

Why I Am a Unitarian Universalist
a sermon delivered by Rev. Rebecca F. Benner
at the Accotink Unitarian Universalist Church
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READING

from *A Chosen Faith*, from the introduction by Forrest Church

For most of us, our faith did not choose us, we chose it. Born Catholic, Jewish, Protestant, Muslim, or into a secular or “Mixed” household, when it came time for us to affiliate with a religious institution we sought one that fit our own thinking, not one that imposed its thinking on us. This is even true for individuals born into Unitarian Universalist families. In our religious education programs, though we place special emphasis on liberal religious traditions and values, we also introduce our children to many different religious and theological approaches, encouraging them to formulate their own beliefs and make their own commitments.

Unitarian Universalists are neither a chosen people nor a people whose choices are made for [us] by theological authorities—ancient or otherwise. We are a people who choose. Ours is a faith whose authority is grounded in contemporary experience, not ancient revelation. Though we find ourselves naturally drawn to the teachings of our adopted religious forebears, these teachings echo with new insights, insights of our own. Ralph Waldo Emerson did not seek disciples; he sought people who could use their minds and tap their souls as profoundly as he did. In a Unitarian Universalist church, revelation is an ongoing process; each of us in a potential harbinger of meaning. (p. xx – xxi)

SERMON

I have often wondered where I would be religiously if I had not grown up in a primarily Unitarian Universalist family. By temperament, I am generally accepting of authority and I tend to do and believe what I am told. I have sometimes thought this might mean that I would have stayed with whatever religious faith I had been raised in, whatever it was.

It is an impossible question to answer. My Unitarian Universalism, including the questioning and skepticism that comes along with it, is so deeply ingrained in me, it is impossible to sort out how much of it is nature and how much nurture. It is impossible for me to know whether I would have found my own way to Unitarian Universalism as so many of you did, whether I would have settled in where I was raised, or whether I would have done without organized religion entirely.

In one sense, certainly, being an active Unitarian Universalist has been, as Forrest Church talks about, a choice. I could be elsewhere religiously, or nowhere. I could have done many things with my life besides being a minister in this faith tradition.

But, truth be told, it was not a particularly informed choice. I did grow up in an interfaith family, with a lived recognition of my father’s Jewish heritage as well as my mother’s Unitarian one, but beyond that, I had little genuine exposure to other religious traditions. I took the religious education class that was, at that time, called *Church Across the Street* and is now *Neighboring Faiths*. I remember visiting the nearby Catholic church, and a few others as well, but I certainly didn’t really learn what it would be like to live in the context of another religious tradition. And so I have always wondered if I am here simply because of the family into which I was born.

I don't know the answer to this question. I never will. What I do know is that I am glad to be here, that this *does* feel like home religiously. That, in the end, the question of whether I chose Unitarian Universalism or it chose me doesn't really matter, because here I am and here I am going to stay.

How I got here is one thing, but if I ever wondered about whether or not I really belong here, that question was settled again for me this summer. At the end of July, while spending time visiting with Derek's family, I had the opportunity to go to church with my mother-in-law, to the church she has been attending for decades—a small Methodist congregation in the center of a small town. They had a new minister who was in the midst of a sermon series on belief and action, preaching from the letter from Paul to the Ephesians. It was great to be there, to meet some of the people, to briefly be a part of a community which is an important part of my mother-in-law's life, and the church which Derek grew up in. I was interested in the service, which was primarily about prayer, and in being exposed to another way of understanding the world religiously. And when it was over, I was even more convinced that Unitarian Universalism is where I belong.

Since then, I've been trying to put my finger on just what it was about this Methodist worship service that brought me even closer to my Unitarian Universalist faith. After all, it was a warm and welcoming congregation, with rich history and people I already care about as part of it. Why did it feel so clearly not the right place for me?

One piece of it was my discomfort with the religious certainty I heard being spoken. Whether my skepticism is innate or indoctrinated from all my years in Unitarian Universalist congregations, I simply cannot believe in religious guarantees. And so when the minister spoke with complete assurance that God was watching us, paying attention to us at every moment, my resistance went up. This is, I believe, a relatively liberal Methodist church. The minister spoke about the many ways to pray, and the importance of being open to all people. She spoken directly about the church's mixed record on that openness through the centuries, including the current controversy around gay and lesbian people. But even with the generally open attitude, there was a fair amount of certainty in the air. When the minister promised us that the love of God is there waiting for us if we simply open ourselves up to it, I immediately thought of all the ways that statement didn't fit with my experience of the world. (Although someone could argue pretty effectively that I've never been truly open to God's love in this form, so no wonder I haven't experienced it.)

