

**Answering the Call of Love**  
**April 8, 2018**  
**Rev. Otto O'Connor**

This morning I'm going to tell you a story. It's about the words on the banner that's hanging on the side of the church, the yellow one, on the other side of the Black Lives Matter Banner. Do you know it? What does it say?

Right, Standing on the Side of Love. You might also notice that I'm wearing a rather bright stole today and it actually also has this heart on it and say "standing on the side of love," here at the bottom. And if you've ever been to a protest or a rally or a march with a bunch of Unitarian Universalists you will have seen them wearing these yellow shirts that say "Standing on the Side of Love." In coffee hour, if you look at the bulletin board to the left right when you walk in, you'll see a picture of a bunch of people from this congregation at the Pride parade, wearing these bright yellow shirts.

So did these words, how did this phrase become such a mainstay of Unitarian Universalist justice work?

Well that starts way back in 2004. The Rev. Jason Shelton, a Unitarian Universalist Music Minister (perhaps like our own Miranda will be someday) found himself here, in Boston, Massachusetts. He was involved in a project to work on creating a new hymnal of Unitarian Universalist songs that would later become the teal hymnal you'll see in your pews that we sometimes use.

And so he came, from Nashville, for a meeting at the headquarters of the Unitarian Universalist Association in Boston - did you know that the headquarters of all the UUs across the country was right here? - And this meeting included the President of the Unitarian Universalist Association at the time, the Rev. Bill Sinkford.

So something kind of major happened in Massachusetts in 2004 that the Unitarian Universalists had been major advocates for. Does anyone know what it was?

Same-sex marriage was legalized here.

But this meeting was before that. President George Bush has just proposed a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage, and as Rev. Jason went into this meeting office, President Sinkford told him he needed to wait because he needed to make a statement for the Unitarian Universalist Association in response to the media.

And during that conversation, as he was figuring out what to say, Rev. Sinkford said, as he was on the phone with the reporters, that that we, as Unitarian Universalist of course support same sex marriage because we "stand on the side of love." And as Rev. Jason heard these words, he began composing in his head and it went like this "we are standing on the side of love."

Rev. Jason has said that he had marriage equality in mind when he thought of it. “Love” being originally the love felt between same-sex partners. The fact that the Unitarian Universalists bold claim at that time that supporting marriage equality could actually have a religious backing, was revolutionary at the time. Back in 2004, most religious traditions did not accept gay and lesbian folks, and the fact that the Unitarian Universalist Association and our churches did, made a huge difference in the movement and helped to propel the marriage equality movement throughout the US.

For many years it was a huge unifying issue among UUs, spoken of often in our congregations and supported by our leadership. A clear moral conviction that love is about inclusion, that love does not divide, that love does not pull us apart but brings us together. That we stand on the side of love. Bold. Unmoving. Steady.

As this song was gaining popularity in our churches as part of this hymnal, in 2008, there was a shooting at a UU church in Knoxville Tennessee that claimed two lives. And the perpetrator claimed to attack the church because of its welcoming stance towards African Americans and homosexuals.

And so, a kind of justice campaign was born out of the title of the song. And Unitarian Universalists soon found that the lyrics didn’t simply fit with the issue of marriage equality alone.

It was almost a religious conviction that made it easy for us to see where we should be on any moral issue of our time. Soon it became the symbol of immigration justice, racial equity, and intersectionality among our congregation and our movement.

Where are we on immigration justice?  
We stand on the side of love.

Where are we on Black Lives Matter?  
We stand on the side of love.

The campaign was, and is, in many ways about presence and about witnessing. It’s about showing up in the world. It’s about literally standing, that is using our bodies, to be present on the side of love, be that in LGBTQ right, immigration justice, or any other movement we’ve been called to.

It was a bold campaign of inclusivity, of acting out of this sense of love, of connecting with each other across differences of race, class, gender and sexual orientation.

Yet, from the inception of the campaign ten years ago there was a group within Unitarian Universalism who felt that the song and the campaign was not as inclusive as it could be.

And those people were disability rights activists, who felt that the language of “standing” made those who were able bodied the default and made the work of those who are unable to stand invisible. That it equated the ability to stand with power.

-----

And so this all came to ahead about two years ago, at General Assembly, which is the yearly gathering of Unitarian Universalists. Rev. Theresa Soto, who has cerebral palsy and uses a scooter, sat on the stage during a ceremony recognizing new ministers and lifted up a sign that said “Ouch” each time there was a metaphor that used the words “stand” or “walking.” You might be able to guess that this sign went up quite a bit.

These actions, along with years of hearing mumbling about the song, forced Rev. Jason into some deep introspection about these lyrics of his famous song that had started a movement “Standing on the side of love”. Where these really not inclusive? Wasn’t standing a metaphor that could still be used even for those who can’t stand?

Rev. Jason heard the words before, those of Helen Bishop when she said at the beginning of a workshop he was in, that “We need to have a moment, that acknowledges there are people in the room who cannot hear, so we need to use the microphone; who do not intake information, so we need to repeat. . . . We can’t possibly know how to accommodate everybody because we don’t know what all the needs are. Please let us know, and if our language is problematic, we’re sorry.”

