

“The Heart of Ministry”
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First UU Church of Wakefield, MA

The focus of today’s Association Sunday service is shared ministry. Unitarian Universalist congregations all over the country are worshipping and tackling issues around ministry. Today I am wearing a couple of different hats, and I want to name that at the top of this sermon. I grew up in this congregation. You helped to form me as a person and a minister. My personal theology is informed by this Sunday School that I went to as a student and taught in as a young adult. I learned to read music with my grandmother in these pews. This congregation ordained me to the Unitarian Universalist ministry with Old Ship Church in Hingham. One hat I wear is as a member of this church. I am also a minister, which is another hat I wear, however, I am not the minister of this congregation. On a Sunday focused on shared ministry, I offer this sermon as a member of our congregation and as a minister of our shared faith.

In shared ministry, we are all part of the ministries of the church. We have different responsibilities, perspectives and accountability. We are part of the whole. My message today is about the Heart of Ministry and I am not going to be coy. This is today’s message. The Heart of Ministry is Love *and* the heart of Unitarian Universalism is Love.

We are going to look to the Apostle Paul for help in talking about ministry and love. I bet you didn’t plan on that today did you? We often ignore Paul because of the stance on women in the church described in many of his letters, but I think unjustly. Many of the epistles attributed to Paul that we find theologically distasteful are generally agreed to have not been written by the historical Paul. The actual Pauline letters are some of the oldest writing in the New Testament, and in seminary, once I got over my hesitancy, I found his ideas to be exciting. Paul wrote at a time in the history of Christianity when the message of the early church was opening up to include all people. Paul was called to shape the Christian message to speak to different communities and to talk about a radical welcome to the faith. There is a lot we can learn from Paul.

The Bible passage we heard earlier was 1Corinthians 13. How many of you have heard it read at a wedding? How many of you had that read at your own wedding? Okay. What is that passage from Paul about? It is about Love, and *MINISTRY*. For any romantics in the room, I am sorry to tell you that it is not about romantic love at all. In Paul’s context it is about love of Christ and the risen Christ’s love for humanity. We are Unitarian Universalists, heretics who separated from the mainline Christian church over issues with the resurrection and the Trinity. So, let’s not get bogged down in that today and look at this passage a little more literally and from our perspective. In verse 8, Paul writes, “Love never ends. But as for prophecies they will come to an end.” Paul then goes through the temporal things that come to an end. In this letter to the Corinthians Paul was pointing to love, and particularly to Christ as the force at work in the world and in human hearts that will not die. From a Unitarian Universalist perspective, this image of what is eternal in our experience would not be an eternal Christ, but rather the spirit of life and love in the universe, the ineffable that we can never fully know, God, Goddess, a force that draws us toward relationship, the power of relationship to enact change, or simply love itself. At the end of this chapter Paul states, “Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I

have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” We can interpret this from our postmodern social location to say, through love, we know and are known. As we achieve more perfect love, we know ourselves and each other more fully. This knowing is ministry. According to Paul, knowledge, faith, and hope, without love are nothing. Love is the key to relationship and therefore faith and hope as well. The heart of ministry is love...a big expansive, unconditional kind of love that draws us into community and relationship.

In the covenant we speak together each week, Love is in the first line. “Love is the Doctrine of this Church.” We stand on the side of love against those who would use the faiths of our heritage for exclusion and hate. Unitarian Universalism is based in Love. We have no creed, but a call for all of us to be in community with an open door and welcome, to love one another and this good creation.

James Luther Adams, the great Unitarian theologian, wrote an essay in 1953 titled, “The Love of God.” In this essay, Adams examines the nature of God. This work is important to understanding shared ministry, because it explores the very foundations of our faith and why it is that we are together in community. Adams believed that the properties and ideals historically ascribed to God, were not necessarily the true nature of God. To love God, he suggested, we may have to reject these old understandings and come to new ones, offering a deconstruction of the nature of God. In his essay, James Luther Adams states, “The love of God, then, is the giving of oneself to the power that holds the world together and that, when we are tearing it apart, persuades us to come to ourselves and start on new beginnings.”¹ Adam’s theological reflections have helped Unitarian Universalists better articulate our theologies and leads me to say that the heart of our faith and ministry is Love. Love draws us into and supports relationship, and helps us to build beloved community through shared ministries. “The love of God, then, is the giving of oneself to the power that holds the world together and that, when we are tearing it apart, persuades us to come to ourselves and start on new beginnings.”²

It is our shared ministry, to do the work of repairing the world, as our Jewish neighbors would say, Tikkun Olam. As a denomination we have professional ministers, who help, guide, challenge, and comfort us, who love us. We also *all* have ministries. We have ministries as congregations. What is the ministry of this congregation? How do we work to repair the world together? How do we minister? Ministers describe what brought them to ministry and their understanding of their mission as a minister as their call. What is the call of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Wakefield? I know that the congregation is working on these types of questions right now, and I invite us to consider, how we as a congregation love one another and the world. How do we share this love?

We support love and build community through the shared ministries of the church. Some of these are religious education, pastoral care, worship, spiritual practices, theological development, and our work for justice, generosity, and *evangelism*. What does it mean to share these ministries? It means that our various gifts and talents will be focused in different areas based on our calls and abilities. It means we can understand the big picture of the ministry of the church, without being involved with all aspects of that ministry. Traditionally in congregations, it is the

¹ “The Love of God”, James Luther Adams, *On Being Human Religiously*, p.96

² Ibid 96

role of the professional minister, with lay leaders, to hold and support the vision of the congregation of their shared ministries. In this congregation today, while we are in search for a consulting minister, our lay leaders are holding this big picture.

How do we know what our call is? How do we as a small congregation minister to the community outside our walls? These are questions that I am sure have been rattling around this congregation for years. I think that I remember them from when I was a child. Remember Paul's words? "Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." The way we discern our call is with love. To love one another we must listen to each other, talk about our ideas, feelings, and beliefs. We must LISTEN and learn from one another. We must engage with the reasons why we are together as a congregation. We are a church. We worship, which in its word root means to lift up things of worth. We encounter the holy together. We care for one another, and we try to fix a broken world. My prayer for us as a congregation is that we will continue to wrestle with our call, that we will discern and name our ministries, and then to fully engage with them. We have gifts to offer a broken world. We have a message of inclusion and radical welcome. We have a faith based in love and community.

My prayer for this congregation is that we will honor the work we do in community by understanding it as a ministry, as an act of love to help repair the world. In shared ministry, we honor our gifts and the gifts of our community. Through love, we know and are known. As we achieve more perfect love, we know ourselves and each other more fully. In shared ministry, we are all part of the ministries of the church. We have different responsibilities, perspectives and accountability. We are part of the whole. My message today is about the Heart of Ministry and I am not going to be coy. This is today's message. The Heart of Ministry is Love *and* the heart of Unitarian Universalism is Love. Mary Oliver, the amazing poet, offers this brief poem in her new collection, which I will close the sermon with today.

So every day

I was surrounded by the beautiful crying forth

of the ideas of God,

one of which was you.³

May it be so.

Amen.

³ "So Every Day" Mary Oliver, *Red Bird*, 2008.