

# How Can I Keep From Singing

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Each Sunday we hear the voices of our children ring out, "We believe in Love! We believe in truth! We believe in helping others! We believe in the Sacredness of Life!" It is a challenge to attempt a sermon about who Unitarian Universalists are—who we are—knowing that nothing could be as eloquent as those words and those beautiful voices.

And yet, this being the Sunday we make a special effort to invite and welcome newcomers to our congregation, there is so much more to say. What do we mean when we say we believe in love and those other things? What do we do about it? Where did we come from? What is this church really like—and maybe more importantly—what do we strive to be? What do we want to accomplish? Why do we think church is still important? Why do we hope to invite people to join us in this venture?

The first, and perhaps most important thing I need to say is that we are not here to save your soul...at least not in the conventional sense. Most religions are very worried that without them, people would be degenerate and evil. The first principle of Unitarian Universalism is different: "We affirm and promote the worth and dignity of every person." So we didn't invite you here to tell you that you're bad and you need us to save you. In fact, we invited you here to tell you that you are valuable, and your heart, your mind, your body, your soul, your actions, are all important.

Maybe it would help to talk a little about where we've come from. Contrary to popular belief, we're not a new or a new age religion. Looking at this building, you might have gathered it's been here for a long time. Indeed, this building was built for this congregation in 1930. But even that 70+ year history is relatively short. The two strands of our history—Unitarianism and Universalism—have been around for a long time. Origen, the Greek philosopher, was a universalist—but back then, he was pretty lonely. Unitarians argued with Constantine about the nature of God way back when Christianity was being formalized and institutionalized. They lost the argument, and Christian doctrine became centered on the Trinity.

We tell those stories as a reminder that the roots of our ideas and ideals are deep, even if official Unitarianism and Universalism didn't come along until much later. Our more recent spiritual ancestors are the Puritans, led by John Robinson, who broke away from the Church of England because he came to believe that *"the church was to be constituted, not by obedience to hierarchical authority (bishop or King,) not by assent to a set of propositional statements (a creed,) and not by confession of a transforming experience (salvation.) This church was to be constituted by a promise, a covenant to venture together as individuals in ways of the Spirit, with entire integrity."*

This is very similar to what we now believe about church. We, as Unitarian Universalists, have decided to work together to become the best people we can be and to help make the world a better place. We don't require obedience to church leaders—we'd rather

invite you to participate in the democratic process by which we make decisions. We don't require that you buy a certain theology or profess a certain set of beliefs—we'd rather engage with you in what we call "the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We don't ask that you confess your sins or experience salvation by any one means—we'd rather get to know you and learn from you what ideas and experiences have made your life worth living. We don't have rules and doctrine—we have principles that we try to live by, a mission statement to guide us, and each other.

What are those principles? Some of them you've heard already: the inherent worth and dignity of every person, a free and responsible search for truth and meaning; the use of the democratic process in our congregations and in society at large. They also include: justice, equity, and compassion in human relations; acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations; the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all, and respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

These are the things we think will improve our lives and the world and we've chosen to form a community around those values. Over the years, labels have sprung up to describe us: covenantal communities, liberal religion, or my favorite: the Free Church. According to Alice Blair Wesley, one of our ministers and deep theological thinkers, our churches are held together by the spirit of a covenant or promise. She describes it this way:

*There is a recognizable spirit of the Free Church. It is the spirit of persuasion. It is both free and freeing....I'll try to describe this spirit:*

*The spirit of persuasion is, by definition—has to be, can't be other than—a spirit of affection, love, for two kinds of things. It is love for other living creatures, people, and so, love for all that sustains and enriches people. And even more it is love for truth itself, our ultimate spiritual sustenance, without which no people can long live, no matter what else they may have...The power of the spirit may be—should be—vigorous and rigorous, persevering. It hangs in there! Yet though it may urge and press, it will never knowingly force. It refuses ever to be coerced itself, or try to coerce another.*

*Yet, precisely because it is of love, the spirit of persuasion may sometimes be very angry at what—as it appears to informed and reasoning love—won't sustain, can't sustain people; angry at what diminishes rather than enriches people, angry at what is therefore wrong, sinful, deadening. The power of the spirit of persuasion can be fierce in its prophetic judgment of what must be changed for good to happen in people.*

We come together each Sunday, and during the week at committee meetings, dinners, classes, and social events because, we believe in love. What's more, we know that love like this cannot survive and certainly cannot grow alone. We need each other for love to flourish. Not sticky, sweet, overly-sentimental love, but love that demands the best of each of us and all of us.

