



Love is slow to lose patience; it looks for a way of being constructive. It is not possessive; it is neither anxious to impress, nor does it cherish inflated ideas of its own importance.

Love has good manners and does not pursue selfish advantage. It is not touchy. It does not keep an account of evil, or gloat over the wickedness of other people. On the contrary, it is glad with all good people when truth prevails.

Love knows no limit to its own endurance, no end to its trust, no fading of its hope; it can outlast anything. It is, in fact, the one thing that still stands when all else has fallen.

In this life, we have three great lasting qualities – faith in each other, hope, and love. But the greatest of them is love.

**Reading**                      “Logos” by Mary Oliver from *Why I Wake Early*

Why wonder about the loaves and the fishes?  
If you say the right words, the wine expands.  
If you say them with love  
and the felt ferocity of that love  
and the felt necessity of that love,  
the fish explode into the many.  
Imagine him, speaking,  
and don't worry about what is reality,  
or what is plain, or what is mysterious.  
If you were there, it was all those things.  
If you can imagine it, it was all those things.  
Eat, drink, be happy.  
Accept the miracle.  
Accept, too, each spoken word  
spoken with love.

## Sermon: “Love as a Response to Love”

I want to tell you a story.

A story you likely already know,  
but maybe not quite as well as you might think—or you might fear.

It’s an epic tale of love and lust, of violence and betrayal and war.  
A miraculous story of failure and faith, of endurance and hope.

Our story begins before there was anything,  
just lots of darkness hovering over the deep.

Our main character, who’s gone by many different names,  
some so holy they can’t even be uttered, tends to simply be called “God.”

Now, this God is a “creative type,”  
and so it wasn’t long before the dark became a boring place to be.

So, in no time, there was light to balance the darkness.

In short order, the heavens were created,  
and the seas and dry land were formed.

So far so good, God decided to spruce up the whole place  
with grasses, and herbs, and trees—  
and then made two really big, bright lights to hang in the sky—  
one for the day and one for the night.

As lovely as it all was, though, there was no one to call it home.  
So, before long, God saw to it that  
marvelous creatures began to stir in the seas,  
winged beasts took to the air,  
and animals of every sort began to creep and crawl and cavort on the land.

Yet, something was still missing.

And, that’s when God came up with the strangest of divine ideas:  
that people would be created and given dominion over it all.

Now, this is the point in the story where things started to come off the tracks. .

The first human, made from the earth itself, was called a man.  
But, before long, it seems, God began to have second thoughts  
and created a new and improved version as soon as it was possible.

So it was that Adam and Eve came to live in the Garden of Eden,  
with their every last need and want fully satisfied.

That is, apparently, with the exception of their burning sense of curiosity.

For Satan, God's arch-enemy in this story,  
was none too pleased with how things were going,  
and decided to tempt the naïve and hungry humans  
into testing the one clear boundary God had put before them.

As that great theological bumper sticker sums it up: "Eve was framed."  
Maybe so.

Either way, as the story goes,  
Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge,  
and in no time, were shown a one-way door leading directly out of paradise.

Suddenly, on the other side, they found life to be a great deal harder.  
Their needs weren't so readily met.  
A life of struggle, and labour, and pain was all that was before them now.

In time, they started a family.  
But, unfortunately, one of their sons killed the other,  
and things pretty much went downhill from there.

The family would go on to populate their own corner of the earth,  
but with each generation growing more depraved  
than the one that went before it.

Eventually, ten generations on, God had had enough  
and decided to flood the earth,  
wiping out all the people and the creatures of the world.

God did manage, however, to suggest to an honourable man named Noah

that he just might want to build a big boat to save his family,  
and take souvenir samples from every species on the earth.

(As a kid, I seriously thought for a time that there simply hadn't been enough  
room on the ark for the dinosaurs and unicorns. . .)

So, with the reset button pushed, the flood waters subsided,  
a rainbow appeared in the sky,  
and God's rocky relationship with humanity began anew—  
with no hard feelings.

After another ten generations, when things seemed to be going a lot better,  
God decided to invest some energy in Abraham and Sarah,  
telling them that they would someday be the parents  
of more descendents than there are stars in the sky.

This was a ludicrous notion given they were already well on in years  
and had never had a child.

So ludicrous that all Sarah could do was laugh at the thought.

Eventually, though, she gave birth to a son named Issac.