But it's not the love I resist. Or at least I hope not. It's the certainty. We Unitarian Universalists are known for our lack of certainty. Not our lack of conviction. We have lots of that. But our lack of certainty. Our unwillingness to claim absolute truth.

I have long appreciated our ability to say that we don't know. We don't know if God exists, or what God is like. We don't know exactly why we are here, or just what our place in the universe is. We don't know what happens to us when we die. Though individually we may have strongly held beliefs about these things, as a religious tradition, we are agnostic. We acknowledge that there is much we cannot know, that human understanding is limited.

As a child and young adult, I appreciated this honesty about all we do not know. As a minister, I depend on it. I could not stand up here and make promises to you about God, about life after death, about ultimate justice or mercy. I just don't know. Being Unitarian Universalist allows me to acknowledge and wrestle with that uncertainty. It allows me to be true to the questions that live within me.

My experience in Methodist worship, at the same time it helped me appreciate more deeply the uncertainty of Unitarian Universalism, also reinforced my belief that there is a genuine and shared theological basis to Unitarian Universalism that, at least to some degree, sets us apart from many other religious traditions. It is this theological core that also makes me a Unitarian Universalist.

Many people believe, mistakenly, that being a Unitarian Universalist means you can believe whatever you want. This is false in two ways. First, belief is not a matter of desire so much as of necessity. Over the years I have heard many stories of people who have left the religious faith of their family and childhood to come to Unitarian Universalism. In almost all cases, it is not because people *want* to embark on a search for a religious home, or because they *want* to reject the faith of those they love, but rather because something deep inside them compels them to. If anything, they might rather believe what those around them find so meaningful and comforting, but they find that, for whatever reason, they cannot and they must find somewhere else to be religious.

What we ask here in Unitarian Universalism is not that you believe any particular thing, but rather that you believe and live from what you are compelled to believe. What your mind, your heart, your experience, the realities of the world, and the wisdom of those around you leads you to believe. We ask you to own and live by your beliefs honestly and authentically. This is very different from being able to believe whatever you want.

The second reason why the statement that Unitarian Universalists can believe whatever they want is false is because, while we never ask anyone to sign a statement of belief and we never exclude people based on theological perspectives, there are, absolutely, religious beliefs which are the foundation of who we are. You won't be kicked out if you don't agree with them, but they do serve to ground all that we do as a religious community. We might be agnostic about the existence and nature of God, but there are some religious questions for which we have found answers that work for us.

The first, and perhaps most important, is a belief in the ultimate unity of all humanity. Central to Unitarian Universalism is a conviction that, in the end, we cannot be divided from one another. Whatever our religious beliefs, however we live our lives, we cannot be separated into those chosen and those not, or the saved and the damned. All of humanity has both a common origin, in that we come from the same source, and a common destiny, in that whatever ultimate befalls any of us will befall all of us.

This is a hard belief to live because so much of human instinct and society leads us to dive ourselves into us and them, insiders and outsiders. But our religious faith calls us to strive to transcend this pull toward division and recognize the unity which lies at the heart of everything.

This belief is part of what informs our belief about Jesus. Though Jesus is more or less important to individual Unitarian Universalists, he is a part of our heritage and history and many of our religious forbears have wrestled with the place he holds in our religious worldview. At this point, the question is basically settled. For most Unitarian Universalists individually and certainly for us collectively, Jesus is seen as a teacher and a prophet; a great man who offered the world a different way to be religious. In this, he falls in line with the other prophets of the world's religions—Abraham and Moses, Mohammed, Buddha.

What separates us from most Christians is that we believe that Jesus was a human being completely and totally. Yes, perhaps he was one of the most enlightened human beings this world has seen, but he was human nonetheless, and therefore, fundamentally no different than any of us.

Both the gift and the challenge of this is the implication that we, too, could live lives as wise and as compassionate as that of Jesus. Or Mohammed or the Buddha. This is no small task.

