

If Fear Is the Problem, What Do We Put in Its Place?



Sermon by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan

November 12, 2023

The words of the 8th Principle are as follows:

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.¹

Hundreds of congregations across the country have adopted this principle, adding it to the current seven principles which Unitarian Universalists seek to promote: the inherent worth and dignity of all people, the interconnected web of life, democracy, and the free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

We have been talking for a couple of years now about adopting the 8th Principle as an affirmation of our commitment to anti-racism and anti-oppression of any kind. It is a natural and important next step for our commitment to peace and our work in the Accessibility and Inclusion Ministry (AIM), anti-racism, and as a Welcoming Congregation. We've prepared ourselves for this commitment by offering ongoing educational programming organized by the Anti-Racism Initiative, starting with *Seeing White* four years ago and currently the *1619 Project*, as well as education around issues of standing up for the LGBTQ+ community, our earth, and people with differing needs.

As I said, if affirmed, this vote for the 8th Principle will count our congregation among hundreds of other Unitarian Universalist congregations across the country who have added the 8th Principle to the seven other principles and values we strive to promote and achieve.

The commitment in the 8th Principle is in line with who we are, our values, and what we believe.

I knew this was all true, and yet, something was niggling at me as I imagined this service. "No more education or pontification. Enough," I thought. "The world is at war again, innocent

¹ *The 8th Principle of Unitarian Universalism*, <https://www.8thprincipleuu.org/>.

civilians are being killed in mass shootings, elders and disabled people can't afford to live in our city." It is time to name what is happening in ourselves, between us, and in the world. We know we don't agree with oppression of any kind. When we hurt anyone, we hurt ourselves. When we do not care for the planet, we are not caring for ourselves, or our grandchildren.

Oppression—an inequitable distribution of resources and systems that privilege some people over others and perpetuate the lies that we are not interconnected, or that violence is the answer—oppression of any type—is simply wrong.

It is misaligned with our other liberal religious values and morality. It is killing our planet and far too many people, and it has been doing so for a very long time. It may be at a heightened time right now, but this way of living is not new. What is there to dispute? Oppression and violence are not working.

As I held this knowing in my mind, body, and heart, I knew what this sermon would be about. It's about naming the fear that runs this world and our lives, asking all of us to choose differently and replace it with what we need and want, and living with and creating in the world the beloved community.

People act out, against themselves and others, when they are afraid. When they feel powerless, and unable to see a way through, they turn to the answer that they have been taught: fighting, demonizing, and otherizing people. From a place of fear, people separate themselves from what and who is "other." Yet spiritual masters have told us for thousands of years, and science affirms, that everything is interconnected. There is no "other." What we do to one, we do to all. When one community of people, one race, or one country suffers, we all suffer.

Fear and its close friend, anger, have reached endemic proportions. These emotions and mindsets are stored in our bodies, passed on through generations, and in some ways so normalized that we forget, or don't realize, that

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there is another way.

There is another way. It is the way of peace, love, and justice: the paths that honor the interconnectedness of our world and feel with compassion how everything that we do to another person or the earth, we also do to ourselves. When we love another, we love ourselves. When we fear another, we fear ourselves. When we hurt another, we are hurt.

This is not rhetoric.

The replacement for fear and anger is what the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called the Beloved Community, words used in the 8th Principle. The concept of Beloved Community is credited as originating with philosopher Josiah Royce as a “global vision of world peace put into practice by embracing the philosophy of nonviolence and reconciliation.”² I believe there were a few great spiritual teachers before the 1800s who also taught about the way of peace, and the Beloved Community.

In Dr. King’s teaching, there were six essential principles necessary to create and sustain the Beloved Community. These include:

1. All can share in the wealth of the earth.
2. International standards of human decency will protect against poverty, hunger, and homelessness.
3. An all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood will replace all forms of racism, discrimination, bigotry, and prejudice.
4. International disputes will be resolved by peaceful conflict-resolution and reconciliation between adversaries, instead of military power.
5. Love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred, and
6. Peace and justice will prevail over war and military conflict.³

2 *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, The Metaphysics Research Lab, Department of Philosophy, Stanford University, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/royce/>.

3 “The Beloved Community,” Module 3-Unit

King placed great faith in the need for and power of reconciliation as a pathway to Beloved Community. He was no fool with respect to how violence destroys entire communities and races. Yet he said, “The end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community. It is this...which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men.”⁴

He knew that goodwill was not enough to bring about this change of society and relations among people. He called on the power of agape love—love for all— “... love, which is purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless, and creative...love seeking to preserve and create community.”⁵

This kind of love, care, and identification with our fellows demands that we hold a concern for all sentient beings, and all people, regardless of their beliefs, abilities, skin color, or religion. King said “...it is...a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all... This often misunderstood and misinterpreted concept has now become an absolute necessity for the survival of man. When I speak of love, I am speaking of that force which all the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life.”⁶

You might be thinking that those are lofty ideals, far out of reach, and not much use now. My friends, that’s what values and virtues are: ideals. If we are not striving for our ideals and living a value-based life, then what are we striving for and what is steering our lives? How do we know how to respond if we aren’t clear about the values we hold most high?

Now is the time for turning and practicing new and different ways of understanding and relating to others, approaching conflict, and caring for all sentient beings who share this earth. The time for lengthy debates or taking huge amounts of time to discern simple truths is over, at least for the

3-Lesson Plan 1, Grades 6-12, <https://thekingcenter.org/lesson/the-beloved-community/>.

4 “The Beloved Community.”

5 “The Beloved Community.”

6 “The Beloved Community.”

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time being. It's back to basics, many basics which have never been given a fair trial. Love, justice, peace, equity, honoring interconnectedness, living in Beloved Community.

We know that peace must be the answer. Oppression of any kind must come to an end. Recognition of the interconnectedness of all of life, and responding to that truth, must be the way of life and must be sustained.

If fear is the problem, and I believe it is, underneath everything, then connection, agape love, and care for one another is the answer. Let us hold one another in great care, provide safety from a turbulent and overwhelming world, and work together for peace. Let us affirm and work toward the Beloved Community, richer for our diversity, grounded in equality, and uplifting for all.

May it be so.

Amen.

Please rise in body or spirit and join in singing our closing hymn, "Draw the Circle Wide." The words are in your Order of Service.