

“Higher than Truth”

a sermon by Dan Lillie
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From “Heavy Week” to “Full Heart”

Last week, when I led the Meditation and Prayer in our Sunday worship services, I shared that my heart was feeling heavy because of the shootings in two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. Last Sunday, I showed up to church feeling overwhelmed by feelings of despair that such things happen in our world. I felt temporarily defeated that peace and justice and love require so much work; continuous, ongoing work that only yields incremental change. And yet, hate and violence seem so *easy*; that all that hard, collaborative work for peace and justice and love can in an instant be shattered by one hate-filled act of violence. It doesn't seem fair. It feels like the deck is stacked against goodness.

That's how I felt when I came to church last week. And I received comments from some of you afterwards that you felt it too, the heaviness; that sense of being overwhelmed.

Well, I'm happy to say that this week restored some of my faith: faith in people, faith in community, and faith in the Divine, which I believe is located in the first two: people and community.

Did any of you notice how beautiful the grounds of our church campus look as you arrived this morning? Leaves, branches, and debris cleared away so you can see the blossoming flowers and plants that are emerging in these first days of Spring? Did anyone notice the daffodils growing in front of the giant cottonwood tree? The beautiful grounds are thanks to all of the dedicated volunteers who gave up part of their Saturday for a Landscape Clean-Up day. Thank you to all who showed up yesterday and helped bring a little more beauty into the world.

And the beauty was not just in the landscaping. I showed up at the church yesterday just as lunch was being served, and I saw people taking a break from their work to break bread together- and by bread, I mean doughnuts, hamburgers, hot dogs, and potato chips. And as people sat to eat, they chatted and got to know each other a little better. Some who already knew each other reminisced about past times they had spent in service together side-by-side, and fondly remembered things they had accomplished in their working together. It was a touching moment of community, and in my heart, I felt a stirring instead of the heaviness from a week before.

The Ebb and Flow of Life

And isn't that just how life is? Always ebbing and flowing. The one thing we can count on is transience, impermanence. Whatever we are going through, whatever we are feeling, it will change. Like the weather (especially the weather in New Mexico), it will change. If it's raining now, we know the sun will return again. If it is windy, we know that the wind will eventually cease. And so it is with our humanity. There are some things that are fundamentally part of the human experience: and among these are grief, sorrow, loss, and pain. But they are not permanent. They do not last forever, and they are not the whole of our humanity, just a part. We also get to experience joy, connection, affirmation, and gratitude.

That's the name I would give to the stirring in my heart yesterday: gratitude. I felt gratitude for all the people who came together to build the beloved community using rakes and brooms.

Visit to Dar Al-Salam

And then last night I felt that same stirring, that gratitude, at a gathering of another sort: our First Unitarian community was invited to a prayer service at the Dar Al-Salam Islamic Center to support our Albuquerque Muslim neighbors as they grieved and honored the Muslim community in New Zealand. It was a beautiful service: Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham, Mayor Tim Keller, Congresswoman Deb Haaland, and City Councilor Diane Gibson were all there to offer their condolences and support, as well as clergy and members from protestant and Catholic churches, Jewish congregations, other Islamic communities, and us Unitarian Universalists.

Many people came up to the microphone, each in turn offering prayers and words of support. The theologies of the many people gathered in that room were vastly different; but those various theologies, those beliefs that were held as truth by the individuals who believe them, were not nearly as important in that shared space as the sentiments of peace, justice, and love. And gratitude. Again, the gratitude, arriving as a stirring in my heart.

The sermon today is called "Higher than Truth", because, as important as truth is, there are higher virtues worth cultivating in our togetherness. Virtues that were present in that room last night at the Islamic Center: peace, justice, love, and the gratitude to be in the presence of it.

The End?

Well, I realized I have arrived prematurely at the end of my sermon. That's the ending, the big take-away: that we should make the goals of our human interactions peace, justice, love, and gratitude; but most especially, love. And that truth is good and important, but it should be used as a way of getting to these other, more important virtues, rather than itself being an end-goal. We might do better to think about Truth as a vehicle, not a destination.

But I've jumped ahead and arrived at the conclusion without really talking about the role of truth in all of this; so let me back up and say a little more about truth, because it's pretty important to us Unitarian Universalists. Our Seven Principles and Six Sources make plenty of references to truth, and our symbol, the flaming chalice, represents the light of truth; so I think it is fair to say that truth is fairly well embedded in our faith tradition.

Different Kinds of Truth

Now, before we continue, I think it is important to recognize that there are different kinds of truth. The first kind of truth refers to an accuracy in our statements. This is the kind of truth that is the opposite of lies, or things we know to be factually inaccurate.

With this kind of truth, there has to be some room for subjective understanding. When two or more people observe or participate in a shared moment or encounter, the way each of them perceives that encounter may vary. The details one person remembers of an incident may be different from what stands out to another person who saw that very same incident. So when we talk about factual accuracy, people may have different accounts of what took place, but still be factually accurate, in that they are telling the truth about what they encountered.

The factual accuracy of some things can be tested. The scientific method consists of taking something we think might be true (a hypothesis), and testing it repeatedly to see if the hypothesis holds every time it is tested; this is experimentation. For something to be considered a fact, it has to be able to be tested repeatedly, and produce the same outcome every time.

