

“Grappling with Suffering”
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Wakefield UU Church

Reading:

James Luther Adams – “The Love of God” written in 1953.

There are many kinds of faith that may be dispensed with. But there remains one kind which no one can live without. We do not need to use the word “faith” to refer to it. The word “confidence” will serve just as well. No one and no culture can for long maintain a dynamic and creative attitude toward life without the confidence that human life has some important meaning either actual or potential, and that this meaning may in some tolerable fashion be maintained or achieved, in other words, that resources are available for the fulfillment of this meaning.

Sermon:

Last spring I went to a nursing home in Hingham, MA to meet with a parishioner from Old Ship Church. On my way into the room, I realized that she had a new roommate, so I stopped and said hello on my way in. Instead of a standard greeting she had an emotional eruption. This woman was experiencing a time of acute suffering. She had moved to this nursing home a fair distance from where she lived most of her life, her sister has just died, and she had suffered other great losses in her family. She told me about her losses, about feeling unheard by the staff of the nursing home, and her sadness. I sat with her for a while and listened. I realized how hard it must be to be so far from her community, and hope that none of us ever have to experience that loneliness.

Today I invite us to engage with suffering. Why is there suffering and what is our response as Unitarian Universalists? As Unitarian Universalists, we have no creed or particular theological stand on suffering. Christians and Jews have struggled with issues of suffering and its relationship to the will and power of God as long as there have been Christians and Jews. After the hell on earth that was World War II, more people than ever struggled to understand suffering, the human capacity for turning away from suffering, and the role of God in suffering. The fancy theological word for this struggle is theodicy, or seeking to understand how an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving God can be reconciled with the fact that there is suffering. In response to these issues around theodicy, there were many Christian heresies that suggested that perhaps God is not all-powerful, this is part of Process theology. There were groups that suggested that God does not exist at all, and there were Unitarians and Universalists. In the twentieth century, among the movements exploring the nature of God and its relationship to suffering were the Universalists, who moved from a liberal Christian position of declaring universal salvation, to a religious community seeking the universal aspects of world religions. They sought a glowing coal at the center of the human experience that could solve some of these theological mysteries.

James Luther Adams, one of our most pre-eminent twentieth century Unitarian theologians wrote an essay in 1953, titled, “The Love of God”, which explored the theodicy question, how human

beings are with each other in the world, and how to describe these relationships. He states, “Humans are made for relationship, and we are of all creatures, the most miserable without it.”¹ In our reading this morning, Adams explained,

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So to explain that in non-1953, theologians speak, in order for us to move forward with any meaning, we need to make the leap of faith that moving forward is worth doing. That life has a meaning that we can work to enrich and support. I would describe this as a force of love in the world, be it transcendent, or among people, that holds us in community. Under the umbrella of Unitarian Universalist theological discourse, there are theists, atheists, mystics and as many understandings of the meaning of life as there are people in our churches and fellowships. Our search for meaning holds us together.

If we agree there is meaning in our existence, and some kind of inherent purpose, what do Unitarian Universalists offer to those in the midst of suffering? Adams comes to the point that many liberal Christians do, which is that we reconcile the concept of that which we find meaningful with suffering and injustice in world, by living a life that seeks justice. Adams states, “What is at stake is the creation of a world in which this kind of love of God becomes incarnate in a more just and free society.”³

We have learned a lot as a denomination from Buddhism, whose basic theological tenets, the Four Noble Truths relate to suffering. One story of the Buddha’s life is that he was sheltered through his childhood as a wealthy prince. When he became an adult and married, he ventured outside his palace walls for the first time. He encountered sickness, aging, and death. He saw the poor suffering outside the walls of his palace and had to come to an understanding of the meaning of this suffering and why it was happening. His learning and enlightenment led to the teaching of the Four Noble Truths. The first of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism is “there is suffering”, sometimes translated as “all is suffering”, or “every being suffers”. The other truths are that suffering comes from attachment, that there is a way out of suffering, and that this way is the Eight Fold Path.