Issac would go on to marry Rebecca,  
who would give birth to their quarreling twins Jacob and Essau.

And, Jacob, after wrestling with an angel and being renamed Israel,  
would go on to have a son named Joseph,  
the same Joseph who, as a youth, was sold into slavery by his brothers,  
and who would go on to work in the palace of the Egyptian pharaoh.

(And the same Joseph who would later headline Andrew Lloyd Webber's  
musical about an "amazing technicolour dreamcoat.")

Eventually, trying to flee a famine in their homeland,  
Joseph's whole family ends up enslaved in the land of Egypt.

And, there they stayed—for four hundred years.  
Their numbers grew so large that the pharaoh feared a revolt.

When the pharaoh ordered all the Israelites' newborns to be killed,

the mother of one infant, who would be called Moses,  
saved his life by placing him in a basket  
and hiding him among the reeds in the river.

He was soon found and later adopted, conveniently enough,  
into the Egyptian royal family.

As a young man, though, he had to flee for his life  
after killing an Egyptian slave master.

But, as so often happens, and can, because,  
hey, this is the Bible and this is a good story,  
Moses runs right smack into God—  
who gets his full attention with a dazzling burning bush.

Out of the fiery shrub, God tells Moses to go back to the pharaoh  
and to ask for the Israelites' freedom.

So, off he went, back to Egypt.  
But, his best, "Let my people go," was met with a resounding "no."

So, then God quickly unleashed a series of nasty, but persuasive plagues  
on the land: frogs and gnats, hail and pestilence, boils and locusts.

But, even with all of these special effects,  
the pharaoh wouldn't budge.  
His heart, it's said, was hardened.

Only after the death of all the first-born children of Egypt  
did the pharaoh decide that it had come time for the Israelites to go.

And, go they did. Fleeing, before even their bread could rise,  
they made their way straight back toward the land of Canaan,  
through the Red Sea—which was miraculously held back  
leaving a clear and dry path for their escape.

On the other side of freedom, though,  
lay forty long years of wandering through the desert.

Forty years of longing for a better life, and, at times,  
pining for all the creature comforts they'd known

back in the blissful days when they'd been slaves.

Now, needless to say, Moses had his hands full.  
The people were restless.

At Mt. Sinai, Moses climbed the mountain, probably to get away,  
and, after forty days, came down with the Ten Commandments.

Forty days, though, is a long time and things had gotten out of hand.  
The people were partying and having a wonderful time,  
making new gods for themselves, and even a great Golden Calf.

When he saw this, Moses, in a fit of rage, smashed the stone tablets  
and then had to climb to mountain again to ask God for a second pair.

(I can only imagine how that conversation went. . .)

In time, though, he made it back down, his face all aglow,  
and the Israelites embraced the commandments  
and fully entered into a covenant with their God.

Though Moses didn't make it there himself,  
in time, the Israelites entered into their Promised Land.

Over succeeding generations, new leaders came and went  
as they settled the land, built up their kingdom,  
and, under the direction of Solomon,  
erected a massive temple in Jerusalem.

Not all was well, though. The Jews were often at war with their neighbours.

In the sixth century BCE, the first temple was destroyed by the Babylonians,  
and the Jews scattered for generations in exile.

Almost a century after the first one was razed,  
a second temple was built to serve as the centre of Jewish religious life.

In and around all of this, from the time they were led out of bondage  
to the building of the temples and beyond,  
prophet after prophet—Elijah, Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos and so on—  
rose up to call the Jewish people back, when they strayed,

into covenant with their God,  
back to the path grounded in justice and mercy.

That relentless call echoes down to us today  
in those enduring words from the Prophet Micah, who wondered:  
“What does the Eternal ask from us  
but to be just and kind and live in quiet fellowship with our God.”<sup>1</sup>

Seven centuries later, when factions of Jews were wrestling with that enduring question, Jesus was asked at a gathering of Saducees and Pharisees, “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?”

He said, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’”<sup>2</sup>

This was not new news.

Jesus was harkening back to *The Book of Leviticus*, which says the same thing.

It’s often said that Jesus offered a reform of Judaism in pointing out that our neighbours aren’t necessarily, or only, the people who live next door.

But, even that, was spelled out in that same chapter from *Leviticus*.

“When a foreigner resides among you in your land, [it says] do not mistreat them. . . Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt.”

I’ve always loved that last reminder—don’t forget that you, too, were once “strangers in a strange land.”

