



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Stand Up for Love”

© by the Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen

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Centering Thoughts

It's not good for human beings to be alone. Genesis 2:18

*The subject tonight is love, and for tomorrow night as well. As a matter of fact
I know of no better topic for us to discuss until we all die! Hafiz*

*The spirit of Love will be intensified to Godly proportions when reciprocal love exists
between the entire human race and each of its individual members. George de Benneville*

*When I speak of love, I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am speaking
of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life.
The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.*

Sermon

It is February and in a few short days America will celebrate love on Valentine's Day. One legend explaining the origin of this holiday claims Valentine was a 3rd century Roman priest. When Emperor Claudius II determined that single men made better soldiers than those with wives and families, he outlawed marriage for young men. Valentine felt this was an injustice so he defied Claudius and secretly performed marriages. When Claudius discovered Valentine's actions he ordered the priest's death. Later Roman Catholics celebrated Valentine's defiance to help turn attention away from old pagan festivals celebrated in February and towards the new religion of Christianity. Truth or fiction? It doesn't matter for we continue to celebrate Valentine's Day by giving candy and flowers or greeting cards decorated with pink and red hearts and a chubby, naked Cupid.

When Cupid's arrow struck my mother and father, they married in the Universalist Church of Melrose, Massachusetts, in February 1948. I married Paul 32 years later in the Unitarian Universalist Church in Arlington, Virginia. But the marriage we enjoy is not available to everyone. So, today, I'm standing up for love.

Now there are some subjects I generally don't preach on because I feel I'd be preaching to the choir. Interracial and same-sex marriages fall into this category. That's not to say some might

not choose either option, or that a few might still be getting used to the idea. But I believe we all support a person's right to make these choices.

One reason I make this assumption rests on your 1996 vote to become a Welcoming Congregation. This term used by the Unitarian Universalist Association designates congregations that have taken intentional steps to be welcoming and inclusive of people with marginalized sexual orientations and/or gender identities. It is why many of our nametags sport small rainbow stickers. At one time we flew a rainbow flag outside the building, but I believe it was vandalized and has not been replaced.

Another reason I assume I might be preaching to the choir rests on our UU Principles. Printed on the back of your order of service, the 1st Principle states that we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of all people—no matter whom you love, where you come from, or whatever your beliefs. The 2nd Principle affirms justice, equity and compassion in human relations. The 3rd Principle affirms that we accept one another. And the 4th Principle states we affirm your right to walk your own path to truth—again, no matter whom you love, where you come from, or wherever your beliefs lead you.

So why am I spending our precious time together to preaching what you already believe about love and marriage?

Besides the fact that it's good to be reminded of our stance, I want to be sure that if you have been victimized or marginalized in another faith community you know you are welcome here. Wherever Cupid's arrow falls, we do not discriminate against you. You are us. And we Unitarian Universalists have held this position for a very long time.

We stood by Richard and Mildred Loving when they were awakened in their Virginia bedroom and arrested in 1958 for having married in the District of Columbia a few months earlier. Richard was of Euro-American stock; Mildred was of a mixed racial background that included, European, Native, and African American ancestry. When they married and returned to Virginia to live, they defied that state's Racial Integrity Act of 1924. Convicted and at first sentenced to one year in prison each, their sentence was commuted to a 25-year probation which included the restriction that the two could never return to Virginia at the same time. This meant they and their children could never visit their parents, grandparents, and friends as a family. They followed these restrictions until the civil rights activity of the early 60s convinced them to take a stand and fight back. They heard the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. say, "When any society says that I cannot marry a certain person, that society has cut off a segment of my freedom." The Lovings wanted that freedom.

They appealed their conviction in 1961 and the newly consolidated Unitarian Universalist Association voiced its support of their right to marry. D.C. area UU congregations welcomed them.

The Loving's case—and can you believe the case for interracial love was brought by a couple named Loving? Cupid must have arranged that. Eventually the Loving's case went before the Supreme Court. In 1967, U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote the unanimous decision to overturn the state of Virginia's right to ban interracial marriage. Warren wrote, "The freedom to marry has long been one of the vital personal rights essential to the orderly pursuit of happiness by free men. [Marriage is] one of the basic civil rights of man, fundamental to our very

existence and survival.” I’m sure if the decision were written today it would not have named only men, but since in that day ‘men’ referred to all people, in my mind this statement should have made all marriages legal—even though no one was advocated for same-sex marriage at the time.

What it did do was make illegal all other state bans against interracial marriage. Sadly, southern states were slow to remove the laws from their books. Astonishingly, Alabama was the last state to finally remove its law from the books which it did at the turn of the millennium, in 2000.

