

Faith AND Good Works February 1, 2026
Unitarian Universalist Society of Laconia, NH
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In our study of the New Testament,
our inquiring group of UUSL biblical scholars are now studying
the letters of St. Paul, such as 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, and 1 and
2 Corinthians.

Paul's letters are the earliest writings preserved about Jesus;
They date from around 50 C.E.

Many of us in our class had previously never been acquainted with
these epistles of Paul.

I would say that we are surprised by how such a unique view
of spiritual life, - that advocated by Paul, was adopted slowly yet
steadily throughout the Roman world until by the fourth century C.E.
Christianity was declared the religion of the Roman Empire by
Emperor Constantine.

It is quite fascinating to realize that Paul does not appear
to write very much about Jesus, his life, his activities in healing
and helping others, nor Jesus' struggles with the Roman authorities.
If Paul did, those epistles are now lost to us.

One wonders whether or not Paul even knew very much about Jesus,
the man, or if Paul related mainly to Jesus through the revelation

he had of Jesus on the road to Damascus. We do know that he travelled to Jerusalem at one point, and did have conversations with the Apostle Peter and the Apostle James.

Yet we have no idea what they talked about.

What we find consistently in the seven epistles in the New Testament clearly written by Paul, is Paul's teaching of his belief, stated over and over again, that Jesus died for our sins and through his death, those who have faith in Christ are saved.

He believed solely in what theologians call "justification by faith."

A number of scholars today are of the opinion that both Jesus and Paul were apocalyptic, believing that the end of the world was about to happen.

Paul's mission was unrelenting in his zeal to establish Christian churches across the Gentile world as quickly as possible, because of this apocalyptic belief in the return of Jesus who would gather up those who had faith in him.

The rest of humanity would be left behind.

Paul's epistles to the Christian communities across the Roman world, with his justification by faith, urged people to let go of, in particular, their beliefs in Jewish Law, including doing good works for salvation.

Paul, who had been a very devout Jew before his conversion to Christ, changed his faith in Jewish Law to solely believing in Jesus for salvation.

Dr. Bart Ehrman, our lecturer in his book *The New Testament*, writes that¹ Paul cited the Jewish Law to show that the Law had no role in a person's standing before God!

For Paul this line of argument is completely sensible.

He maintained that the Scriptures themselves teach that the Law was not given in order to bring about a right standing before God.

From the very beginning, people have been made right with God by faith, starting with the father of the Jews, Abraham himself in Genesis, the first book of the Law.

For Paul, the true children of Abraham are those who have faith, just as Abraham had faith – whether they are Jews who have the Law or Gentiles who don't (Galatians, 3: 6-9).

The Apostle James, believed by many to be Jesus' brother, living in Jerusalem, challenged Paul's belief in faith alone for salvation.

Known as James the Just, the most famous passage

in his epistle entitled James, written towards the end of the 1st century is chapter 2:14-26.

¹ Bart Ehrman. *The New Testament*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 334.

Within this text James argues that genuine faith expresses itself through actions. James challenges the idea that someone can claim to have faith while showing no evidence of it in their life. He insists that belief alone without any outward expression cannot change or transform a person.

He writes: “what’s the use of saying you have faith and are Christians if you aren’t proving it by helping others.

If you have a friend who is in need of food and clothing, and you say to him ‘Well, goodbye and God bless you, stay warm and eat hearty” and then don’t give him clothes or food, what good is that?

So, you see, it isn’t enough just to have faith.

You must also do good to prove that you have it.

Faith that doesn’t show itself by good works is no faith at all – It is dead and useless.” (James 2: 14-17).

James is not writing that salvation comes from doing good works;

He is saying that authentic faith produces good works –

Just as a fruit tree produces lovely fruit.

Faith and good works for James are interrelated.

This question of what matters more- faith or good works is one that has historically divided denominations, inspired reformations, and filled libraries with many, many tracts.

For example, during the Protestant Reformation Martin Luther claimed that Paul's justification by faith alone was the truth, and that James's statement of the relationship between faith and good works needed to be considered secondary.

The Lutheran church today holds this to be true.

Some religious groups in America today also emphasize faith, as an inner trust, or spiritual orientation, that is larger than good works.

Others emphasize good works – tangible acts of compassion, justice, and service to help those in need.

For many of us, the truth seems to be somewhere in the middle.

We live in a space inside ourselves where faith and good works influence one another.

And then, when we become clear on what we believe, we often are moved to act on such a belief.

If we believe in kindness, then we will do acts of kindness.

If we believe in lessening suffering in the world, then we act in ways that help take away the sufferings of others.

As Unitarian Universalists our faith does not ask us to adopt a certain creed, such as St. Paul would advocate with his belief in justification by faith.

Instead of reciting a number of doctrines, our faith is measured by how well we engage in life with open, loving hearts.

Being a UU means opening our heart with compassion for others and the world around us.

Being a UU invites us in 21st century America to believe in our prophetic UU faith calling us to trust in the values we hold – such as transformation, generosity, interdependence, equity, pluralism, justice, and love.

