

June 19, 2016 Fathers Day

First Unitarian Church

I don't want to be a "person of faith" anymore. I get lumped into that category, because of what I do. You might get lumped into it too, even though you might not relate to the phrase "person of faith."

You go to a church. And, since churchgoers are the people that other people think of when they say "people of faith," you're in that group.

I don't want to be a person of faith anymore because the company is awful. So many people, acting as so called people of faith, say terrible things, and commit terrible acts. And I'm tired of keeping company with them, even if only in name.

What does *this* (our church, our interfaith mural) have in common with a church that casts some humans as good and saved and lovable by God because they believe a particular creed, while others, even young children, are doomed to punishment or even an eternity of suffering for having been born into a social group that has different beliefs? Or for having been born gay, lesbian, or bisexual? Or transgender?

Last weekend, another gunman with another assault weapon barged into another crowded space, this time a club full of gay people, most of whom were people of color, and many were Latino or Latina. Again, the murderer held "radical" views, and here radical is again a codeword for hateful and violent.

Again, lives were lost or devastated—this time more than in any other shooting of this kind in US history.

The shooter identified as Muslim and claimed allegiance to Daesh, what the American media calls ISIS, a terrorist group that also identifies as Muslim, and so there was the usual blaming of Islam for inciting violence.

But, lo, multiple haters identifying as Christian pastors were on the air this week, refusing to mourn the deaths of forty-nine gay people, because, they say, God hates the gays.

They, including Pat Robertson who has a large body of followers, expressed hope that more killing would occur, of both Muslims and gay people.<sup>1</sup> The haters cited scripture. Of course they did.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/06/14/pastor-refuses-to-mourn-orlando-victims-the-tragedy-is-that-more-of-them-didnt-die/>

We also heard and read statements of lament, sympathy, and outrage, from many other religious leaders, Christian, Muslim, and others. But I... felt out of words for several days. Except maybe, "Stop the ride. I want to get off."

You know?

The father of the shooter says the man was upset because he had seen two men kissing, in front of his three-year-old son.

I don't know how the shooter, one week before Father's Day, went from "How do you explain love between two men to your son" to "the answer is killing forty-nine people and yourself, leaving him fatherless."

Now many witnesses have come forward to say they knew the shooter, and that he was gay, and that he may have been deeply tormented by that, because he believed it was wrong. He not only frequented the gay club and used a gay dating app and had tried to pick up men in person, he also was known to spew homophobic and violent rhetoric.

What I do know is that here and around the world, the loudest voices of homophobia and violent rhetoric are religious voices. The main source of homophobia is religion.

The shooter was Muslim.

Islam is an expansive religion that includes Sufis and feminists, and gay people, and Latinos, and Sufi feminist gay Latinos. About 4% of US Muslims are of Latin American heritage.<sup>2</sup> Islam includes billions of compassionate, peace loving humans.

It also obviously has some branches of violent fundamentalism, and yet we know that in our country, the religion that is *used* most loudly and frequently to condemn difference and incite violence is the one we heard invoked the most in the news this week, the Christian tradition. The tradition from which our own denomination emerged.

That's right, our roots go back to and through the Christian tradition. Even though we are not considered a Christian denomination, you can see the influence of Protestantism in our liturgy, in the way we do things on these Sunday mornings. The flow of hymns, prayer, and preaching.

Our religious ancestors broke with Christianity gradually, beginning when we stopped taking the bible literally, and began understanding that it is a collection of smaller works: literature, historical works, poetry, and the occasional angry or despairing rant.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/27/the-most-and-least-racially-diverse-u-s-religious-groups/>

We moved further away from mainstream Christianity when, having seen our own tradition in a new light, we opened our minds to the wisdom of other world traditions.

We became more spiritually humble. We embraced not only the world's God-centered traditions, but also transcendentalism, Buddhism and humanism. It is worth noting that our ancestors understood this kind of open-mindedness as a very Christian approach.

