

Begin Again In Love: A Sermon for the New Year

by Reverend Lynn Thomas Strauss

Text: Romans 8:38-39

Paul wrote to the church in Rome:

I am sure that neither death nor life nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God (...from Holy Love).

In his letter, Paul describes agape. The highest form of love, the love of God for man and of man for God – more than brotherly love – agape embraces a universal unconditional love that transcends...that serves regardless of circumstances.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to feel the blessing of such love? To be sure that, no matter what, we would never be separated from such a love?

I read a sermon by a colleague, the Reverend Robin Bartlett. She described how one day, rushing to work through traffic on what felt like a bad day, she stopped at the Dunkin' Donuts drive-through. And when she got to the window to pay, the person working the window said that the person in the car ahead of her had paid for her coffee.

Not one to always see the glass half-full, Reverend Robin also wrote of experiencing “road rage”. No, not rage directed at her by the person driving behind her on a slowly moving expressway; but she, Rev. Robin, had perpetrated road rage and acted most inappropriately, raising a certain finger to the driver who almost rear-ended her car. Robin had to pull over in order to calm down.

What better day than January 1, to consider the fact that we humans have the capacity for both acts of random kindness and acts of rage and anger. What better day to consider what it means that for each of us; our virtues and our vices are inexplicably linked.

Our sermon theme for January is “Good and Evil”...and through the month we will explore both. Ours is an optimistic faith, so it’s not hard to ponder our goodness. But how to think about sin and evil is a whole different story.

Unitarian Universalists tend to avoid thinking about sin or evil....often we imagine evil rests in the hearts and actions of others, but rarely do we attribute evil or sin to our own actions. In fact, we may have chosen Unitarian Universalism as our faith precisely so we didn’t have to think about sin.

We inheritors of Unitarian Universalism might believe we were “saved from sin” in 1819. Something big happened in Baltimore that year. A sermon titled *Unitarian Christianity* was preached by William Ellery Channing – known as “the Baltimore Sermon,”

Channing's message was radical for its day. It is considered one of the most important of Unitarian sermons, as it led to a break with the Congregationalist churches of that time.

Channing held that each person could discern the meaning of scripture for himself, that human rationality gave each person powers of interpretation of the Bible. He also posited that human nature is innately good, not sinful, and that Christian virtue was directed by a person's moral conscience, as defined by both love of God and moral living.

These powerful ideas came to define what is meant by liberal religion – that human rationality was free to interpret scripture and that human nature is innately good!

But sometimes it's hard to believe in human goodness. Reverend Robin Bartlett was raised by parents who brought their children to a UU congregation precisely so their children would learn that they were born, not in sin, but in goodness.

Robin was taught in UU Sunday School that there was a kernel of goodness inside of her, and as she grew older she learned that she could change the world with her love as that kernel of good inside grew and grew. But then it was troubling to Rev. Robin, in moments like the road rage moment, as it is to us all when we fail to meet the mark of goodness, of kindness, of loving the stranger, or helping those in need. It is troubling when we know we are not being our best selves, and that there's more than one kernel inside.

We all know that inner struggle, that internal fight between what feels like the good in us and what feels like evil or sin in us. Why can't we always do our best? Why can't we always act from the goodness seed? Why can't we be loving all of the time? We so long to be the recipient of unconditional love, and we also long to offer this highest form of Love – a transcending love which knows no bounds.

This morning we're thinking about Love – how to be as loving as we can be. I'm hoping that the new year might give everyone an opportunity to begin again in love. To trust in a love that embraces all regardless of circumstances.

I wish in this new year that such a love might touch our elected leaders; that such a love might land gently on popes, and priests, and military commanders, and prison guards, and school principals, and parents everywhere. Imagine what 2017 might be like if agape went viral!

In addition to fear, one of the things that gets in the way of love is our very human, judging brain, and the mistakes it makes.

But judge and make choices we must. And the painful truth is that we so often get it wrong when judging the actions of others, even those closest to us. Especially those closest to us. How many times have you misinterpreted the actions of a loved one? How many times have your own needs and vulnerabilities gotten in the way of your ability to act with kindness and goodness? Flawed and mistaken...that defines a big part of

what it means to be human. Our goodness seed is only one part of who we are. There's also that road rage part.

The ability to make quick judgment calls is a positive adaptation in humans. We need to know when to fight, when to run, when to give in. Our survival as a species has depended on getting it right. But our reptilian brain doesn't always tune in to the post-modern situation. We often make errors in judgement, choosing aggression needlessly, hurting others and hurting ourselves.

