

Standing on the Side of Love
By Rev. Meghan Cefalu
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Readings:

“Hatreds do not ever cease in this world by bating, but by love; this is an eternal truth...Overcome anger by love, overcome evil by good. Overcome the miser by giving, overcome the liar by truth.” --Dhammapada 1.5 & 17.3

Luke 6:27-30 (New King James Version) Love Your Enemies

27 “But I say to you who hear: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you. 29 To him who strikes you on the one cheek, offer the other also. And from him who takes away your cloak, do not withhold your tunic either. 30 Give to everyone who asks of you. And from him who takes away your goods do not ask them back.”

A little over a year ago a church community was gathered, like we are here this morning, in the sanctuary of the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville, Tennessee. The children were up in the front putting on a performance of the musical *Annie Jr.* Suddenly, in the middle of their joyful worship service, a man in the back of the room took a shotgun out of a guitar case and began shooting into the congregation. One of the ushers, in an effort to protect people, jumped in front of the shooter and was killed. A visitor from a neighboring congregation was also fatally wounded, and several more people were seriously injured before the man was wrestled to the floor and held down until the police could get there.

It was a terrifying experience for everyone in that community. And it was a hate-crime. The man who wielded the gun targeted that church for its progressive views. He had walked into the building that Sunday morning intent on killing “liberals,” whom he blamed in a four-page manifesto for the country’s ills and his inability to hold onto a job.

In the aftermath of the tragedy, Tennessee Valley UU was embraced by the surrounding community.

Neighboring churches came forward and offered the traumatized congregation their love and support. People from the somewhat more conservative Presbyterian Church next door announced that they would be serving lunch every day for a week to members of the UU congregation so that they could be together in their confusion and grief.

Children from the Knoxville elementary schools folded origami paper cranes with messages of peace. The paper birds were strung together in long streamers which were suspended from the rafters forming a beautiful display of colored paper around the sanctuary.

Cards and flowers came pouring in from UU’s around the country. This congregation sent a notebook filled with our words of love and compassion and solidarity.

The outpouring of kindness, compassion and support from the Knoxville community and from UU congregations around the country was breathtaking.

The following Sunday when the congregation gathered again to rededicate their sacred space their minister, the Rev. Chris Buice said, ‘A man came into this space with a desire to do an act of hatred, but he has unleashed unspeakable amounts of love.’

The Christian scriptures we heard in the reading earlier counsel us to love our enemies, bless those that curse us, and turn the other cheek. I included that particular scripture as a part of our readings this morning so that we could wrestle with our culture’s common thinking about the role of suffering. I am going to say flat out that not only do I disagree completely with that idea but I think that embracing the nobility of suffering is not a theology that ultimately serves us. The false sense of power that some people find in their victimhood is not true power. It will never be able to lift them out of their state of oppression.

It would be unconscionable for anyone to turn the other cheek in a moment of brutal attack, of course. It is in our nature as mammals to fight or flee in a life threatening situation and we are grateful to the men who tackled the shooter and held him down. But then as human beings we have the choice, after the dust has settled, about how to heal ourselves and our communities; how we will make sense of a heartbreaking situation.

Here is what I do believe; it is easier and quicker to feel empowered by anger, and rage - but love is much stronger than fear and hatred.

These stories we hear again and again of what is possible when people are able to get to a place of bringing love into a hate-filled situation are powerful ones.

The Tennessee Valley UU church could have boarded up their doors and shut down in the week following the shooting; isolating their members in their own homes to cope with their feelings of anger, confusion and sorrow on their own and closing out the wider community of faith. But instead they threw open the doors to their building and invited everyone in to sing and cry, pray and eat together.

They could have installed metal detectors at the entrances or hired security guards to stand in the back of the room on Sunday mornings for added protection. But they didn’t. Sure, they became more wary and watchful than they had been before the shooting. But they welcomed one another back that following week with tears and smiles and open arms. As a community they resolved to remain rooted in faith and in love.

The Buddhist wisdom says that “*Hatreds do not ever cease in this world by hating, but by love; this is an eternal truth*”.

