

Standing on the Side of Love

Rev. Mark Hayes

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“Love is the doctrine of this church.” What does that mean? We say that we have no creed or doctrine in our liberal faith. And yet love is a sufficiently all-encompassing concept and value to be embraced by all of us as a guiding religious principle. “Love will guide us,” we sang earlier. “Love will guide us through the hard night.” And for me, the most important line in that song is “You can change the world with your love.”

That is precisely at the core of the Unitarian Universalist Association’s new initiative, called Standing on the Side of Love. Standing on the Side of Love is a public advocacy campaign, designed to harness love’s power to stop oppression. We choose to stand with all who believe that no person should be dehumanized through acts of exclusion, oppression, or violence.

Our religious imperative is to love above all else. We believe that brokenness can be overcome by the redeeming power of love. In order to heal the divisions that rend our communities, our diverse faith traditions guide us to stand together and act in love.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, people across the United States still face exclusion, oppression, and/or violence because of such identities as immigrant status, sexual or gender orientation, religion, race, or political view.

Now is the time for people of faith to ground our action, our social justice work, our very lives, in a theological message of love for all people. In so doing, we stand together in the long tradition of prophetic people who have worked for justice in the name of faith.

Now I shouldn’t have to work too hard to persuade you, or anyone else, that love is a good thing. Love, like mom and apple pie, is a pretty universally embraced value. Indeed, every major religion has compassion and love at its center. Love is good. Hate is bad. And so, in the struggle between love and hate – of course we will stand on the side of love.

I don’t want to minimize the reality of hatred. Its evidence is abundant. But love has another enemy that I believe is as great as, if not greater than hate. That is fear. Fear of our neighbors who are different from ourselves can overshadow our potential love for them. Fear of losing some of what we have, of having our quality of life compromised, can set us at

odds with our neighbors whom we may see as competitors for limited resources.

There is the fear that undocumented immigrants will take jobs from Americans and drain the resources of social welfare programs. There is the fear that legalized marriage for same-sex couples will somehow demean the whole concept of marriage. Or that giving equal rights to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people will somehow diminish my own rights. There is the fear that prisoners released into our communities will make them unsafe for all of us innocents. There is the fear that if we give everyone adequate healthcare, then that will mean less care for us.

In case you haven't noticed, those who may be motivated by hate, or by greed and self-interest, by a desire to hang on to power and influence – they play on those fears of honest Americans. Too much of our public discourse is driven not by love, but by fear, which often scapegoats particular groups of people and deems them somehow less than human. By dehumanizing the “other,” they divide us and keep us at each other's throats.

Dehumanization can only be met with an outpouring of love. We believe in the power of love to heal divisions and build community. Fear divides. Love unites. In this time of great hope and possibility, all those who are committed to the worth and dignity of all people are called to take a public stand on the side of love.

I'm reminded of the story of a man and his young son. Dad was trying to read a serious book, but his little boy kept interrupting him. He would lean against his dad's knees and say, “Daddy, I love you.” The father would give him a pat on the head and say, rather absently, “Yes, son, I love you too,” and he would kind of give him a little push away so he could keep on reading. But this didn't satisfy the boy, and finally he ran to his father and said “I love you, Daddy,” and he jumped up on his lap and threw his arms around him and gave him a big squeeze, explaining, “And I've just got to DO something about it.” That's it: as we grow in love, we aren't content with small-talk, or lip-service, or pat-on-the-head love. We want to get involved and “do something about it.”

That's exactly what the Standing on the Side of Love campaign is all about. Of course, there's nothing really new here. We've been standing on the side of love all along, and working for justice in our community and the world. But the idea is to sort of kick it up a notch. To re-energize ourselves to stay true to and act on our religious values of compassion and love. To engage with allies from other faith traditions who share many of our values and goals. To give our messages of love and justice a more prominent place

in the public discourse, to influence public attitudes about the worth and dignity of all.

My message this morning isn't so much "Get out there and do something!" It's more like "Keep up the good work, and build on it." For instance, I'm very glad that we had representation at the National Equality March in Washington, DC last weekend. It's important to have such demonstrations of strength and solidarity. But it must not stop there. Judy mentioned the efforts of Equality Across America to keep the pressure on in every congressional district. Progress on such issues as lgbt rights requires changing both hearts and policies. It's sacred work.

One of the first official events of the Standing on the Side of Love campaign took place last summer during General Assembly in Salt Lake City. It was called "Valuing Immigrant Families: An Interfaith Community Witness Event." Featuring speakers from Unitarian Universalist, Episcopal, and Roman Catholic traditions, as well as first-hand stories from the immigrant community, the rally acknowledged the reality that our current immigration system keeps families apart through a huge backlog in family-based immigration and the unjust detention and deportation of immigrant mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters. We stood in solidarity, calling for an end to unjust raids and deportations, and for humane and just family-based immigration reform. Our stance was grounded in compassion, love, and a commitment to human dignity, and we made our voices heard.

Another area where many of us have been standing on the side of love is health care reform. Our Health Care Reform task force, under the able leadership of Brenda Black, has been working with folks throughout our community and region to advocate for truly universal health care for all. Everyone is worthy of love, and so everyone deserves to have access to adequate health care. Love and compassion demand nothing less.

Next spring, standing on the side of love will mean standing, literally, at the side of folks in New Orleans, who are still picking up the pieces and rebuilding their neighborhoods after the devastation of Katrina. It's been over four years now, but there is still work to be done. A group of us will be spending the week of Spring Break doing some of that work, and I'm very pleased that we are reaching out to include folks from at least one other faith community here in Centre County. Those of you who can't participate physically, I hope will be there in spirit through your moral and financial support. Please note the item in the Order of Service about the Window Washing Project to fund scholarships for the trip.

A more immediate opportunity is the annual CROP walk for hunger, which happens today, stepping off at 2:00 from St. Andrews Episcopal

Church. I'm not sure how many walkers we have participating, but I suspect some of them will be available during coffee hour to enlist your support. I particularly want to recognize the steadfast efforts of Jeff Schmid, who has been coordinating our participation in the CROP walks for many years. Thank you, Jeff, for that labor of love.

These and many other efforts for social justice can benefit from our support and participation. But let us never forget that our efforts are grounded ultimately in our love and our compassion, and in our conviction that every person has worth and dignity, and is worthy of our love. As the choir sang earlier, "What more have we to give . . . to one another than love and understanding."

So may it be.