

# Love at the Center

## Sermon by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan

September 15, 2024

I chose this year's annual ministry theme of Truth last April, a time when many of you were nervous—about the future of democracy, the real and present danger of rising authoritarianism, and the increasing division within our country.

Person after person asked me and each other: *How do we respond to all of this as Unitarian Universalists? What does our faith call us to do? Can we love people who harm others and prioritize their personal agendas and rhetoric over human rights, and are they people of worth and dignity?* People were nervous and at a loss as to how to respond and were turning to their faith for answers.

I soon realized that not only were people fearful of what was happening in our country and the future of democracy, but they were being forced to look deeply at our Unitarian Universalist principles—at the worth and dignity of every person, for example—and ask if these principles still held true.

I remember talking with someone and asking if they felt that elected officials, past and present, who were doing some of these most terrible acts, were forgivable. "I don't know," the person said. "It feels so hard." Where is the hope for the future if these officials are not forgivable? I asked. We still refer to that conversation.

These are deep existential questions.

I took seriously the questions you were asking and decided we would journey together asking tough questions: *What is true? How do we respond faithfully as individuals and a spiritual community committed to love, peace, and justice? How do truth and bravery connect? How do other religions understand truth? What is truth in our personal lives?*

We will go deep into those questions and more this year. But we need to start today by talking about politics and religion. Because the situation is pressing and the threats of what may happen in our country are real.

It is time to talk about the intersection and interconnection of religion and politics. Before I

continue, let me make it clear why I am bringing politics to the pulpit. It is not to misuse the pulpit, or to push a political agenda in the name of religion. Nor do I speak of politics to affirm to us that we are right, or to, in any way, further divide people, one against another.

Like Mahatma Gandhi, I speak of politics because religion cannot be separated from politics. Both have to do with power: the power to unite, empower, and ensure equity and safety for all people; and the power to diminish, control, and kill in the name of personal agenda or gain.

Whenever either politics or religion are used to hurt people and our earth, and to dehumanize and divide people and create conditions and systems that result in fear and destruction, we cannot be silent, not even in the name of separation of church and state.

When politics or religion privileges those who have historically been in power and blatantly lies, when politics is used to oppress, when politics and its people create rules that are killing our earth and its creatures, those of us with religious values that contradict those actions must step up to do what we can to stop those crimes.

Years ago, Reverend Bertrand Steeves, minister of this congregation, stood up against antisemitism. It was a political action coming out of religious values. When we housed an Afghan family of refugees, or human paroles, as they were designated upon their arrival, we were taking political action based on our religious values.

So too are we taking political action based on our religious values when we hang our Black Lives Matter banner and pass an 8th Principle that specifically states our commitment to work to end the oppression of black people, and all forms of oppression. When nearly 200 FRSUU members and friends recently signed their names on an ad, published in *The Daily News*, stating that we oppose all forms of violence against women, including on billboards, we were taking political action based on our religious values.

# Love at the Center

September 15, 2024 *page 2*

The truth is that there are times when you cannot separate politics from religion without, in my opinion, being sacrilegious or hypocritical. Now is one of those times.

Unitarian Universalism is a religious tradition long steeped in engagement with social issues. We are a church where service is our prayer, and always will be.

We are in a time when silence is not only complacency, but also doing harm. I stand here not to ask you to vote for a person, but rather to vote for our democracy, human rights, and for elected officials who respect the rule of law. To vote for people who work to ensure that all people are safe and given the care they need, and that we work together as global partners to respond to climate destruction in the most effective and immediate ways possible. This is no time to be silent.

We must bring the feelings you experience here in church into the streets. We must care for our nation and her people and all sentient beings as we care for one another here. We must open our hearts wide enough to know and feel the truth that until everyone is free, none of us are free.

At the same time, we must act in ways aligned with our religious values. This means we take action without disdain for others. Disdain does not foster shared understanding, it does not build bridges where there is divide, and it certainly does nothing to change minds. When was the last time someone who called you an idiot or yelled in your face changed your mind about anything?