Rev. Bartlett offers a helpful corrective to our tendency for quick judgment of the actions of others. She suggests that our internal struggle is not really between good and evil, but rather between love and fear.

Such a helpful shift of perspective. Our struggle is not a battle of good and evil, but a struggle between love and fear!

We human beings cannot escape holy love, and we are born with a kernel of goodness within. We are, each of us, full of worth and dignity; all worthy of unconditional love.

And we are also flawed, limited, frail. We do miss the mark. We do make mistakes. We do hurt those we love. And on a grand scale we humans do tremendous harm to the planet, to other countries and peoples, to strangers and neighbors alike. None of us is immune to the full range of human nature.

We all make mistakes, we all hurt others, and we all suffer at the end of a day in which we have forsaken the angels of our better nature. It is painful to acknowledge our flaws; it takes courage.

But the good news is we are not the first to struggle with existential pain. We are not the first to fall short of loving our neighbor, or our partner or our sister, or our best friend, or even our child. We are not the first to sin.

I am so glad that I discovered our faith. I am so grateful that Reverend Channing gave that Baltimore Sermon that freed us from the old orthodox constructs of Original Sin. That granted us our right to use our rationality to make good choices for ourselves. Choices made not from fear but from love.

I read again some of the work of Reinhold Niebuhr as I thought about how to balance the good and the not good...that lives within us all. I thought about the new paradigm that Rev. Bartlett suggests, that it is not good and evil that motivates human behavior, but it is love and fear.

Niebuhr, a Christian theologian, is the author of the 1932 work *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. Nineteen thirty-two was a time of upheaval on the world stage, a time of suffering in Europe and the rise of dictators, a time moving toward WWII. Niebuhr contrasted the sentimental optimism of the social gospel movement with the tragic history of political power

misused, acknowledging that sin is endemic to the human condition but that agape love remained a relevant ideal.

Our Unitarian forebear, Theodore Parker, an antislavery activist minister, had held this ideal kind of love when he said: “The arc of the moral universe bends toward justice.” In spite of the evidence of power misused throughout history, our progressive UU faith has inherited the ideal of a Love that conquers fear...a Love that never dies. A belief that good will win out and justice will someday be realized.

Can we find the courage to open our hearts to this highest form of love? The love that will find us no matter what. The love from which we cannot hide.

Because our faith teaches us we are born in blessing rather than in sin, we must search our hearts, we must seek to know ourselves more fully and thus acknowledge our flaws as well as our goodness. We are called to a humility that rests neither in pride nor shame, but brings us instead to a kind of religious realism that Channing and Niebuhr and Robin Barrett would recognize...

In order to embrace the blessing of agape, we must practice our faith at a soul level...at a deep spiritual level. We must come to know our full humanness...the seed of goodness as well as our human limitations. We must come to know and to confess our human vulnerability. Our continual fear is that our

limitations, our flaws, will be recognized and we will be seen as weak and vulnerable. As UUs we do the deep spiritual work confident in our inherent and essential worth and dignity, knowing that we are born in blessing. That is where we begin. But we cannot stop there.

A strength of Christian liturgy is a reliance on confession and forgiveness. UUs in our optimism and denial of sin have, for the most part, omitted confession and forgiveness from both our theology and our practice.

What if, in this new year, instead of hiding our vulnerability, and denying our fears...what if, we said them aloud, or in prayer, or in meditation, or in quiet conversation with a trusted spiritual director or friend. And after confessing our full humanness, we offered ourselves a word, a litany, a blessing of forgiveness?

Then when we experienced anger or hate or greed or jealousy in another, wouldn't we see more clearly the fear behind their actions....and would we then be better able to forgive them?

And most particularly in the year ahead, wouldn't it be useful to understand the fear that motivates human behavior? Wouldn't it be a kindness to offer a listening ear to a person ready to bear their soul? And wouldn't it be a blessing to them and to us all to offer forgiveness?

A little forgiveness every day – that is my resolution for the new year. Let me seek, let me find, let me offer a little forgiveness every day to myself and to others. Let me learn to receive the Holy Love that will not let me go. And let me pass that love on to others as best I can.

And wouldn't that change the world just a little?

Whatever challenges we must face in the year ahead, today, on January 1, 2017, we have a chance to begin again in Love.

May It Be So. Amen.