

Greenville UU Fellowship
Sources V: Loving Our Neighbors
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It is worth remembering that what we do here and now, today, in this fellowship, comes from somewhere. Though our personal beliefs and spiritual practices vary widely, our ideas of right and wrong, our values and our commitments, even today are rooted in and reinforced by the ancient teachings of Judaism and Christianity. Our cultural and spiritual roots reach deep. Both unitarian and universalist (small U) theology can be found in the earliest of Christian teachings. The canon of Jewish scripture and rabbinic teachings forms part of the foundation of our values today.

According to the UUA website, “Many Unitarian Universalists (UUs) have a connection to Judaism. Whether we are ethnically, culturally, or spiritually Jewish, whether we're married to a Jewish person, or simply inspired by Jewish wisdom, we have a place in Unitarian Universalism.”

And the UU Christian Fellowship says, “Many Unitarian Universalists (UUs) have a relationship with Christianity. Whether we're moving away from a rigid Christian upbringing or moving toward an all-loving God, whether we call ourselves "Christian" or simply admire Jesus, we have a place in Unitarian Universalism. Our faith tradition grew from Christianity, and one of the six sources we draw upon in our worship and religious education is Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.”

Stephen Kendrick says, “Many Unitarian Universalists choose to turn away from our Christian roots because of experiences we are very uneasy with or troubled by. While this reaction is understandable, it strikes me that it is not ultimately healthy for a religious movement or for any of us as individual searchers. Why? Ignoring Jesus’ teaching and influence distorts our own past and heritage, which is deeply steeped in Christian origins. Furthermore, as Unitarian Universalists, we seek to build a religion based not on nay saying or rejection but rather on a positive, life-affirming message.

... When Jesus was asked how best to follow him, he did not offer guidelines for creedal acceptance or ask for signatures on the dotted line. Rather, he asked, did you feed the hungry? Visit the widows? Go see the prisoners? If you did, you served him in the highest sense. These are still good questions, and how we answer tells us more about our relationship to Jesus today than any coffee-hour discussion or theological quarrel.”

As I was digging through resources for this sermon, I had such a hard time choosing the few short quotes from Emerson, Channing, and Parker – I wished I could skip the sermon and just read you excerpt after excerpt from all the rich primary source material! But even though all three of those preachers and their colleagues would regularly share sermons that lasted an hour or more, I decided to spare you! Instead, I have tried to distill the primary theological

positions of Unitarian Universalism today that grow out of Jewish and Christian teachings. It's not an exhaustive list – one of the things that

Radical hospitality. Welcoming the stranger is a foundational premise of Hebrew life, with countless examples of solidarity and welcome for the outcast found in the Hebrew Scriptures. This was carried through to the New Testament in the life and teachings of Jesus, who continually worked to draw people from the margins into his circle, insisting that the most outcast of society be seen and heard and healed.

God is love, and all beings contain a spark of the Divine. Nobody is outside the circle of love, and human beings have the capacity for goodness. If God is truly benevolent, then original sin does not exist – we are not required to be absolved before we have even lived – instead we think of original blessing. Universalist Hosea Ballou explained this understanding that God is loving and benevolent this way, “Your child has fallen into the mire, and its body and its garments are defiled. You cleanse it, and array it in clean robes. The query is, Do you love your child because you have washed it? Or, Did you wash it because you loved it?”

Salvation is both collective and universal. We share a common destiny and our fates are bound up with one another. Collective salvation means that one person didn't die for all of our sins – that Jesus did not atone for us, we are responsible for our own atonement. We are linked together by our humanity, and none of us are free until all of us are free. Universal salvation means literally that there is no Hell – that all souls are saved (which is why you see UU congregations called “all souls”). But in a more figurative sense, universal salvation is one of the things that calls us to work for justice in the world around us – all people deserve to live a full and healthy life.

Revelation is not sealed. Emerson, Channing and Ballou all believed in the importance of using reason to interpret scripture and theology. This understanding of reason as essential to religious interpretation leads right into the foundational idea that revelation is not sealed. This phrase comes from James Luther Adams “Five Smooth Stones,” the first of which is, “Religious liberalism depends on the principle that 'revelation' is continuous. Meaning has not been finally captured.” This means that not only do we use reason to interpret, but also that there is always something new to learn, that nothing in scripture or tradition is final or inerrant. And because revelation is not sealed, it is always our work to continue to explore and interpret our own experiences and beliefs.

And finally, *it is our work to repair the world.* We may assume that this comes out of the humanist source. It does, of course, but not exclusively. The Social Gospel applied Christian ethics to social problems, especially issues of social justice such as economic inequality, poverty, alcoholism, crime, racial tensions, slums, the environment, child labor, unions, schools, and war. Unitarians and Universalists were involved in pretty much every major reform movement in the US prior to the 20th century.

At the same time, we find the rabbinical teaching of *tikkun olam* inspiring us – this is the idea that the divine light was put into pottery vessels, but they couldn't hold it and they shattered, taking the light with them – and it is the work of humanity to locate the shards of divine light and put them back together. Again, the words of James Luther Adams, “The faith of a church or of a nation is an adequate faith only when it inspires and enables people to give of their time and energy to shape the various institutions - social, economic, and political - of the common life.”

I grew up in a congregation that didn't talk much about any of these teachings – they were lumped into the vague “God” category and generally disdained. I was a kid who was honestly concerned that I might get struck by lightning if I walked into a Christian church. It has been a long and interesting learning process for me to truly understand and embrace the heritage of our UU faith – this source which calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves. That's not easy – it requires humility and curiosity and courage, especially in this day and age.

It is our work to embody the love of a benevolent and loving God, to protect and support the divine spark within all of us.

May it be so.