But we went far enough in the direction of diversity and inclusivity that we could no longer consider ourselves merely Christian. Our path evolved in a different direction than the mainstream. And here we are. Yet we are still somehow in the company, at least in public perception, of those whose beliefs stayed lodged in or evolved into intolerance. And those people are vocal in their opinionated rhetoric. Bigotry and fear take up too much of the religious space in our country. Religion doesn't have to be that way. It *should not* be that way.

A few months ago, I preached a sermon called "As You Are," about self acceptance. In it, I spoke also about non-judgment and accepting others.

Afterward, a man named Matthew, a member of our church with an earnest and curious mind, asked me some questions.

"What if someone wants to do evil? Should you judge them then?" He asked. "And what if you feel hateful? Should you accept yourself then?"

Good questions.

Our liberal religious tradition is, writ large, grounded in acceptance of difference. We honor many paths, many ways of being. And, we are called to practice this not only on the big denominational level, but on the individual level. With one another. To be in right relationship with each other by meeting each other where we're at, with curiosity, compassion, self-awareness, and empathy. Avoiding judgment.

We are called to practice these things with each other at church, and in our families. I put this sermon title on the preaching calendar many weeks ago, intending to talk about just that. About non-judgment and love in our families, between fathers and children, and in other intimate relationships too.

But then last Sunday happened, and suddenly Matthew's question sounded different and more urgent. What if someone wants to do evil? Should you judge them then?

What role, if any, does non-judgment play right now? If that question makes you cringe, I totally get it. Non-judgment sounds like a naïve, passive way of being, in the presence of violence and hate. It sounds like a self-protective, indulgent way of being—something only a person with the privilege of distance and safety could advocate.

And indeed, that kind of "non-judgment" would be incorrect.

What's true is that while we are responding to tragedy and violence in the immediate ways that we must—by helping the survivors and comforting the bereaved, by enacting laws to deter future attacks—only the slower, person by person work of teaching non-judgment, empathy, presence, and acceptance will prevent future acts of hate and violence.

In cases where violence or systematic oppression has already occurred, it is right—indeed it is a moral imperative— to acknowledge that harm has been done, and great suffering inflicted, to mourn, to stand in solidarity with those who have been most harmed, and to work for justice, healing, and peace. That is what we must do.

But we must also pan back and ask ourselves how this keeps happening.

Where did last Sunday's shooter, and every other terrorist, learn to hate and hurt people? I'll tell you: they learned it from other people, who taught them.

A while back I told you the about the interfaith leader Eboo Patel pondering this same question, and I told you about his visit to Whitwell, Tennessee, a town with a population of fewer than 2000.

In Whitwell, middle schoolers lead tours of a stunningly tangible holocaust memorial. They have an actual German railcar that was used to take Jewish prisoners to Auschwitz.

At the entrance to the memorial, the kids have posted a sign that says, "We ask you to pause and reflect on the evil of intolerance and hatred." At the exit, another sign reads, "What can I do to spread the message of love and tolerance these children have demonstrated with this memorial?"

Inside the railcar, the middle-schoolers direct visitors' attention to a collection of paperclips. Millions of them. One for each person murdered by the Nazis.

Whitwell is such a small town, it has only two traffic lights. It has no more than a handful of black and Hispanic families, and no Catholics, Muslims, or Jews.

So, Eboo Patel wondered, how did the town's middle-schoolers come to have such an appreciation for diversity?

The answer is the same as for those who do violence: people taught them. They taught them to be non-judgmental toward those who are different. To be curious, instead of making assumptions. To be compassionate, instead of "better" or "more right."

That is what our religious tradition teaches.

This morning we are dedicating (or have dedicated) 5 children- one at 9:30 and four at 11 "to a life of love and service for and among their fellow human beings." We call it a child dedication but really it is a parent dedication and a congregational dedication because in it we promise to be there for these kids, and for all of the

children of our congregation. About 170 children have participated in our Sunday school program this year. Did you know that? 170 children.

We promise to be their teachers, teachers that raise up wise and compassionate people, people who are not violent, people to accept themselves as they accept others. Every one of us is tasked with teaching that to our kids. Even if you don't personally know the kids, you teach by your example, by being part of this congregation, by supporting this place, by showing up here, and being the best self you can, in the most compassionate non-judgmental way you know how.