As Unitarian Universalists today our good works are the outward expressions of what we believe – our core values and principles.

Thus, as UUs, faith and good works today are not in tension with one another.

No. They are partners in making our world a better place.

To illustrate this relationship between faith and good works,

I want for us this morning to focus on the current crisis

in our nation over immigration and the ICE raids. What does our faith of Unitarian Universalism tell us to do about what is happening?

At our June 2025 General Assembly the delegates adopted an Action of immediate Witness that grounds us in our UU faith in how to relate to ICE and its raids. It says:

“As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm the sacredness of every human being and our shared humanity across lines of culture, experience and theology. Our faith compels us to uphold the inherent worthiness and dignity of all people,

including immigrants and to insist they be treated with love, compassion and justice. We reject policies and practices that deny immigrants their basic human rights – especially the right to due process protected under the US Constitution and international law.

Our UU values affirm that justice demands fairness and equal protection for all. Due process – a cornerstone of democracy – guarantees that no one is deprived of life, liberty or property without a fair hearing. When immigrants are denied these rights, we are called to respond with moral clarity and courageous action.”

That was last June. Since then we have witnessed ICE raids throughout the nation, including Los Angeles, Chicago, Maine, and Minneapolis.

Today we can no longer turn away from what is happening in our nation.

This past Thursday Julie Nye, Linda Terwilliger and I attended a NH Clergy press conference on ICE Overreach at St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church in Manchester.

Clergy from across the state were in attendance, standing behind each speaker, holding up signs in protest.

For example, I stood for an hour holding a sign “No more separating families.”

We listened to stories about children being afraid to go to school

because they feared that when they came back home, their parents would have been arrested by ICE.

We heard of immigrant families hiding in their homes, fearful to come out, and of food being delivered to them by supporters.

We heard a story of a Manchester immigrant family that had a child their congregation loved, and the congregation is now in grief over the family deciding to move to Canada for safety.

One minister had just returned from Minneapolis and he told us that it is much worse than what we see or can imagine from the news.

We learned of immigrant families in Minneapolis who are afraid to go to a hospital for care.

One person at our meeting was trying to recruit anyone who was trained in delivering babies to going to Minneapolis, as parents were having their children in their homes, without medical care, because they were too afraid to go outside.

As we were driving home, after the meeting, I reflected on how very different is our environment here in Laconia – as almost everyone is white, and in some important ways, we are isolated from what is happening

to immigrants because of where we live. Yet, I will recall for you the words of Rev. Dr. King, Words on our wayside pulpit this very moment:

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

When I think of what good works we are called to do for our immigrant brothers and sisters, first and foremost, we must not deny what is happening to them. Otherwise, we each will be complicit in what happens.

I hope that we organize better here in Laconia, so that we know who are our immigrant neighbors.

We can befriend them, and prepare to help them, if the need arises.

One of the things mentioned Thursday was that in Minneapolis neighbors helped neighbors, and boundaries were broken down, as a sense of the greater good for the entire community arose.

We can do that here as well. I invite us to learn to know who are our immigrant neighbors,

Right here in the Lakes region.

Another good work we can do is to continue to protest the presence of ICE in our neighborhoods.

One member of the audience at the clergy press conference

-a former state legislator said that protesting is an even greater American right than voting. Friends of our congregation, Tom Barker and his wife Karen, are protesting in front of the Laconia Library every Wednesday afternoon.

And our Social Justice Committee has listed a number of protests coming up. I'm sure Matt Soza or Kim Reeve will let us know when and where.

If we want to join a protest, I recommend attending a training, such as Linda Terwilliger let some of us know about by the Kent St. Coalition on February 5th & 12th on Zoom.

We can also contribute financially to organizations that are actively engaged in helping immigrants:

The National Immigration Law Center;

The ACLU;

The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee.

Of course, we all need to be in contact with all of our legislators about I.C.E. And those of us who knit can make a visual protest by knitting a hat that's called "Melt the Ice Hat." Norwegians in the 1940s created the pattern to protest the presence of Nazis in their country.

If you have any doubts about the severity of what is happening in our nation, I invite you to listen to Bruce Springsteen's new song: "Streets of Minneapolis." It is not easy to listen or watch, but still important for us to know what is happening in our nation.

We will have the link to all the possible actions we can take in the next NYCU.

In closing, returning to the debate over faith versus good works, my vote is with St. James, that faith needs good works.

We as 21st century UUs best not hesitate to practice good works that grow out of our UU faith, such as what our faith tells us about immigrant rights.

We are living in a unprecedented time that calls us to action, even though we are tired and have done so much before in our lives. The time is now. We are called to respond.

As we do, may we remain firmly grounded in our UU faith, may we have the courage to say a resounding “no!” to whatever is harmful and morally wrong-.

May our UU principles and values guide us well during this time of national crisis.

And may we continue to act in ways that preserve justice and treats everyone – immigrant, citizen, non-citizen - humanely and fairly.

Peace and love to you.