

Welcome by Host - Cappy

Prelude - Betty's Diner

Chalice Lighting - This Chalice Lighting is brought to us by Uwayisaba Clement through the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists.

We light this chalice in union with those who are suffering because of their belief, of poverty, sickness, unemployment, persecution, exile, prison; for the absent, those who are dying, to those who are burdened by work. May love, joy and peace reign in the world and may freedom and tolerance be our virtues.

Please be uplifted, in body if you prefer to sing that way, but at least in spirit and join me in singing Hymn number 361, *Enter, Rejoice, and Come In*.

Opening Hymn #361 - *Enter, Rejoice, and Come In*

Would those of you who are children, even just at heart, come to join me up here for the Story for All Ages? Today I have a very special story - one of my favorites from my childhood - *The Butter Battle Book* by Dr. Seuss

Story for All Ages - The Butter Battle Book

Collecting Food for the Haven

This is the Time in our service when we collect food and personal care items for our friends and neighbors who are using the Haven food pantry this week:

Hymn #118 *This Little Light of Mine*

Sacred Sharing - We do not leave our cares at the door. We do not leave our joys and our sorrows. Instead, we bring them here, into our community, because sorrows shared are lessened, and joys shared are multiplied. Please take a stone, and tell us of your sorrow and joy.

I will now place a final stone, for all those joys and sorrows that remain unspoken.

Hymn # 123 - Spirit of Life

Offering And now the monetary gifts which support the work of this congregation will be gratefully received.

Offertory - "Old City Bar", Grace Alden

Homily - What if There Were No Them? - Daroc M. Alden

I grew up in this church. And when I was little, I was pretty sure I understood Unitarian Universalism. Then I would have a big revelation or a new understanding, and I thought okay *now* I understand Unitarian Universalism.

I have never understood Unitarian Universalism. I'm tempted to say that I understand it now, as I speak to you, but history has shown that I probably don't.

I'm sure many or all of you have had similar experiences. This is why we say that spirituality is a journey, not a destination. We are all working our way up the mountain by all our various paths. That, I think, is what these services are about. Some of them are calls to action, some of them are pastoral care, but all of them are about trying to share an insight with those who may not have encountered it yet on their path, or who might need to be reminded. I hope that the idea I'm about to present can help you along on your journey, whether it is novel or not.

When I was younger, Sparrow and I were discussing a sermon about inclusivity, and I asserted that the sermon was about expanding the category of "Us" until it encompassed everybody in the whole world. Her reply was "But wouldn't it be nice if there were no 'Us' and 'Them'?" And I nodded solemnly and said "I see. But can you even have an 'Us' without a 'Them'?" I didn't see.

In fact, it wasn't until I took a history course last semester, and wrote a paper that would be the precursor to this sermon, that I finally got her point.

As humans, we naturally break things up into categories. It's part of how our brains are shaped, because it's evolutionarily advantageous to be able to make quick, sweeping decisions in life-or-death situations. A good distillation of the reasons for and consequences of this is "How an Algorithm Feels from the Inside", by Eliezer Yudowski. Yudowski argues that we reflexively label things, and then use the labels instead of the actual things to make decisions. This reflex is so deeply ingrained that a lot of the work that we do as a congregation is dedicated to reversing it. An example of how and why this reflex can be wrong is racism. When we see someone who looks different than ourselves, it's easy to label them by their race, but then forever after, that label twists our thinking about them. This is also why transgender people are more often misgendered by people who knew them before their transition - labels are easy to apply, and hard to remove. Our first, instinctual judgement of someone forever affects how we interact with them.

We are a Welcoming Congregation. We actively work against our built-in stereotyping reflexes to welcome Everyone.

And that is the core of the thing: Everyone.

The Robbers' Cave experiment is a famous experiment in social psychology, about what causes groups to compete or cooperate with each other. The researchers took a group of teenage boys who were going to summer camp, and they were going to see what it took to set one group of boys against the other. So they separated the boys into 2 groups, ... and that was all it took. The groups started off peacefully enjoying their summer camp, but as soon as they learned that there was another group of boys in the area, they developed distinct group identities (the Eagles and the Rattlers), and started fighting whenever they crossed paths.