A second belief that is critical to Unitarian Universalism is the focus on this world, not the next. This isn't to say that we don't wonder what happens after we die, that we don't work to formulate an understanding of death that both makes sense to us and comforts us in times of fear or grief. But what this does mean is that, whatever time we spend on the question of another world, another life, we put most of our energy into this one. This is what we know, what we can be sure of. This is where we belong; it is not simply a way-station that comes before our true home. We are of this earth. We are of this life. In addition, we have come to trust that, if we live well here, we will be okay, whatever comes next.

Salvation then becomes not a question of whether any particular individual will go to heaven or hell after we die, but rather what happens to the whole human race, here on this earth. Will we self-destruct, spiraling into ever increasing hatred and violence, or will we be able to move toward a world of expanding peace and justice, where all might live lives of health, happiness, and productivity? This is not a question that we simply ask passively, waiting to find out the fate of humanity. We believe that we have a part in determining our fate. Indeed, if there is to be a world of peace and justice, hope and compassion, we are essential to building that world. It cannot happen without our help.

All of these perspectives can be found in early Unitarianism and Universalism, as they moved away from the conservative Christianity of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The same is true for another idea that is basic to our religious faith - the idea that revelation is ongoing. The exact definition of revelation may be up for debate. Some understand it as the appearance of God or the divine, some understand it as Truth with a capital "T," some as truth with a small "t." Some find revelation in the work of science, others in the words and practices of religious traditions through the centuries, others in the whisperings of the human heart. But however we understand revelation, and wherever we find it, we share the view that truth, the divine continues to make itself known in new ways and new places, to people both individually and collectively.

In other words, religious wisdom and truth are not limited to one book or one tradition or one set of rituals. Each of us has only a limited view of the world and therefore what we believe about it is always subject to change as we discover more about it. This is why we don't have certainty to offer—because we understand that there is always more truth to be known and, as we come to know it, our beliefs about the world may very well change.

In part because of this and in part because of the realities of being human, we also hold that how we live is more important than what we believe. For Unitarian Universalists there are many, perhaps an infinite number, of paths in life that are meaningful and good. There is no particular doctrine or idea that we use to judge people. What matters for us is what we do with our lives, whether we in fact live with compassion and justice, whether we are part of building the beloved community of all humanity. One way that we say this is "deeds, not creeds." Our concern is not what people believe, but rather that their beliefs, whatever they are, help them to live in a way that does not hurt themselves or others; that encourages them to work for a more just, more peaceful world; that leads to responsible stewardship of all life.

We know enough about human nature not to equate the thought of adultery with the act of adultery, or the impulse toward violence with the commitment of it. What matters most about

people's beliefs are not what they are in and of themselves, but rather the kinds of lives they lead people to live. Beliefs and actions are, of course, connected. They deeply influence each other. What defines Unitarian Universalism in this areas is that we judge beliefs by the actions they inspire, rather than judging actions by whether or not they are grounded in "correct" belief. Humanity and all of life will not be saved by what we believe, but only by what we choose to do.

As foundational as these beliefs are to Unitarian Universalism, we do not ask anyone to sign a profession of faith when he or she joins our church. We do not quiz you on whether your understanding of the world fits with these ideas. We will not tell you whether or not you belong here. But you will find, if you stick around for a while, that these fundamental beliefs are apparent in all that we do as a religious community—in how we welcome children into the world and how we say good-bye to those who leave it, in what we expect from ourselves and each other, in the questions we choose to ask and those whose answers we take for granted. You will find that, however you answer the religious questions of life, we ask that you take those questions seriously, and ask yourself as well what kind of life your answers lead you to live.

I am a Unitarian Universalist not only because I appreciate and need the freedom to search and to question, and to come to an understanding of the world that feels true to me. I am a Unitarian Universalist not only because I grew up as one. I am a Unitarian Universalist because I believe in the unity of all humanity; because I believe that this world, this life is where I belong and where I want to focus my energy and my hopes; because I believe that the revelation of truth and the sacred is ongoing and continuous and that I always have more to learn; and because I believe that it is what I choose to do with my life that matters, more than the religious framework I call my own. I am a Unitarian Universalist because I find these core beliefs echoed in our religious communities—in words spoken from the pulpit, in hymns sung on Sunday mornings, in the education we offer people of all ages, and in the kind of people who fill our congregations. I am a Unitarian Universalist and I hope that you find again and again, as I have, that you are one too.

Amen.