And so, to his credit, Jason listened to these critics, listened to though who said that they were hurt by these words and eventually, as the composer, decided to re-write the lyrics to his song, changing the name to “Answering the Call of Love,” like you hear today.

And just this year, in response to the same hurt, the justice campaign based on the song “Standing on the Side of Love” changed its name to, to simply “Side With Love.”

----

And so, I ask you. What’s in a name? Do the words we choose to use in our conversations, in our worship services, in our daily lives matter? This is a tough question, right? Language changes, the way people speak today, what’s consider “ok” to say together is different than it was fifty years ago, and it will be different fifty years from now.

So what does it matter if we change the words of a song, of a campaign? Isn’t the intention clear? “Standing on the Side of Love” is intended to be inclusive, it’s literally a justice campaign, a song written for our movement at a moment in time where UUs were shaping the fabric of our country. Surely it’s historical significance makes a difference. It’s speaking to a specific time.

Rev. Jason’s change to his lyrics, from “Standing on the Side of Love” to “Answering the Call of Love” were not met with universal excitement. He described wrestling with this in real time in a UU Minister’s Facebook group, soliciting responses from a wide range of folks, those who loved that he was considering a change, and those who thought it was too reactionary to something that didn’t actually make a difference.

And, so he picked “Answering the Call of Love” because it fit the meter of the song. And I can be the first to tell you that it actually changes the meaning of the song, doesn’t it?

To “stand” is to have power, to have presence, to already be there. It’s active. It’s present. If you are “standing on the side of love” you are making yourself visible in the service of a cause of a belief.

“Answering the Call of Love” feels a lot more passive to me. Honestly, I imagine myself sitting at home, waiting for love to call. I’m not actively going out to “stand” with love, not unless love calls me first, then I’ll answer, then I’ll go towards it, whatever it may be.

And of course, I’m not the only one with this criticism.

I’m not a part of the group of people who choose to change the name for the justice campaign from “Standing on the Side of Love” to “Side With Love,” but I can only think that they considered “answering the call of love” and also found it too passive as well, and opted for the more directive “Side with Love” which really seems like a directive to me. “Side with Love! Ok?” So it’s got a little more power, but perhaps not as much agency as “Standing.”

And so, I get the resistance. In fact, I agree with some of it. Standing is a powerful word, that means something very clear and distinct. Power. Presence.

So here’s the thing. The fact that I have, and so many have, these associations with the word standing, actually prove the point that the disability advocates, and Rev. Therese Soto, the minister who held up the word “Ouch” were trying to make.

If we associate “Standing” with power, with presence, with visibility so much, what does that say about how we view those who do not stand? Are they powerless, invisible? Is their support of justice work, be it with the presence of their bodies or in other ways of support somehow less valid? Does it make their work invisible?

And furthermore, if they are telling us, those of us, like me who are able bodied, that it’s hurtful, isn’t that enough? Isn’t that enough to make a change to our language?

It was enough for Rev. Jason.

And to his critics, I say, look at our entire hymnal. If you’ve ever attended a different church, you’ll see that we Unitarian Universalists change the words of hymns all over the place. We’ve removed countless references to “God” or “Lord” that I’m sure the original composers wouldn’t be excited about. We’ve re-written whole hymns to be about the earth and the spirit so that those who do not believe in God are not excluded. Because we’ve always been a people moved by inclusivity. So doesn’t the composer of a song get to look back and change it to create more inclusion?

Rev. Theresa Soto, the minister who held up the signs that said “Ouch” at General Assembly that sparked the change, chose to use the song with its new lyrics at her own

Ordination later that year, speaking to the meaning the song had for her with the changed lyrics, and the power we have when we are listened to in our relationships.

----

So, why am I telling you all this?

Well, for one, I wanted you to know this story because it's part of our larger connection to Unitarian Universalism.

But also because I have some homework for you.

I know, I know, I'm always giving you homework. But this is perhaps more introspective than I usually go.

I want you to think about the words that you use. I want you to consider when others have expressed pain over certain words, and I want you to consider if you have resistance to changing the way you speak, and why you might have that. I want you to consider if anything in your vocabulary, particularly in the ways that others have said are hurtful, I want you to consider if and how they might have a point. Even if you feel that resistance, which I know I've felt. And as you consider that, consider how you've felt when you've felt that words weren't inclusive of you or your experience. I would be willing to bet that everyone in this room has had that experience of being not included because of words. How did that feel to you? How might that inform your response to others?

And, I'll remind you, that you don't have to agree with me. This is a free pulpit, which means I can speak my mind, and that requires free pews, which means you can choose to agree with what's spoken here or not. This is Unitarian Universalism, after all, and we know that we don't need to think alike to love of life. But part of coming to this congregation and this community, where we from so many different life experiences come together, to challenge our own assumptions about the ways the world works. So I encourage you to find ways to do that in your own words and language.

So let us consider, on this day, when we welcome a new baby into our congregation, into our community of love, how we can side with love, and answer the call of love, in conversation and in relationship with each other and all our different abilities, identities, and opinions. For a new generation might have more to tell us that we may be ready to hear, unless we open our hearts to the possibility of change.

And, as we contemplate how language impact our own lives, let us continue together in this messy, imperfect thing we call relationships, and say together Amen. Amen.