So when we say that we welcome Everyone, we *have* to mean Everyone. Any distinction, any cleft, and the whole thing splits in two. The Robbers' Cave experiment was extended to try to determine what it would take to have the two groups of boys cooperate and coexist peacefully again. The experimenters tried communal activities, fireworks, games, etc., but the only thing that got the boys to cast aside their perceived differences was being told

that they had a common enemy in a group of vandals that were vandalizing the park. That's what makes it tempting to encourage people to band together against some other group. It's easy to reframe the discussion as Us versus Them. But by creating an Us to band together, you always create a Them. It's as simple as binary set theory - the existence of a set as a subset of some universe always implies the existence of its negation.

It is much better to have a kind of radical acceptance. We fight against division, inequality, and strife by welcoming Everyone. We welcome people of all colors and creeds and sexual orientations and romantic orientations and origins and educational backgrounds and socioeconomic status and families and genders and faiths and membership status and shapes and ages and abilities and political beliefs and blood types. And it is important to let each individual who might feel ostracized somewhere else know, that Yes, we Welcome *you*.

But the most important thing is that we Welcome Everyone. This is what I think Universalism is all about. There is no possible thing that you could be or have done that would bar you from receiving our help, our community, and our friendship. There is no possible way for you to be unloved, unwelcome. There is no possible way for you to be unworthy of our love.

That's the ideal, anyway.

But it's hard, because while we welcome all people, we don't welcome all behaviors, and it can be difficult to separate them in our minds. We will always welcome each and every person, but we know that there are destructive and unethical behaviors that we cannot condone, no matter who does them. Any schoolteacher can tell you how hard it is to communicate what is or is not acceptable. Deciding when it is or is not appropriate to use force or coercion to stop a behavior is a hard choice.

And it's hard because different people need different things. Welcoming people who are caring for kids means being sure that kids will be welcomed, cared for, and safe. Welcoming people who are less physically able means using certain kinds of doorknob, building wide aisles, and having comfortable chairs or spaces for wheelchairs. Welcoming people with

atypical genders means not putting signs on the bathroom doors, and using their preferred pronouns when we speak. Welcoming people who aren't white means actively correcting for ingrained, cultural oppression through open and honest friendships and discussions. But we can't know what someone needs without ever knowing *them*, so Welcoming people means *asking* what you can do to help. Welcoming people means *listening* when they tell you what you can do for them. And Welcoming people means *doing* what they ask.

And it's even harder than that. This congregation has been, and is now, a positive force in the wider community. We contribute, every week, to the Haven. We lead sustainability efforts. We work with other congregations to support the refugees in Rutland. We do restorative Justice training. We help people get access to clean water. We provide comprehensive, free sexual education for both adults and children. But because we are a Welcoming congregation, in all of our efforts, we never work *against* people. We work against corrupt systems. We work against societal imbalances. We work against some people's better judgment. But *no one* is our enemy. There are no evil people. And that is horribly difficult to accept. It is easy to feel that when you've been attacked, when you've been wronged, that you must strike back against your aggressor. It's easy to feel that we must protect the weak by *opposing* the strong. Unfortunately, what is right is not always what is easy.

Our second source is "Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with Justice, Compassion, and the transforming power of Love".

Martin Luther King was one such prophetic person. He showed that revolution and change don't need to mean attacking the oppressors. Revolution can mean just showing, again and again, why the system is wrong, and how to do better. Jesus of Nazareth was another such person, and his words "Turn the other cheek" are still taught world-wide.

We have to turn the other cheek. We have to do whatever it takes to help misguided people see what they did wrong and how to be better. We seek justice, not revenge. And we Welcome everyone.

We know that the world is not fair. There are powers and structures of Evil which we must tear down, but in the entire world, there are no enemies, only people who do not yet fully understand and consistently practice welcoming, ethical, just behavior. I know I don't. But this community has helped me come so much closer than I could have on my own. I hope that together we can help those people who are most lost to see how they can get better. I hope that I might have helped you a little further along the path, and I hope that you will find me at coffee hour to share your point of view.

If you prefer to stand to sing, please do so, because I would like to close by singing Hymn number #302, "Children of the Human Race".

Closing Hymn #302 "Children of the Human Race"

Extinguishing the Chalice

And now.... (pause to let folks know where you are so they can join you)

We extinguish this flame
But not the light of truth
The warmth of friendship
Or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts until we meet again.