

Who is Your Neighbor?

Alex Jensen - July 7th, 2019 at Mission Peak UU Congregation in Fremont, CA

Good morning! It is such a pleasure to be returning to Mission Peak and preaching here this morning! This congregation was my first spiritual home back in junior high school, where I fell head over heels in love with Unitarian Universalism due to this amazing community. I have this special community to thank for all of the love and support it's given me.

I'd like to start this sermon off in a very atypical Unitarian Universalist fashion, if you'll humor me. *We're going to start with a reading from the New Testament!* I'm joking, only kind of! I'll spare you reading the entire passage and instead give you a SparkNotes version. Some of you may be familiar with this story:

A lawyer stands up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he says, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus replies, "What is written in the law?" The lawyer responds, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." Approvingly, Jesus says to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." Dissatisfied with this answer, the lawyer presses Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus speaks to him in the following parable:

"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.'

Jesus asks the lawyer, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The lawyer finds the answer obvious. "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus then says to him, "Go and do likewise¹."

One of our many rich and powerful sources in Unitarian Universalism is Christianity, particularly drawing from our Unitarian and Universalist Christian roots. In this passage, we experience a theologically rich moment in Jesus' teachings. We are taught to help others in times of need. This is how, Jesus says, we show one another true mercy.

This parable is one of the most well-known of Jesus' parables. It is cited everywhere; you might've heard of "Good Samaritan laws". I was fifteen or so when I first heard about Good Samaritan laws. A brand-new Scout, I joined the BSA my

¹ Lk 10:25-37, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

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freshman year of high school. Part of the “Scout Oath” involves the words (*make Scout sign*) “On my honor I will do my best to...help other people at all times²”. I was deeply struck by this oath I made as a teenager. As an Eagle Scout, it became my life’s commitment to look for ways to serve others at all times. In providing first aid in emergency situations, we talked about how Scouts are protected by Good Samaritan laws in offering aid to those who need it. It became our calling as Scouts to examine our lives for opportunities to be of service to others. We were charged with helping *all people*, not only *some*.

I was a Scout at a critical moment in Scouting. As a gay person, I know firsthand my experience in Scouting as a queer Scout. I wasn’t welcomed to bring my full self into the program. Although I wasn’t “out” at the time, I felt a sense of conflict in my identities as a queer person and a Unitarian Universalist. The UUA had cut ties with the BSA over its exclusion of queer and atheist Scouts and leaders.

Scouting and faith appeared to me pitted against one another. On one side, I understood Scouting’s radical call to action to “help other people at all times³”. On the other side, I witnessed the power in Unitarian Universalism’s Seven Principles: to foster justice, equity, and compassion in our relationships with one another, to understand just how interconnected we all are with the web of life, and a prophetic affirmation of each person’s inherent worth and dignity simply by virtue of being human⁴. Between these calls I experienced the exclusion of my full self, fearing at times I could be kicked from the program. I carried deep anxiety in this circumstance. I found myself asking the very same question of the lawyer in the passage: *And who is my neighbor⁵? Who can I be unapologetically myself around? Who will love and accept me in all of who I am?*

I remember feeling stuck in a difficult position. I was a queer UU Eagle Scout. Part of me continues to see how these identities aren’t all that mutually exclusive. Involved in advocating for LGBTQ+ rights as a high schooler, I wore an unofficial “rainbow knot⁶” protest patch on my uniform to signify to other Scouts that I was a safe person to talk to within the organization; *that I wouldn’t “out” someone to leadership if someone came out to me*. I also managed to earn an unofficial UU religious emblem through an outside UU organization that maintained a relationship and connection with the BSA. This helped me to understand the kinship of values between Unitarian Universalism and Scouting. Both of these organizations were

² "What Are the Scout Oath and Scout Law?" Scouting. 2019. Accessed May 06, 2019. <https://www.scouting.org/discover/faq/question10/>.

³ "What Are the Scout Oath and Scout Law?" Scouting. 2019. <https://www.scouting.org/discover/faq/question10/>.

⁴ Gage, Emily. "2nd Principle: Justice, Equity and Compassion in Human Relations." UUA.org. February 24, 2016. Accessed May 07, 2019. <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles/2nd>.

⁵ Lk 10:29.

⁶ "Inclusive Scouting Award." Scouts for Equality. Accessed May 06, 2019. <https://www.scoutsforequality.org/isa/>.

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concerned with this question of “who is my neighbor⁷?”. Each of these hoped to build a world in which we could radically and unapologetically show up for one another in times of need. Since the time I was a Scout, the BSA has lifted its bans on queer Scouts and Scout leaders⁸. Yet, what remains in tension is this exclusion of atheist scouts and scout leaders.

