

World Communion Sunday
October 1, 2017
Rev. Otto O'Connor

Before I get into talking about communion, I want to let you know that this is the first Sunday of October, and so our new worship theme this month, based on our vision statement is “love,” because our vision statement states that we aim to bring our love beyond the walls of this church.

And before we go beyond the walls in November, I want to think about the love that is already present inside this church. Because you all are doing a marvelous job at demonstrating that love. Which is not always an easy thing. Love and kindness are not synonymous. Love means speaking our truths and listening to others, even when we don't agree. Love means calling each other into a higher purpose or relationship, and doing so with respect. Love means coming to a communion service even if it's not really the ritual that works best for you. Because in church we can never get exactly what we want, 100% of the time. And so you can know that if you aren't enjoying communion today, someone else was. And don't worry, you communion lovers, it will be your turn to experience something different, and maybe uncomfortable, soon enough.

One of my mentors, the Rev. Nathan Detering, used to tell me that the things that make us uncomfortable are the things we should move towards, because that discomfort is a sign of something there that we need to attend to.

And so it is for me today. You see this is the first time I've lead a communion service. You might even call it my “First Communion,” though it's certainly not the first time I've taken communion. But this is a big deal for me. You see, I was the president of the Atheist Club at my college! And it's been a slow journey for me towards comfort with some of the more Christian imagery of our faith tradition of Unitarian Universalism.

This discomfort I had with Christianity doesn't really show up very much for me anymore. I recognize that it's not this way for everyone. Our historic sanctuary, for example, with its crosses around the room, I am able to see that these things represent a part of our history, and in some ways our present, as we are a faith that has pushed beyond what Christianity has been in the past. But I know that not everyone feels the same.

It's funny, as I was researching this World Communion day, something I have to admit I was not familiar with before coming to this church, I noticed that in 1940 the National Council of Churches declared it an important day for all to take part. This was an organization that was created at the turn of the 20th century which rejected both Unitarians and Universalists, the two churches that joined to become present day Unitarian Universalism. We were rejected from joining for not being “Christian” enough.

At the time both Unitarians and Universalists were considered at the extreme. The Unitarians, named that way in contrast to the Trinity of the God the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, believed that there was only one God, God the Father, and that Jesus

was not God *and* man, the way most Christians understood it, but rather, simply a man, one with a deep connection to God, but not God Godself.

The Unitarians had seen the movement of some among them called the Transcendentalists, like Emerson and Thoreau, in the 1800s, that challenged their views about where we find religious authority, meaning who and what we look to for spiritual guidance. They emphasized one's own experiences and intuition over the outside sources of scripture, as a place to find truth and knowledge about God and the Divine.

By the 1920s many of the prominent Unitarian ministers at the time had signed onto something called the Humanist Manifesto, a document that envisioned a set of religious beliefs that based themselves on this idea of human goodness for its own sake, rather than for divine reward or because it is what is stated in the Ten Commandments.

The Unitarians were the type who went to Harvard, and enjoyed intense theological discourse. They were the type who would be so relieved that I was finally giving you a sermon with some history and facts in it, rather than telling you these silly stories about falling in fountains and tarot card readers, as I have for the previous two weeks.

But what about the Universalists, you ask? I see you, Universalists who might be present. It's a good question, especially because this church is one of the very few in New England who was identified as Universalist church, not a Unitarian one, before the merger of the National Unitarians and Universalists churches in America in 1961. And a church that voted against this very merger.

You see, the Universalists believed primarily in a loving God who would not condemn anyone to hell for eternity. They believed that everyone would ultimately be restored with Christ, in a concept known as Universal Salvation. It didn't matter if you were Christian, or not, or if you sinned or not. They believed different things about how long it would take for you for you to be sent to heaven, but you would get there.

While the Unitarians were moving in a humanist direction, many Universalist church often merged with Congregationalist Christian churches in the early 20th century. Universalist kept close to their Christian roots, and honored that Christianity as a fundamental aspect of who they were. Nevertheless they still believed that those with other faith traditions would be welcome as well. Robert Cummins, head of the Universalist Church of America, said in the 1930:

“Universalism cannot be limited either to Protestantism or to Christianity, not without denying its very name. Ours is a world fellowship, not just a Christian sect. For so long as Universalism is universalism and not partialism, the fellowship bearing its name must succeed in making it unmistakably clear that all are welcome: theist and humanist, unitarian and trinitarian....”

I find it especially interesting how this tension, between being specifically Christian and being more welcoming is shown visually in this Universalist cross, which you can see

right here, that was designed in 1946, and it has the cross off center to represent the space for growing inclusiveness of other religions.