We cannot be silent, and we cannot return evil for evil. Casting our fear and anger onto others harms us as much as the other and interferes with the potential of creating common ground. The high road is to continue to work for what we believe in and strive to love our neighbors in the highest sense of the word.

All Republicans are not stupid, and all Democrats are not enlightened. We are all people, and here at FRS we are people committed to justice, compassion, and equity for all people, living creatures, and the earth. We don't know other people's stories; we don't know who they are or

what formed their opinions.

Do we need to learn how to challenge our anger and our fear? Yes. Does it help when we dehumanize and antagonize others who think differently? No. It is helpful when we channel our anger and conviction into positive action, and this action need not be large. It just needs to be constructive.

Don't let others rob you of your dignity or inner peace. Turn off the television after a while. Work to get out the vote or thank people who are doing that. Return to this sanctuary, so that we can love you when you are frightened, hear you when you are angry, and make space for you to return to the best version of yourself.

It is natural to get angry and afraid. The spiritual path calls us to be good stewards of those feelings. This means using those feelings to propel us forward, or processing and releasing them without harming others, so we can be stewards of peace and goodwill as we work for justice.

My friends, we are often self-righteous and quick to point out the faults in others, instead of understanding what the faults in others touch off in us and learning how to respond to them appropriately.

It is hard to feel powerless and afraid. It is hard to feel rage, and there are many, many people who have lived with those feelings of powerlessness, fear, and rage for generations. The historically marginalized and oppressed... We might learn a lot from them.

We can start by learning their stories. Learn how Sojourner Truth's faith in her God got her through all her struggles, or how the person down your street who can't afford to buy groceries still has ways to help their children feel confident and good about who they are.

Our feelings of powerlessness over all that is occurring have us experiencing base emotions that many people in the world have had to negotiate for a very long time and still do today—including right here today in this sanctuary. We are here right now with others who know what it means to be unsafe, to have little power, or to be

# Love at the Center

September 15, 2024 *page 3*

silenced. We can learn from each other.

An essential part of the spiritual life is truly learning to put yourself in other's shoes, which we cannot do if we don't know them. That means we must listen well and hear others' stories and learn who they are. Some of us are fortunate to be able to do this in personal relationships. We can also do this by being intentional about what we read and listen to on television, in news or in podcasts. When we live from this place of openness and curiosity, we begin to see that the ways in which events affect any of us is not the same.

Take, for example, the heinous and hurtful lies that were spoken on a recent political stage where it was stated that immigrants eat other people's pets. This is so extreme that some people say it's funny. It's not funny if you are an immigrant. For immigrants these untrue statements are scary. Rather than poste a meme, reach out to immigrants you know or send a letter or card to the Haitian-American Public Health Initiatives, who work with Haitians on the ground and in shelters in Mattapan.

With all of the challenges and stressors of this time, we can still choose to help transform this into the beginning of a new way of how we relate to one another, one in which we truly come to understand and respect one another. This kind of shared understanding is built on sacred ground, where all people are worthy, and all voices deserve to be heard and respected.

Unitarian minister Reverend Jim Brewer said this of our religion: "Freedom demands responsibility to others and life. Being a UU is about much more than the opinions and beliefs you hold; it is about the way you live every day. Our tradition has always affirmed that true religion is about deeds, not creeds. UUs are fond of saying, 'Don't tell me what you believe, show me how you live.'" As one minister pointedly put it: "If being a Unitarian Universalist were against the law, would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

My friends, as we move forward through the days and weeks ahead, may we do so as people of faith, acting in ways that align with our values of truth, justice, and equity for all. May we be brave enough to know people. May we focus on

values and refrain from disdain, remembering that everyone has their stories and that for any of us to be liberated we must all be liberated. May we return here for sanctuary, work for the good of all, and return no evil for evil. Regardless of who wins the election on November 5, we have work to do, and we will not turn back.

Amen and blessed be.