

Love Thy Neighbor  
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UUMSB

When our puppy was little it was wonderful to have her jump up on the bed and cuddle us. The cuddles are still great, but we are having to get really good at protecting ourselves from her pounces, now that she is almost 60 pounds. In the morning, one of our cats hangs out near my head to let me know he would like breakfast. If the dog hears or sees him, I sometimes wake up to her pouncing toward the cat, on top of my head or back. It can be painful and startling. My response is usually to cover my neck and head, or to curl into a ball. It is an instinctual reaction to protect myself. If we get punched in the gut, or walked on by a big dog, we curve in to protect our squishy parts. People who might need to physically interact with others for their job, like nurses, teachers, police officers, soldiers, have to train to fight their instinct to curl up or run away in the face of physical danger because they have a role and responsibility in that moment. Bravery they say is being afraid, but moving forward anyway. The Gospel of Mark ends with the empty tomb of Jesus. When the two Marys and Salome hear that Jesus is raised and that the body is not there, they do not do as the young man asks, but instead, “went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” They behaved completely reasonably given the circumstances, and illustrate a very human reaction to fear and unknowing.

Across the world, we are in challenging times and many suffer. In addition to any present concrete dangers, many people are afraid because of large existential threats. For example, lately I have heard more conversations about nuclear war and weapons since the end of the Cold War. There was a similar mix of concrete and existential fear cultivated by the Roman authorities in the time of Jesus. The Romans sought to control vast populations of people, while being greatly outnumbered. A way to maintain that control was through infrastructure and enforcement of draconian laws together with discriminant and indiscriminate violence. They called it the *Pax Romana*, the Roman peace. Jesus’ story reflects this context. His teachings made the Roman authorities nervous because of their potential to impact social order and foment change among subjugated people. He made the Jewish authorities nervous because they were afraid their people would be killed as punishment for Jesus’ words and movement. And in the end, Jesus was tried and killed.

Jesus was a prophet. He spoke truth to power and we go back again and again to his wisdom and the wisdom of his followers who recorded the story of the early church. Those ideas are fundamental to nonviolence movements throughout history. In the Gospel of Matthew, in Chapter 22, it is told:

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”<sup>1</sup>

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1 Matthew 22:34-40, NRSV

What does it mean to love your neighbor as yourself? One can hear this as the golden rule, treat others as you would wish to be treated, but to love your neighbor as yourself is actually a much deeper ask because to love someone, you have to know them. It means knowing how our neighbors *want* to be treated. It requires us to build relationships and ask questions, rather than to assume. Loving your neighbor as yourself means that you have to know your community, and to have compassion for yourself and your neighbor. Loving your neighbor as yourself can mean fighting the instinct to protect ourselves above others, because in building new relationships, we are vulnerable. We are vulnerable to rejection, to making mistakes, we have to be open to learning, and to being challenged in our understandings and world views. When we engage with people with different cultures, histories, identities, and conventions, we are transformed, which is often uplifting and enriching, and sometimes painful. It requires of us to be attentive to our privileges and to see ourselves and our actions through the eyes of others.

How do we challenge ourselves to be uncomfortable in an effort to know our neighbors? How do we put ourselves and our comfort on the line for others? How do we take care of ourselves in our own suffering? You know what I am going to say the answer is to all of this, right? Practice. We have to practice. During Jesus' ministry, he lived this by breaking social conventions, by forming relationships with people who had been forgotten or ignored by others. He comforted the afflicted and afflicted the comfortable. We are each invited to consider this question in our own lives, what does it mean to love my neighbor, as myself, and to think about the vitally important question, who is my neighbor?

Our Christian neighbors today celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, in their theology, a being both fully human and fully divine. Many Christians, and many Unitarian Universalists, would suggest that all people are made of divine "stuff," connected to transcendence through the miracle of life and the web that holds us all. Just as Jesus was transformed, each of us has the potential for change and transformation every day. The resurrection story for early Christians lifted up a power greater than the Roman authority around them, important as an organizing force and hope for oppressed people. In Unitarian Universalism, we don't have a single transcendent being to unify us in hope and expectation of change. What we do have is each other and our neighbors. Many of us may believe in transcendent powers or forces, but as a community, most of us believe that if we are going to change the experience of ourselves and others for the better, we are doing the lifting together. We share hope in stories like the Christian Easter story and in the Jewish Passover of communities of faith overcoming incredible odds and oppressive regimes, to build communities of faith that sought to live up to their ideals—communities that were flexible enough to adapt to changes in theology and practice. We have hope in the power of compassion. There is hope in life, in transformation, in eggs, and tulips, beauty, and children running around in the grass.

Who is our neighbor? Our neighbors are the people next to us, people across the world, spiders, bunnies, trees, tulips, we are all connected. Though we can't know every person's story, every creature's life, can't know every person's hopes and dreams, we can practice *as if some day we might*. We practice in our communities, building transformational, challenging, and uplifting relationships. Thousands of years after Jesus spoke the words out of his Jewish tradition, we are still working to live into his summary of all teaching, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

So may it be. Amen.