So what does this have to do with the Parable of the Good Samaritan? One of the lesser known themes in this story is what Jesus teaches us about interfaith acceptance. This morning we’ll look at this parable for what it might mean to us, as Unitarian Universalists who seek truth and meaning across many faiths and traditions⁹. It is an opportunity for us to reclaim a liberal Christian message of love, liberation, and Beloved Community. It is a prophetic call for us to build the world we wish to see. A world in which we love the Divine through loving our neighbors as ourselves, fully inclusive of different creeds, faiths, traditions, and identities.

In the passage, Jesus speaks about what is written in the law, the collections of laws of the ancient Israelites. He speaks directly to a lawyer about what it means to truly be someone’s neighbor and offer mercy in fulfilling the law. The lawyer parrots to Jesus what is written: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself¹⁰”. At the core of this teaching is the central question the lawyer asks Jesus in response: “*And who is my neighbor¹¹?*”.

Dr. John Dominic Crossan, an emeritus professor of New Testament from DePaul University and former Catholic priest, discusses the significance of Jesus’ intentional inclusion of the Samaritan man in this story. He breaks it down in terms of the first problem we encounter with this parable. *It’s too cliché.*

“‘Good Samaritan’ for us,” he writes, “is a cliché, but for the people who would have heard it if they heard that expression, Jewish people talking about a Good Samaritan, that would be a little bit more of an oxymoron...It’s important in this story, the priest and the Levite are the good guys...But what happens...when the ‘good guys’ don’t do what they should and the ‘bad guy’ does good. What happens to your world, to the security of your prejudices, your presuppositions, your prejudices...? They are all challenged¹².” (*pause.*)

⁷ Lk 10:29.

⁸ Lee, Kurtis. "Here Is How the Boy Scouts Has Evolved on Social Issues over the Years." *LA Times*, February 5, 2017. Accessed May 6, 2019. <https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-boy-scouts-evolution-2017-story.html>.

⁹ Getty, Paige. "4th Principle: A Free and Responsible Search for Truth and Meaning." UUA.org. February 24, 2016. Accessed May 06, 2019. <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles/4th>.

¹⁰ Lk 10:27.

¹¹ Lk 10:29.

¹² Crossan, John D. "The Parable of the Good Samaritan by John Dominic Crossan." *The Parable of the Good Samaritan*. 2018. Accessed May 06, 2019. <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/tools/video-gallery/p/parable-of-the-good-samaritan-crossan>.

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The emphasis on the Samaritan's religious identity is essential here. In Jesus' words, a priest and a Levite—both of whom are fellow Jews to the robbed and injured man on the road—pass the wounded man and avoid offering help. It is a Samaritan—a man who belongs to faith tradition and ethnic group so traditionally and culturally at odds with Jewish persons¹³—who stops to offer help.

Jesus is challenging us with something radical here. Your neighbor isn't only the person who thinks, believes, speaks, prays, or looks like you. In fact, it may be someone who is the opposite. *Your neighbor is especially someone who is different than you.*

This past year, I've served as a chaplain at the Unitarian Universalist Urban Ministry in Roxbury, Massachusetts. Roxbury is known as a predominantly low-income community with a majority of people of color. The Urban Ministry provides several different services. In my case, I served as a chaplain for the Believe in Success program, which provides career development and other support for women who are survivors of domestic violence.

Part of our programming at the Urban Ministry includes running an interfaith family shelter for survivors of domestic violence. Renewal House is an incredibly special community that I was asked to visit this past summer as a chaplain. Two weeks ago, I visited Renewal House for the first time. Walking in, I was met by a couple of kids who took to me immediately. I know how to be popular with kids: *I had a build-your-own-sundae bar on my first day!* The kids laughed, squirted whipped cream, and smeared melted hot fudge everywhere. Although it was a huge mess, this moment taught me something special. I was able to connect with the youth in the Roxbury community where I work. This was a chance for me to build connections with people through my role as a chaplain. I felt like I was truly meeting my neighbors in this community for the first time.

I used this as an opportunity to reflect on my identities as an aspiring Unitarian Universalist minister. I'm a white, cisgender able-bodied male walking into a space that views me with apprehension and skepticism. *And who could blame them? (pause.)* People who look like me have caused lots of harm to some survivors. What is most touching is the trust and grace that survivors have given me in working with them. I've further understood my sense of calling through this challenging ministry, where even through so much pain, anger, shame, and anguish, new connections with neighbors are still possible.