And if you want to do something more directly to work toward a peaceful world—sign up to be a Sunday school teacher a couple of times per month. Really. The more volunteers we have, the more children we can welcome into our program. The more children we welcome into our program, the more people there will be in the years to come practicing a religion of non-judgment and acceptance.

This is no small thing we are doing here. What we are doing is important. This community we create together is not just for us. It—and other places like it in other traditions—are desperately needed in this world.

What if someone wants to do something evil, should you judge them? No, you should stop them! And you should double down on your commitment to practice and teach non-judgment and love.

We have to do that work in our churches, and also in our families. Let me tell you, it might be most difficult in our families, because that's where our egos and our judgments get *most* involved. That's where it can be the hardest to be accepting and nonjudgmental of others.

I want to talk about that word, accepting, for a moment. Acceptance is a misunderstood concept, especially in family life.

Acceptance is the ability to be present with what is. Rather than resisting *what is* by raging, or dwelling on past expectations or choices, or perseverating on what might have been or could have been or "should" have been, a person who practices acceptance is able to stay in the present, with what actually is.

In this way, the person is open to wisdom pertaining to their reality, and is able to companion loved ones and others. The spiritual concept of acceptance does not imply positive regard. Accepting doesn't mean liking. Acceptance is the ability to be present with what is.

When we are present, we can practice non-judgment.

When we are in an accepting and non-judgmental state of mind, we are able to be curious about the person in front of us. When we are non-judgmental, we acknowledge that a human being has a limited perspective. We don't know

everything. Especially about how our family members should be, or why they may be different than we expected.

Consider again the children we dedicate this morning. Aren't they beautiful little souls? Don't we accept them as they are this morning? The adults in their lives need to have good boundaries with them, for sure, in order for them to grow up safe and healthy. But as for their personalities, their likes and dislikes, we are curious about them. We want to see these children unfold as they grow and mature.

When they surprise us, we will need to check our assumptions. Be curious about their journey. Accept them. Be truly present with them. Because when a person (young or old) is companioned by someone who is genuinely loving and interested in them, who notices without judgment, then they are in a relationship in which it is safe to make mistakes and corrections, to grow and be authentic. And that peaceful and loving relationship will extend out into the world.

This is my Father's Day message for you. That what we do in our families matters. Whether you are a father or another kind of family member. You may think you are just going about your life, but you are actually participating in the creation of our next reality. It matters what we do in our families. And it matters what we do in our churches.

The kind of non-judgment that is strong and loving, and actively engaged, that is what we have faith in. That is what kind of "people of faith" we are. It doesn't mean accepting hate. It means actively responding to it by teaching people not to hate.

Non-judgment is not tolerating hate or people with malicious intentions. It is the antidote to those things.

Let's take our values out the doors of our church. When you have a chance to speak up, affirming the inherent worth and dignity of all people, will you do it?

Let's take back some of the airtime that those bigoted voices have grabbed.

It doesn't have to be complicated. This isn't about winning arguments. It's just about saying out loud, I believe in loving our neighbors. I believe in being curious about people, and not judging them. And I believe in teaching others to do the same.

You can do it in 1:1 conversations, or online. You can amplify your voice in the public square, or you can speak quietly but consistently, just whenever you have a chance.

Sometimes we speak up by showing up.

The morning before the shooting was the day of Albuquerque's annual Pride Parade. Adult volunteers from this congregation had helped organize our youth to turn out. The adults and youth brought banners. Some wore bright colors, some wore daring outfits. Some were straight, some were gay, some were transgender.

Some were confident. Some have struggled with their identities, with self acceptance, with loneliness. Some have overcome that struggle. Some are still in the midst of it.

At the starting place, I smudged glitter on the parade walkers, young and old, and blessed them with these words, “May you walk with pride, courage and love today and every day.”

And they went out proclaiming with their presence and their words, the Unitarian Universalist gospel of love and non-judgment.

They had a lot of company—thousands of big hearted people in Albuquerque, all standing on the side of love together.

Our closing hymn is standing on the side of love. You can look it up in the teal hymnals if you want, but we’re going to project the words onto the wall up here, along with some images from the parade that you can carry with you in your heart this week.