In 2009, the District of Columbia did use the Supreme Court’s decision to support its recognition of same-sex marriage. In affirming marriage a basic civil right, DC Councilman Phil Mendelson wrote, “If we are all created equal, then gays and lesbians are entitled to the same rights and privileges, the same fundamental freedoms, mandated for all individuals. Access to equal treatment under the law inevitably includes the freedom to marry.”

The signing of the District’s marriage equality law took place at All Souls Church, Unitarian, because the members of that congregation had been a major player in its passage. In all the states that legally recognize same-sex marriage, Unitarian Universalist ministers have been among the first to perform them and bless the couples. I happily blessed a same sex union in this sanctuary, but I look forward to the day when I can sign a marriage license without regard to the sexual orientation or gender identity of the names it bears.

Since I can’t, our justice work remains unfinished. As President Obama said during his second inauguration speech, “Our journey is not complete until our gay brothers and sisters are treated like anyone else under the law. For if we are truly created equal, then surely the love we commit to one another must be equal as well.”

If you’ve been following the news this past week, you’ll know the Boy Scouts have been debating whether to lift their national ban on openly gay leaders and participants in favor of allowing local troops to decide themselves. But did you know President Obama happens to be honorary President of the Boy Scouts of America? On February 3, Obama said, “gays and lesbians should have access and opportunity the same way everybody else does, in every institution and walk of life.” Unfortunately, the Boy Scouts postponed their decision until May because they felt it was too complex and they needed more time. What they really meant to say, in my view, was that they were too cowardly to finally do the right thing in the face of conservative opposition. By waiting until May they allow the full Boy Scout body to decide. I’m all in favor of democratic decision-making, but how about a little leadership?

Many Boy Scout troops meet in space provided by religious organizations, some of which claim homosexuality a sin. On our Fellowship FaceBook page, one person suggested we announce we will gladly host any Boy Scout troop kicked out of its space if they choose to welcome the currently unwelcome. What do you think? (*applause*)

I am proud this Fellowship welcomes and respects all people. I am proud our Unitarian Universalist Principles affirm our stance on sexual orientation and gender identity issues. And there is only one word that sums up our values: Love.

Love is the guiding spirit of this Fellowship and of all Unitarian Universalist congregations. Love is the shorthand for our highest value. Love and equality are the underlying values we inherited from our Unitarian and Universalist forbears.

Universalism gets its name from the idea of universal salvation, that God's love is so great all people will be saved and will join God in heaven. If God saves all people, then all people are equal in the eyes of God. Our 1st Principle leans most heavily on this theology. Whether you subscribe to this particular idea about God or not, universal love with or without God is what we value.

From our Unitarian forbears, love comes to us less from the heart, and more from the head. If God is one and, as our Transcendentalist Unitarians taught, God is in all things and available to all, then we are all one in divinity, too. Being one means total equality, no exceptions.

Each Sunday you join me in reciting our unison covenant. The first phrase says we are to be guided by the spirit of love. Love gets mentioned twice in these five short lines, along with respect, justice, hearts, peace, and harmony. Aren't these other words for love? You say it each week; I hope you believe what you say.

But just because we may believe it, doesn't make it any easier to follow. It, like our seven principles, is inspirational and aspirational. We aspire to live them daily, but often they are just words, not actions. Respecting and loving our enemies isn't easy. Watching what we say to those we disagree with isn't easy. But most things that are worthwhile aren't easy. In part, that's what makes them valuable. What comes cheap can easily be discarded.

Let's keep working at living out our principles in our own lives. And let's keep standing on the side of love for those among us who are marginalized. In fact, let's do it right now.

Think of this as an early Valentine's Day gift. Please turn and greet your neighbor by saying, "Hi. You are worthy." And for those who want to be really bold, say "I love you!" (*pause for greetings*) Thank you. I can feel our love.

I know I've preached to the choir today, but there is too much violence and hate beyond these walls and out in the world to be silent. We need more love. We need it for marriage equality, better race relations, immigration reform, reduced poverty and classism, among many other justice needs. Love is a spiritual journey that demands we continue acting with love and compassion in our community. Our Social Action Committee will continue to lead the way by offering us many opportunities for our engagement in justice work. There are two in your program insert. Please be generous and discuss the Interfaith Hospitality Network with Julie Sapp after the service. We are a partner with Holy Cross Lutheran to provide shelter for those without any. You can help.

Please, stand up for love. Your heart will feel the love and you will make the world a better place. May it be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Whom do you love and how do you know it is love? Describe this love.
2. Our covenant reading asks us 'to be guided by the spirit of love'. What does this mean to you?
3. In what ways, if any, do you offer love to your neighbors and enemies?