We know a lot about our world using the scientific method, and more is being discovered every day. But there are limits to what we can know using this method. There are some truths about the universe, and our very existence, truths about meaning and purpose, that just cannot be tested and proven. And this is the kind of truth that I'm interested in exploring with you today, because it's in this realm of truth, the untestable, unprovable realm of meaning and purpose, where our theological and spiritual truths tend to reside.

The Fourth Principle of Unitarian Universalism says that we covenant to affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

This is the part of our faith tradition that encourages us to search for truth, even and especially in this unprovable realm of meaning and purpose. This principle recognizes how important it is for each of us to explore our own personal theology.

Unitarian Universalist congregations are composed of people across a wide theological spectrum, and our congregation is no different. We have atheists, who believe no such thing as God or gods exist; we have agnostics, who claim neither a belief nor disbelief in a God or gods; and we have theists of many stripes, including monotheists, polytheists, pantheists, and panentheists, to name a few; and while there is much variation in the form and name, what theists have in common is that they believe in the Divine in some kind of way.

Atheist, Agnostic, Theist (or None of the Above)

Back in my home congregation in Denver, I used to work with the 8th Grade Coming of Age class. Once, I remember trying to explain theology to them by breaking it down into three very broad categories, atheist, agnostic, and theist, of some type or another. I then asked them which of the three they most closely fit their theology. Even with very broad categories, and even though I said that they didn't have to match a category exactly, goodness if there wasn't resistance among those 8th graders to being put into boxes!

More than half of the youth in the class wouldn't answer by aligning with one of the theological categories. I probably shouldn't have been so surprised. I imagine a number of you, even with the expanded categories of theist that I listed, were still probably thinking, "nope, none of those categories fits MY theology!"

Just for fun, let's take a quick poll of the room. You don't have to answer if you don't want to:

How many of you most closely identify with the atheist category?

How many of you most closely identify with the agnostic category?

How many of you most closely identify with the theist category?

How many of you feel like your theology doesn't align with any of those categories?

Well aren't you a bunch of theological rebels!

Thanks for playing along. When it come to theology, here's the thing about truth: it's limited; or maybe it's clearer to say, we are limited in our ability to know and understand truth. What we think we know, we only know until we know better. We Unitarian Universalists refer to our faith tradition as The Living Tradition, because we believe that revelation is not sealed. This just means that humans didn't stop receiving truth once sacred texts were passed down from God as final, unchanging words that express the ultimate reality of the universe forever and ever, amen.

Instead, it means we believe that we are always learning more about ourselves and our universe, and that truth about such big and important matters is constantly and forever available for us to find.

It would be a mistake, and an arrogant one at that, to think that we might ever know the entire truth about all of existence; or with our limited brains, to be able to fully comprehend the nature of the universe. I understand how for some people, the idea of uncertainty, of not knowing, can feel daunting and scary.

But personally, I found it freeing to embrace mystery.

Growing up as a Christian, I was taught that I had to get the answers right about God, or I wouldn't get to go to heaven. Scary as it was, I eventually strayed from this belief, and found

something else to be true instead, and that is The First Source of our Living Tradition, which is: “direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.”

When I discovered Unitarian Universalism as a young adult, this affirmation that I could find truth in the mystery, in *my own direct experience* of that mystery, entirely shifted my theology.

Coming to the realization that there was more truth out there than I would ever be able to know, meant that I couldn't possibly be expected to know it. And so, I gave myself permission not to have to find all the answers.

In this realm of theology, meaning, and purpose, it's okay to find truth, but it is important to hold our truths lightly. Just as science is constantly innovating and revealing new truths that replace our best understandings with better ones, we should be doing this with our theologies. And this is why I said earlier that Truth should be a vehicle, not a destination.

If we treat Truth as a destination, as something ultimate and final to be found and proven, and that demands us to convince others to believe it as well, then I think we have in fact missed a very important truth: that it is better to be in right relationship, than it is to be right.

When it comes to our theologies, our deeply personal, “built from our direct experience with the great transcending mystery” theologies, the question is: how do our truths cause us to show up in the world? How do our truths impact our relationships with others?

Back in that room yesterday, in that Islamic holy space filled with people of many faiths, I felt the presence of those things that are “higher than truth” in the room: I felt the presence of peace, justice, and especially love.

In that moment, it wasn't important for anyone to convince anyone else to believe in a particular truth; we weren't there to convince each other of a truth, because truth wasn't the destination. As people of faith, it was the vehicle that brought us together in a moment when the healing power of relationships and community was needed, not a perfect articulation of the truth. It was powerful to be in the presence of peace, justice, and love. For me, I believe that was the presence of the divine, and it restored my faith that had been broken just a week earlier.

And so my fellow theologians, as this service ends and you go about your day, I ask you to consider two questions:

What do you know to be true? And then, How does that truth show up in me?

And as you think on these things, may these words by Jason Mraz be your mantra:

There's only one answer that matters; even if your heart has been shattered;

Whatever you want, whatever you are after; Love is still the answer.