And on these grounds, these grounds of inclusiveness and growing the circle wider, the Federal Council of Churches, precursor to the National Council of Churches rejected them for not being “Christian enough,” just as they rejected the Unitarians.

And so, in a way the Unitarian and the Universalists were left out on their own. Too religiously liberal for the other Christians in this country.

This year actually marks the 500 year anniversary of when Martin Luther published his Ninety-Five Thesis and created the schism in the Catholic church that led to Protestantism, which literally means to Protest, for they were Protesting the Catholic Church. This is the branch of Christianity that both Unitarians and Universalists come from.

My mentor Nathan likes to say that we Unitarian Universalists, rejected from the Federal Council of Churches, claiming God’s radical love for all people, daring to welcome atheists... in a way we Unitarian Universalists are protesting the Protestants.

Which is an interesting point to make. Unitarians and Universalists have always been well represented in protesting circles, sure, being heavily involved in everything from abolition, to civil rights, to the women’s movement, to LGBTQ rights, to Black Lives Matter. Yet, we’ve done so in the trappings of Christianity, in the trappings of religion. We have churches, and ministers, reverends and parishes. We have sanctuaries and communions. Our roots are unmistakably in Protestant Christianity. So where does that leave us when it comes to traditions like communion?

Ok, so, have you ever been out somewhere, with friends or at a party and told people that you go to church?

And, friends, does it happen to you, as it does to me, where they some say “huh? What? You don’t seem like the type...”

I recently told a friend of mine who is not a member of a religious community that I was probably the most religious person she knew.

“What??? That can’t be true. That’s so weird.”

“But I’m a Minister!” I said.

“But, but! But you’re not religious *like that*.” But what does she mean “like that”?

Throughout history Unitarians and Universalists have been told that they weren’t Christian enough, so they joined forces and became this beautiful, wonderful, complicated religion, and I do call it a religion, called Unitarian Universalism, that comes

from the Christian tradition, but accepts many different beliefs and ways of being in the world. One that finds us uniting around common values, not statements of belief.

And I don't want us to lose our religion.

When the Unitarians and Universalists merged on a national level in 1961 there were many more Unitarian churches than Universalist ones. Many Universalist churches voted against the merger, including this one, they were afraid of losing their Christian heritage, their rituals, their identity. They were in the minority. Can you blame them?

But the interesting thing is that the Unitarians were the "head" of UUism, the ones who were all about hard theology, academics, books, and lectures over sermons; the Universalists were considered the "heart" people, because, ultimately, if salvation is Universal, we have to treat everyone with love.

Among many, many young clergy today I hear rumblings of the heart being the one we want to go back to. Yet this Universalist tension, between our Christian heritage and all the other sources of wisdom we UUs draw on is still so relevant today.

And so where does that leave us and our practice of communion? I've said nothing about the scripture that Rachael read, I've not described the practice and how it connects us, I've not said much in the message about the person of Jesus himself.

In practicing this ritual of communion, are we not connecting ourselves with those who have come before us in this struggle to be a religion? Are we not, in fact, protesting by attaching ourselves to the communion ritual anyways? As a part of where we came from, are we not entitled to it as much of our own as the more Protestant churches among us?

The ritual of communion comes, in fact, from the Passover seder, as it was practiced at the time. Does communion become something for us as well? We have water communion, where we bring water at the beginning of the year, and flower communion, where we bring out flowers together and share them, but what about this communion, the bread and wine communion, the communion where we share a symbolic meal? Is this ours? Don't we have as much right to it?

As much right as we have to the words church, religion and sanctuary. To reclaim these words for liberal religious values, values that believe in the universal love that promises salvation to everyone... if you believe in that sort of thing, and that asks of us all to work towards creating heaven here on earth. So perhaps we can reclaim these words and rituals that have been used to hate and to cut people out. For we have as much right to them as they do.

This Universalist love is the love that you already have. It comes from you history and it comes from each of you individually. It does not build walls. It does not block out those who don't look like us or don't believe the way we do.

Friends, we are connected to a past that is the reason we exist as we do now, but most importantly we are connected through our spiritual ancestors vision of a different world. And I mean the Protestants and their challenging of pre-existing ways of being, the Unitarians and their beliefs in many different sources of human goodness, and the Universalists who knew that God's love was big enough so as not to exclude anyone, and even Jesus, who ultimately executed for this love.

And in this radical tradition from which we come, we celebrate this ritual of communion. Let it give us the sustenance to bring our love beyond the walls of this church.

Blessed be and let us say together amen, Amen.