And yet, another eternal truth seems to be that there *are* people in the world committing evil acts that destroy lives and diminish people's humanity. Some people have been hopelessly corrupted by abuse or greed or addiction and can no longer see the harm they cause. It seems that no amount of prayer or candle-lighting or singing for peace will change that fact.

That is not to say that I believe those actions are powerless. How we choose to respond to acts of hatred, violence and bullying is vitally important.

The challenge for us is how to fight hatred without becoming hateful ourselves.

We can choose to recoil in disgust or fear, we can turn away giving in to our feelings of helplessness, we can seal off our hearts in an effort to stay safe, we can indulge our cynicism and allow hatred to take root in and around us, *or* we can make a brave choice to stand squarely on the side of love.

Our Unitarian Universalist Association has just launched a public advocacy campaign called Standing on the Side of Love. The idea behind it is to actively promote respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person. As it says on the official website, "We believe no one should be dehumanized through acts of exclusion, oppression, or violence because of their identities. Standing on the Side of Love is about lifting strong religious voices proclaiming love in the face of fear and hate."ⁱⁱ

For too long liberal religion has been misunderstood by people outside our communities as well as our own members. Let's get one thing clear, ours is *not* a faith that blindly welcomes every single person who walks through our doors. And this is *not* a place where every point of view is seen as equally valid. You cannot believe whatever you want to and say you are a Unitarian Universalist. You cannot be a white supremacist and a UU. You cannot be anti-Semitic and a UU. You cannot hate people in the queer community and be a UU. Period.

We do honor the inherent worth and dignity of all people *and*, and this is the important part, we insist that everyone else here does as well. Generally speaking, if someone does harm to others it is an act of love to insist that they stop. If they do not stop the harm then it is an act of love then to exclude them from our association.

The Standing on the Side of Love campaign is a way of empowering us, and giving us the tools and language and mutual support to say that hatred and bigotry are just not okay and we, as a people of faith, will not put up with them in the wider communities in which we live. Through community activism, media outreach, and other resources, the hope is that people across the nation will be equipped and empowered to respond to incidents of exclusion, oppression, or violence based on intolerance of people's identities.

Here is another story about how a carefully chosen response to hatred can diminish its power. In May of 2007, also in Knoxville, a local Ku Klux Klan group hosted a rally. There had recently been a brutal murder of a white couple and all of the suspects were black men. While the police and the

families did not suspect it was a racially motivated act, the Klan saw it as an opportunity for media attention and recruitment purposes.

It is not unusual that people will gather to counter protest the hatred and bigotry at the white supremacist rallies. They carry signs and shout back in anger and rage at the hate-mongers. But the counter protestors at this particular rally were a very special sort. They called themselves the Coup Clutz Clowns and they arrived at the rally dressed in white gowns complete with painted faces, colorful pointy hats and outrageous hair, shiny red shoes and red foam noses.

Amanda Cagle, a member of the group's parent organization, said, tongue in cheek, "We heard the formal dress was white gowns."

The CCClowns danced, and sang, played the cymbals and trombone and twirled Hula Hoops. They were excited because they had heard that a parade of other clowns had come to their town and they wanted to join the party. They pointed, and cheered and danced merrily when the Klan demonstrators came marching around the corner.

The Clowns were eager to celebrate whatever it was those visiting clowns were there to celebrate. So when the Klan shouted "White Power!" the clowns put their gloved hands to their ears and delighted to know the reason for the party, then joined in the yelling with glee, "White flour!" They reached into their pockets and began throwing flour in the air while running in circles. Huge clouds of white powder rose, getting everywhere, while some raised separate letters which spelled out, "White flour".

Neo-Nazi groups loves to stir people up, they expect to be met by anger and rage. They seem to almost feed on the fury they inspire. But the light-hearted mockery and playfulness of the Coup Clutz Clowns took them off-guard and they became enraged. This unexpected charade must have been too much for the Klan's leader, Alex Linder, to cope with. He rushed the comical counter protestors in a fit of fury and was promptly arrested by four Knoxville police officers.

The clowns maintained their innocent composure and marched alongside their new friends. And so when the Nazis angrily shouted "White Power!" once more, the clowns huddled together to be sure they got it right this time. "White flowers!" they decided it must be. The clowns cheered and threw white flowers in the air and danced about merrily, petals landing everywhere, including on the angry demonstrators.