Neither our purposes and principles, nor our covenant are as explicit about suffering as the four noble truths in Buddhism. Our experience, which while often wonderful and filled with miracle, is mired in human institutions that allow and sometimes encourage suffering for humans, and all of creation. Our purposes, principles and sources do not mention the word suffering, but the goal of alleviating personal and systemic suffering is implied. Our principles point toward changing

¹ James Luther Adams, “The Love of God” in *on being human religiously*, 1976, p.94

² Ibid, pg. 91.

³ Ibid 99.

social and political systems to respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person, to freedom, peace, and world community. This is further explored in our sources, including language calling us to move “to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life” and to “confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.” Our congregational covenant calls us to serve humanity in fellowship. Through our covenants as congregations and as a denomination, we have promised each other that we will grapple with suffering in community, at the individual and the institutional level. We gather together because we believe it is worthwhile to do so, seeking what James Luther Adams describes as “sacred, sovereign, and reliable”⁴, what I call love in community.

With the suffering that has been happening in Gaza and Israel this week, with the incidents of violence against black men last week in California, Texas, and Louisiana, the riots in Oakland, flooding in Washington, and the people that are suffering around the world because of economic issues, this is a moment for us to talk about corporate suffering, and the relationship of power with suffering. We believe it is possible for people to live together in a beloved community. We seek a world community not supported on the suffering of others, but honoring the inherent worth and dignity of each person and creation. We are not there now. Our religious and community identity is in large part based on making changes in systems of oppression that hurt all of us. We need to change systems where people have power over others, to systems of power with each other.

Most of us here this morning may choose whether or not to engage with issues of power. We may have privilege through our class, race, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, or ability. Some do not have that choice. Yet, we all suffer in the systems that power and privilege have wrought. Consider the woman in the nursing home from the beginning of this sermon. In many ways, she experiences the fruit of her privilege. She is cared for, safe, and visited by her daughter. She suffers in her loss of family and freedom. She feels ignored by people who she thinks should be treating her with greater authority, in particular the minority nurses and aids who work on her floor. She sees herself as a person without privilege or power, yet it is clear to me that much of her suffering is in her adjustment to being a person with less privilege and power than she had in the past. What would her experience be like, if she were able to see the suffering of the people working with her? What if she realized her power to add to the suffering of people working with her or to alleviate it? What if she could let go of her attachment to power over other people?

We all suffer. Suffering can send us into a spiral where we cannot see outside of our experience. Where we see only ourselves, our story, and miss what is happening to our neighbor. This is how injustice and human rights atrocities can begin, by attacking people who are stuck in a spiral of suffering, disconnected from those who might speak for them. Power and suffering are bound together. Even suffering that comes from seemingly random acts of nature or chance, can impact those without power differently than those with power. Consider Hurricane Katrina. All who lost loved ones and homes suffered deeply. Those with power and access to resources were able to recover much more quickly and with greater success than those without power. Power and suffering are bound together in systems of oppression. As the Buddha observed, there is

⁴ Ibid, 92.

suffering in the cycle of life, in sickness, aging and dying, and in our attachment to our expectations for how our lives should unfold. Suffering is compounded for those who are powerless. We are called to do all we can to tread lightly on the earth and to stand up for the oppressed. There is suffering, and there is joy, and hope, and love. Every human being deserves the opportunity to freely experience pain, joy, and *life*.

What do Unitarian Universalists offer to those in the midst of suffering? In religious community, we travel together through suffering. We hold each others hands, we deliver casseroles, we stand in vigil, and we remind each other that there is a sacred, sovereign, and reliable force in this world. We may not agree on how to name it, but we agree that it is worth fighting for. Unitarian Universalists respond to suffering by trusting that it is worth trying to make meaning out of our lives. Suffering is often a symptom of power used inappropriately, and sometimes happens with no apparent cause or reason. It is a part of the human experience. We seek to change systems of oppression. We seek the world described in our principles and covenant. We seek to hold the hands of those in the midst of suffering and to let them know they are not alone. There is suffering. We respond to it with love and compassion.

So may it be.