

All are Loved, Even You

Readings: 'Us vs. Them' by David Tomas Martinez
from *Accidental Saints* by Nadia Bolz-Weber, adapted

All are blessed. The meek, the merciful, the forgiving. All are worthy of love. We as a Unitarian Universalist church affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, no matter what, no exceptions. We have inherited and adapted this belief from our Universalists ancestors who proclaimed that God loves everyone, no matter what, no exceptions. All are destined for heaven.

This is a beautiful idea – and it is so hard to live by consistently, every day, no exceptions. In this world, we are constantly divided by politics, race, religion, class, sports fandoms and an infinite number of other things, this principle is so hard to live. It's easy to affirm the worth of the respectful people, the lovable people, the people we know well and can see are trying their hardest. But what about everyone else? The disrespectful people, the down-right rage-inducing people. I admit that sometimes I long for there to be an asterisk on that principle – that there's some sort of escape clause that would allow me to write off the people whose dignity I struggle to recognize – but you can see on our banner on the wall right there that lists our principles that there is no asterisk. There are no exceptions.

We are called to live our lives recognizing the inherent worth and dignity of all people, no exceptions. This doesn't mean that we accept all behaviors, but we recognize that even the people acting in ways that we abhor, still possess that inherent worth and dignity that we are called to respect. We can oppose their views, but we remember that they, as people, possess worth and dignity, original blessing. What does that look like in practice? I have two stories for you today. The first is about failing to recognize that common humanity.

Some of you know that I lived in Serbia in Eastern Europe for a few years. I was a volunteer with the Brethren Volunteer Service, a volunteer program run by the Church of the Brethren and open to all who share their interest in peace and justice. I spent two years working with Women in Black, a feminist anti-war organization made up of some of the bravest people I have ever met – people who publicly opposed nationalist wars, people who are openly queer at the risk of great physical violence. During my time there, we were invited to participate in a protest march. Some Neo-Nazi organizations had been given a permit to hold a gathering in a public park to celebrate the birthday of Heinrich Himmler, a leader of Nazi Germany and one of the people most directly responsible for the Holocaust. That permit was later revoked, citing laws against inciting religious and ethnic hatred. The local peace and justice groups wanted to hold a rally to say, "Not in our city. Nazi values are not our values."

So we marched, with police in full riot gear accompanying us. We passed by the park where the Himmler birthday party was supposed to be. It was full of Nazis yelling and doing Hitler salutes. They started throwing rocks at us. And some people in the march started throwing rocks back at them. I got hit on the shoulder with a rock the size of a golf ball. It didn't cause any real harm – I didn't even get a bruise from it. But it was painful. I was rattled. I was angry. My Serbian friends comforted me as I finished the march.

In my pain and surprise, I turned to anger and hatred. *Can you believe what those Nazis did to me?* I definitely got some credibility from the activists I knew. *Rachel had Nazis throw stones at her.* My anger felt justified – and it probably was, but I also forgot our first principle. I hated those people who threw

stones at us, who wanted to celebrate Himmler's birthday. And in my hatred, I couldn't see those who gathered in that park as human, possessors of worth and dignity. They were Nazi monsters, worthy targets of all the hate I could feel, of all the hate I could convince others to feel alongside me. The Christian writer Anne Lamott says that the surest sign that you've created God in your own image is that he hates all the same people that you do. That was the cosmology I was living then, a world where I was pure and righteous and good and the stone-throwing Nazis were evil and less than human. There was no common humanity between us.

Just recently, I learned another story. A story that helped me imagine what a different, more faithful, response to stone-throwing Nazis could have been. This story is an example of what it means to live by our first principle when it does not come easy.

40 years ago, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. came to Chicago. He joined with local organizers called the Chicago Freedom Movement to end the racial segregation and poor living conditions for African Americans in that city. King knew that his presence would bring national attention to this effort and would show the country that segregation and discrimination happened in the north too.

He joined the Chicago Freedom Movement for a march. Seven hundred people marched to demand non-discrimination in housing and an end to slums – and 5,000 people came to yell, spit, and throw bricks at the marchers. Martin Luther King was hit in the head with a brick, started bleeding and went down on one knee. After a few minutes, he got up and kept marching.

A few days later, the Chicago Freedom Movement marched again, this time with more security. At one point in the march, Martin Luther King slipped free of those who were trying to protect him from violence and approached a young white man in the crowd who had been throwing bottles and spitting. He looked him in the eye and he said, "you are too smart and too good-looking to be so full of hate." Even at the risk of physical harm, this modern prophet approached an angry young man to call him toward another way of being. King could see through the anger and violence to that young man's inherent worth and dignity. He could see that he was blessed for who he was. He could see he was smart and good looking.¹

And when I heard this story, this story of Martin Luther King recognizing the full, worthy humanity of someone who surely didn't recognize his full, worthy humanity, I realized that I had never considered the person who threw that rock at me. To me, that rock thrower was part of an undifferentiated Nazi group, a group of monsters... and that's not how our values call us to see other people. I'm not sure if, even nine years later, I'm willing to tell that rock-thrower, "you are too smart and too good-looking to be so full of hate," but I know that is what our faith challenges me to do, challenges us to do. Martin Luther King wouldn't use the words "inherent worth and dignity," as he was deeply rooted in the Christian tradition, but he embodied it in his practice in a way that shows all of us what is possible.