I’m struck by how relevant, some 4,000 years later, this guiding wisdom, this law of reciprocity, continues to be.

It is an ethic of fairness—an early articulation of The Golden Rule.

But, what speaks most powerfully to me is how this sacred rule

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<sup>1</sup> Micah 6:8.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 22:36-39.

is grounded in our shared human vulnerability—  
in our ultimate interdependence.

That is what I most admire about the Jewish tradition.

And what I find most inspiring about the early movement  
that sprung from the life of Jesus, was that people were inspired  
to create communities in which they might work to make this sacred rule  
the centre of their lives.

At the time Jesus lived, there were competing visions  
of what the Jewish faith meant, of what it required  
and what it should become.

The vision Jesus offered was one among many at the time.

And, indeed, after his death, in the first three centuries of the Common Era,  
there was not one unified church  
or an agreed understanding of what his life and ministry had meant.

In those first three centuries, there were many different Jesus movements,  
There was no single Christianity, but, rather, several Christianities.

In the fourth century, as this diversity of Christianities was profoundly  
transformed by the organisational force of the Roman Empire,  
much of that vision of justice and mercy,  
of love to neighbour and stranger alike, was diminished.

In time, Christian theology took a turn toward the idea  
that humans are born in original sin,  
and in desperate need of the atoning and sacrificial death of Jesus.

There were several heretical voices that argued against this as the many  
Christianities of the first three centuries were morphed and coerced into a  
more unified and orthodox Christianity.

Over a thousand years later, our religious ancestors  
joined those silenced, heretical voices during the Reformation.

And, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, our Unitarian and our Universalists forebears  
rejected these ideas, believing that people were not born broken

or in need of Jesus' or anyone else's atoning death.

These people looked to Jesus not as a god and not as a saviour,  
but as an example—and example of a life lived with divine integrity,  
even in the face of torture and death.

Here in the middle of this series of sermons on the six sources of Unitarian  
Universalism, we honour today our fourth source:

“Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love  
by loving our neighbours as ourselves.”

This is easily our most controversial source.

While our other sources, such as the insights of humanism and science  
or earth-based traditions might cause those beyond our doors  
to deeply question just what we're up to,  
it is this source about Jewish and Christian teachings  
which seems to raise the consternation of many within our walls.

That profoundly saddens me.

It saddens me because I know that many of the 90% of us who come to this  
faith from other traditions bring with us unresolved pain.

It saddens me because it disregards our actual history—  
you can't choose your parents, after all,  
and, for better or for worse, our parents are Jewish and Christian.

And, it saddens me most all  
that the layers of harmful and hurtful history in these two great faiths  
have so often obscured or outright undermined  
the wisdom and beauty that lives at their very heart.

The message at the heart of what Jesus taught,  
at the heart of the Judaism he was so deeply much a part of,  
was a message of love and justice and mercy.

It was a message not as focused on some world to come,  
as it was on the power of creating beloved community in the here and now.

Early Christian communities, at their best,

were about the work of recognising the promise of paradise in this present moment.

When asked when the reign of God would appear, Jesus said that it couldn't be found by looking for outward signs—either here or there—because, he said, the dominion of God “is within you.”<sup>3</sup>

Heaven was already—is already—here.

So much of that was forgotten for too long over much of Christian history.

In its place has been an obsession with human sin and a misguided hope in Jesus' salvific suffering on a cross.

One of the most important things I've learned recently is that there seem to be no depictions of Jesus' crucifixion or his dead body until the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

“It [essentially] took Jesus a thousand years to die.”<sup>4</sup>

In the earliest church frescoes and drawings in caverns and catacombs are found, instead, depictions of paradise, of community, of shared meals, symbols of resurrection, and when Jesus is shown, he is alive and well.

As you've heard me quote before, I'm with Theodore Parker who said he was more interested in the religion *of* Jesus rather than the religion *about* Jesus.

This epic story began so long ago in a garden, in a corner of paradise, is ultimately a human story—and a central part of our story as Unitarian Universalists.

May we, inspired by the teachings that gave birth to our tradition, begin to reclaim and rebuild that vision of paradise, that it might take hold within our hearts and change the world around us.

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 17:21.

<sup>4</sup> Rebecca Ann Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock, Prologue from *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of this World for Crucifixion and Empire*.

For our world needs to be reminded now more than ever that we do, indeed, already live in the garden.

Amen.