"White Power!" the group shouted again this time enunciating very clearly.

"Oh!" the clowns yelled "Tight Shower!" and held a solar shower in the air while they all tried to crowd under to get clean as per the Klan's directions.

Once again, growing furious, the demonstrators screamed, "White Power!"

One of the clown women thought she finally understood what they were was trying to say. Holding up a finger she said, "Now I understand...this parade is to celebrate 'WIFE POWER!'". The

women clowns were hoisted up on other's shoulders saying, "Let's hear it for our wives!". While some other clowns lifted letters up in the air to spell out "Wife Power!" and began dancing and merrily chanting along with the Klan marchers "WIFE POWER! WIFE POWER! WIFE POWER!"

Along the route more and more people joined the clown's parade and by the end of the march the counter protesters outnumbered the Klansmen by almost three to one. The clowns danced and handed out flowers and made people smile and laugh.

"Hatreds do not ever cease in this world by hating, but by love; this is an eternal truth".

Though I imagine they must have been frightened, especially at first, these people put white greasepaint on their faces and laced up their big shiny shoes and discovered the power of countering pointed rage with merriment, angry screaming with mirth and singing, raised fists and clenched teeth with playfulness and dancing.

It makes me think of something Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Hatred paralyzes life; love releases it. Hatred confuses life; love harmonizes it. Hatred darkens life; love illuminates it."

When I have become confused about a predicament or a social situation I need only ask myself, "What would Love do here?" Usually the answer becomes obvious.

The first two stories I told this morning have been rather extreme examples. But there are ways that you and I can make choices to stand on the side of love in our everyday lives.

I came across this next story on the Standing on the Side of Love website. Tim Atkins is a member of a UU church in Atlanta. Last week when he heard on the local news that a swastika had been spray painted on the sign outside the office of Democratic Representative David Scott, an African American man, he was disgusted. Tim decided he needed to do something. So on his way to work that morning he stopped at a grocery store and bought a big bouquet of flowers. He drove over to the Representative's office and saw the defaced sign out in front - in plain view of an elementary school.

In his own words this is what happened when Tim went in to drop off the flowers. He said, "The older African-American receptionist was shocked, and in our thirty second conversation she managed to say "this is such a blessing!" about five times. It's amazing what a show of love and support can mean when there's a symbol of hatred outside the front door."

Tim decided to publicize his story on the website because, he says, "There's outrage nationwide about this incident, and there's outrage locally too. But the racists are louder than those of us who stand with love. We're not loud about it, because we often don't think it's our place to tell someone else what to do or how to think. ...we quietly sit in our homes and offices, thinking how terrible it

is, maybe post a comment or two on a blog, but don't use our powerful voices to stand up and say that this is not acceptable.

I'm glad I chose show my support in person this morning, and to offer a blessing. I encourage all of us to speak out and take a stand. After all, the only response to hate is to overwhelm it with love.”

A common thread in all three of these stories is that people took a chance. Faced with fear and hatred they had a choice and without knowing what would happen they stepped out bravely on the side of love. And by doing so they discovered they had unwittingly invited grace to enter in.

The people at the Tennessee Valley UU chose to keep their hearts and doors open and love came flooding in from around the country.

A bunch of social activists dressed up as clowns and ended up ruining a perfectly good hate rally.

A man sets out to drop off a bunch of flowers but instead bestows a blessing to a hate-targeted government office.

Here is what I know: no matter how risky, or silly or mundane the impulse may seem to you, if it is an impulse based soundly in love you will be supported by much more than you can ever realize. Because when we choose to act in love we are doing holy work.

When we stand up to hatred and bigotry and counter the voices that would diminish life in all its glorious diversity we are doing holy work.

When we choose to stand on the side of love we align ourselves with the Spirit of Life, with God, and we discover that we do not act alone. Grace appears.

You don't have to go out there and take on the Ku Klux Klan. But get up from the computer, show your face, bring flowers, send a paper crane, put on clown shoes...

You know in your heart that love is infinitely more powerful than fear and hatred. What chance will you take?

Let us stand together on the side of love.

Amen

ⁱ <http://www.standingonthesideoflove.org/faq/>