament,

And service is its prayer.

To dwell together in peace,

To seek knowledge in freedom,

To serve human need,

To the end that all souls shall grow into harmony with the Divine—

Thus do we covenant with each other and with God.

Over the next few Sundays, I will be taking the words of our Affirmation Statement—as we have adapted it to reflect our congregation—and also coming back to Williams' original Affirmation and taking a look at each line to truly get at the heart of what each line actually says, what it means, and most importantly, what meaning it has for us as

UUs and how can we choose to embody these words, not only in our own individual spiritual practices, but in all of our interactions with people on a daily basis.

The first line of the Affirmation is perhaps the most interesting one to me for the presence of one word alone: “doctrine.” It always amazes me how nonchalantly this word is uttered by UUs without much fanfare, especially seeing as how issues relating to doctrine are the reasons that many individuals who grew up in other faith traditions—especially Christian ones—ended up leaving those churches they grew up in and came to Unitarian Universalism. When I was living in Texas, I encountered so many people who had grown up in conservative churches—many of which had very specific definitions of what they believed that doctrine was and should be—and had been so traumatised by what I refer to as “toxic theology” that by the time that they arrived at the UU church, any mention of words like “God,” “church,” “prayer,” and “worship” were all words that would trigger a negative emotional response. But “doctrine” surprisingly never seemed to be one of those words.

This led me to the question: what exactly IS a doctrine, anyway? According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word “doctrine” is defined as “a belief, or set of beliefs held and taught by a Church, political party, or other group.” This definition left me at a bit of impasse; if we are truly a non-creedal faith tradition as we profess, can we really claim something—even as lofty an ideal as “love”—as something that we believe? But then, I scrolled down a little further (yes, I am a millennial and I was looking at the Oxford English Dictionary online) and I arrived at the origin of the word “doctrine.” If you have been coming regularly to this church since I have been here, you will know that my background is in foreign languages and linguistics and that I am as much of an etymology nerd as I am a

liturgy nerd. The word “doctrine” comes from the Latin word *doctrina*, which means “teaching” or “learning” and comes from the root verb *docere*, which means “to teach.” Why do I mention this? The reason is because *docere* is the same root as the word “docent,” which has two definitions in the OED: 1) a member of a teaching staff, immediately below professional rank, and 2) a person who acts as a guide, typically on a volunteer basis, in a museum, art gallery, or zoo.

The reason that this definition is important for us as UUs is because love is the driving force that guides the majority of what we do in community. As UU minister (and one of my predecessors as the Intern Minister at First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque) Rev. Meredith Garmon writes in his blog *The Liberal Pulpit*: “religion isn’t about what you believe. Religion is about how you live: the ethics and values that guide your life. Religion is about community: the people you come together with, and the rituals that affirm your connectedness...Religion brings all things together and integrates them.” From welcoming in new members and friends who are looking for a place to connect with people—especially those who are marginalised by society and looking for the sanctuary to be who they are and be accepted for it—, to the social justice efforts we undertake and the community organisations with whom we partner, to the pastoral care that we offer to those in our community, what brings us together is love and everything that we do is defined with love and care for each other as the common bond.

But it is even more than that. By affirming that love is the doctrine of this church, it means that we are the ones who are entrusted to show the world a different way. We are the ones who get to be the docents who are sharing to a world that is becoming increasingly more polarised and antagonistic every day that things could be better and that

we could truly affect a change in our world if we would recognise the importance of love for humanity and have that as the centre of how we relate to each other in this world. How amazing and affirming is it that we have the opportunity every Sunday to say that we have the potential to be the change that we wish to see in the world? How meaningful is it to say that we know that it is possible by us choosing to remember love? What would it mean to step into your prophetic voice and show people a different way of being together and coming together by simply reminding them to choose love? What could be achieved?

Of course, there will always be nuance, and it is not necessarily always that simple. But there is something hopeful for me in knowing that there is something that I am able to do, however small it is. It makes things seem less scary and intimidating, which helps to make me less overwhelmed and leads me to realise that things are not necessarily as big and foreboding as they sometimes may seem. I also sometimes like to ask myself the question: what is the alternative? What would life be like if nobody chose to love anyone or anything? Is that really a world that I would feel comfortable living in? Is that a reality I would want for myself and others? When framed that way, it seems to me that choosing love is a no-brainer and a easy choice to make.

I am still on the fence about the word “doctrine” and whether or not I feel that it is the most appropriate word to include at the beginning of our Affirmation Statement. Like many people, I have become so accustomed to saying it at this point that I do not think that I would actually ever change it. I have heard other congregations try to replace it with other words and phrases like “spirit” or “guiding force.” But, as much as it breaks my linguistic heart to admit, I feel that the actual words are less important. What I feel is important is what that “love” that we speak of encourages and emboldens us to go out into the world

and do. What I want to know is how that love makes you see and relate to the world outside of these church walls differently. I want to know what are the changes that you see in the world after you choose love, and what differences it makes. And I want to know that love that you find here—the love that defines everything that we do—gives you the confidence to continue to go out choose love in your daily lives. I promise you that it can make a difference.

May it ever continue to be so. Blessed be. Amen. Shalom. Assalamu Aleikum.

Namaste. Thank you all so much.