I said earlier that we come to our first principle from our Universalist heritage. Universalists believe in Universal salvation—the idea that everyone goes to heaven. An all-loving, all-forgiving God was a radical idea in Christian circles when the Universalists, who were firmly part of the Christian tradition then, organized themselves in the 18th century. In some circles, universal salvation is still radical.

¹ story told by Eboo Patel in an episode of *On Being with Krista Tippett*. The podcast can be found here: <http://www.onbeing.org/program/natasha-trethewey-and-ebboo-patel-how-to-live-beyond-this-election/9010>

Instead of telling you about this old and vicious theological fight, I'm going to show you a short video that illustrates Christian Universalism. It's from the sketch comedy show *W/ Bob and David*, produced by Netflix, who gave us permission to show this today. For context, you should know that, in evangelical Christian circles, quite a few people who have had near death experiences have written so-called heaven memoirs, describing the afterlife. Many of these have become best-sellers. In the sketch, Corey is bringing the good news, Universalist style.

[video: 'Heaven is Totes for Realz' from W/Bob and David. Copyright held by Netflix Studios. 2015.]

"We will not sit here and have you mock God as some all-forgiving monster!" Our Universalist ancestors got that a lot.

In the nearly 300 years since the Universalists became an organized denomination, a lot has changed. For our church now, heaven and who goes there isn't of ultimate concern. Our views of salvation aren't our defining characteristic. Many of us don't believe in a traditional idea of heaven. We echo one of our Unitarian ancestors, Henry David Thoreau who, when asked about the afterlife said, "one world at a time."

We are community of diverse believers and arguments about who gets to go to heaven aren't what's most important to us now. There is some irony that we, as Unitarian Universalists, are named for two words that come from old, vicious theological fights that aren't core pieces of faith for many of us now. The Unitarian label was applied to us when our religious ancestors questioned the Christian doctrine of the trinity, that God is three in one. And the Universalist label comes from Universal salvation. When the Unitarians and the Universalists merged in the 1960s, they joined those two cumbersome theological words together. This is one of the reasons that I like that our name is People's Church. When I tell people about our congregation, I don't have to start by explaining these words we have inherited from fights about the nature of God, a god that many of us gathered here don't believe in.

When we took the Universalist Christian ideal and reworded it for our spiritually diverse community, when "God loves everyone, no exceptions." became "we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of all people," we made it a lot more challenging to live our faith. Have you seen the bumper stickers that say, "Jesus loves you, but everyone else still thinks you're a jerk?" People with those bumper stickers outsourced the universal love of all to the holy and aren't responsible for it themselves. We don't have the option to outsource our principles. Our commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of all people means that each of us needs to affirm and promote that principle and reflect it in how we live our lives. That is so challenging.

Sometimes, people talk about how Unitarian Universalism is an easy religion – we don't have one set of beliefs or one set of practices all must follow. But, if we really live by our principles, this faith we have is not easy at all. It pushes us beyond what is comfortable and easy. In a world where we are encouraged to write people off, to divide people into "us" and "them," Our faith proclaims that all of those divisions are false and demands that our hearts and our actions reflect that truth. We are one human family, wrapped in one garment of destiny, whether we like it or not. And perhaps you all have more generosity of spirit than I do, but I find this so challenging to live by day in and day out. That person who is in front of you driving 15 miles below the speed limit when you're running late? Still has inherent worth and dignity. That neighbor with the yard sign for the political candidate that makes your blood boil? Still has inherent worth and dignity. That person in our lives who spouts racism and sexism and other forms of hate speech? Still has inherent worth and dignity. That person who hurls insults or bricks at people doing the work of justice?

Yes, them too. All of them, every person still has inherent worth and dignity. None of the actions are ok, but the people who do them are still fully human, still possessors of inherent worth. We cannot dismiss anyone as monsters, as less than human, as no longer worthy of our respect and care.

This is so challenging, but also so good. The good news of this is that each of us have inherent worth and dignity too and there's nothing that we can do to lose it. Our actions can be wrong, but we, in our essence as humans, can never be wrong. Our original blessing cannot be forfeited.

This week, with the election on Tuesday, will be a time brimming with chances to divide us into "us" and "them," to dismiss those who disagree with us politically as less worthy of respect. There will be so many chances to forget that we are all human, we are all blessed, we all possess inherent worth and dignity.

I urge you to remember. Remember our principles and act on them. Remember that each of us here and every person everywhere, has inherent worth and dignity.

Being Unitarian Universalist is not easy. But when we engage in the struggle to truly and fully live our faith we transform ourselves and transform the world.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.