Mr. Rogers, from our Time for All Ages this morning, also has something to teach us about being a neighbor to those who are different from ourselves. Megan discussed "National Good Neighbor Day" and "Be a Good Neighbor Day" as

¹³ Zangenberg, Jürgen K. "The Samaritans." The Samaritans. 2018. Accessed May 06, 2019. <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/people/related-articles/samaritans>.

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opportunities for showing courageous love to one another in our communities. Our centering words this morning reflect a core tension with loving our neighbors as ourselves: “Love isn't a state of perfect caring. It is an active noun like 'struggle.' To love someone is to strive to accept that person exactly the way he or she is, right here and now—and to go on caring even through times that may bring us pain.”

So, let's return to the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Rev. Scotty McLennan, a Unitarian Universalist minister and former Dean for Religious Life at Stanford and University Chaplain at Tufts, speaks to the significance of this parable for Unitarian Universalists in his book *Christ for Unitarian Universalists*. He writes, “It is stingy, small-minded, and self-centered to use the supposed uniqueness of Jesus Christ to exclude the stranger of another faith or deny the value of another faith. Also, it is not what Jesus taught. After all, Jesus turned to a hated foreigner outside of his own religious tradition, a Samaritan, to describe the essence of how to be loving, which he called the greatest commandment¹⁴.”

Jesus is teaching us that we can be neighbors to one another even when we don't share the same faith. This is nothing new to us Unitarian Universalists. We've found that we can hold all of us in community together—those of us who are atheist, those of us who call ourselves Buddhist, agnostic, Muslim, Humanist; those who freely follow Jesus; others who are still searching. However, our work isn't finished.

“Samaritan” is also a racial identity, not simply a religious one. We could take a lesson from our lawyer in this parable in asking, “And who is my neighbor¹⁵?”. In our pursuit of building the Beloved Community, we envision Unitarian Universalism as a dynamic, multicultural faith that can embrace all of us. From my colleagues of color, there remains a call for more work to be done. In the anthology *Centering*, religious professionals of color share their experiences of how Unitarian Universalism has failed as a movement at times to embrace all of themselves.

Reflecting on the words of the Rev. Darrick Jackson, Unitarian Universalist communities try really hard to center issues affecting communities of color. In one of Jackson's reflections, his church holds a vigil after the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. In their attempt to center these experiences and pain, however, his community fails. Instead of centering the pain of those in Ferguson, the community centers their own whiteness. Jackson speaks to how white Unitarian Universalists perceive issues from a distance. In our churches we too often see them as issues that affect others, not ourselves. Like the Levite and the priest in the parable, we pass by unspoken pain and leave those who are hurting to bind up their sore wounds themselves. Jackson found no space to name his pain within community. In his words, “I did not need a sympathetic ear; I needed someone who

¹⁴ McLennan, Scotty, and Harvey Cox. *Christ for Unitarian Universalists: A New Dialogue with Traditional Christianity*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2016, 57.

¹⁵ Lk 10:29.

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could understand my pain and could help me find solace in our UU faith. But that was work I had to do on my own¹⁶.” Jackson needed neighbors to hold him in the midst of his sorrow. He needed Beloved Community.

As Unitarian Universalists, we must be continually asking ourselves “*Who is our neighbor? Who is present with us this morning? Who still needs to be welcomed to the table?*” We are called to the work of decentering whiteness and building a Beloved Community in which we are all held. In which every one of us stops like the Samaritan to help one another when we are in need. In which a queer Scout and teenager can find refuge and a spiritual home in a faith that has room in it to hold all of who they are. We can co-create sanctuary together in which each one of us feels affirmed in our complex selves. Imagine a transformative, multicultural Unitarian Universalism that fully includes people of color and people of other marginalized identities. Imagine what a richness that would bring to our tradition of many sources. Imagine the home and sanctuary we could hold for one another.

(raise hands.) My charge to you all is to ask yourself this question: “Who is my neighbor?”. May you find the courage to look inwardly at your own instances of when you’ve both succeeded and failed to be someone’s neighbor. May you strive to help other people at all times, especially those who are different from you. May you live up to Jesus’ call for us to love one another as ourselves and do the difficult work of justice. May we continue to dismantle white supremacy and work toward decentering whiteness in order to build the Beloved Community we dream of, right here on earth.

May it be so. Amen.

¹⁶ Rahnema, Mitra, and Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association. *Centering: Navigating Race, Authenticity, and Power in Ministry*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2017, 1.