In her most recent book *Proverbs of Ashes*, Rebecca Parker, president of our seminary in Berkeley, tells a story from her first ministry. Lyle came home from WW II in 1945, the only soldier from his small Iowa town to return:

*The day he arrived home, the whole town came out to meet him, When the train pulled into the station, the band played. Family and friends waved and cheered, and the mayor stood ready to greet him. But the man who climbed off the train was not the cheerful, high-spirited boy who had gone off to war. The man who climbed off the train was a ghost. In response to the music and the cheers, he stared back, mutely. His blank face did not register recognition of anyone—not mother, sister, or friend.*

*They took him home to the farm. He sat in the rocker in the parlor. He wouldn't speak, he wouldn't sleep, and he would barely eat. No one in that town knew what was wrong. They just knew that Lyle's soul was lost somewhere.*

*Maxine...decided to keep her brother company. Whenever she could, she'd sit in the parlor with him and talk. She'd tell him the news from the hardware store in town, or about the potluck at church, who was there, which dress each young woman wore. She'd tell him how the clean laundry had blown off the line and into the tomatoes that morning. When she ran out of things to say, she'd just sit with him quietly, snapping beans or mending socks. Lyle was like a stone. No expression on his face. Rocking.*

*It went on like this for days that flowed into weeks and on into months. Then one night, late, after everyone else had gone to bed, Maxine was sitting with Lyle, quietly knitting, when the eyes in Lyle's still face filled with tears. The tears spilled over and began to run down his face. Maxine noticed. She got up and put her arms around her brother. Held in his sister's embrace, Lyle began to cry full force, great gusts of sobbing, and Maxine held him. Then he began to talk. He talked of the noise, the cold, the smoke, the deaths of his buddies. And then he spoke of the camps, the mass graves, the smell. He talked all night. Maxine listened.*

*When the morning light came across the fields, she went to the kitchen and cooked him breakfast. He ate. Then he went out and did the morning chores.*

This is the most powerful story I know of the power of love. Maxine's love, enacted in her unwillingness to leave her brother alone in his pain and despair, eventually drew Lyle back into himself, into his family, back to the steady rhythms of the farm, which still needed him. It saved his soul. When our children shout out, "We believe in Love," I think of Lyle and how love drew him back to life. Maxine's love was strong and stubborn, unwilling to let go, willing to face even the hardest truths.

Some people have the idea that Unitarian Universalism is an easy religion. Because we don't ask our members to live on faith alone, or to affirm doctrine that they don't understand, because we don't enforce strict codes of behavior and preach damnation for sin, people think Unitarian Universalism doesn't ask much of people. I think they are wrong. At its best, this is a very demanding faith. It asks us to be present to ourselves and to each other in love, with perseverance, patience, and understanding. It asks us not only to be the one who listens, but the one who tells the long story, the hard story, the real story of life—in its pain and its beauty. At its best, Unitarian Universalism asks us to promise ourselves and one another that we will search for love, even when we don't know how or when or if we will find it.

Of course, we are not always at our best. Like any human community, we make mistakes. We speak more harshly than we intend. We fail to see another side to the

story. We find trusting hard and skepticism easy. G. Peter Fleck, in the title essay of his book, *The Blessings of Imperfection*, acknowledges that churches are human institutions:

*Well, let's be frank [he writes] and admit that the church has its aggravations. The eternal and oh-so-necessary concern about finances, the annually recurring problems of balancing a budget, of finding money for repainting the vestibule, repairing the boiler and tuning the organ, the ongoing criticism of the minister's sermons, which are too liberal for some and too orthodox for others, too pedantic for some and too colloquial for others, the endless committee meetings about the Sunday School curriculum and about the propriety of social action, the persistent shortage of tenors in the choir. Who wants it? Who needs it?*

*The answer to this question is that we..want it, because we need it. The answer is that the church...in spite of its shortcomings, the imperfection that characterizes everything made by humans, is better, infinitely better, than no church. Maybe I should not have said, "in spite of its shortcomings" but "because of its shortcomings." For isn't it true that in our churches, in these communities of the spirit, we have more resources than outside of our churches to accept each other's imperfections, to reconcile our differences, to forgive and be forgiven, to comfort and be comforted, to love and be loved? Isn't that what the church is all about—because it is what life is all about?*

We believe in love, even if, because it is human beings doing the loving, that love is imperfect. We believe in love, when love is angry at injustice, weeping at destruction, laughing in delight. We believe in love when love is sweeping the steps, weeding the flower beds, and tracking expenditures. We believe in love when love because love is at the heart of all we do. Love is what empowers us, comforts us, challenges us, holds us. While we may fail, love never fails. We may call Love by many different names, but what this congregation and Unitarian Universalism is about is that simple statement, raised high by our children's voices: We believe in Love.

May we, as we open our hearts to the new, feel the power and possibility of love. May we be faithful to our promise and worthy of the promise of our companions. May we seek and find meaning in our own lives which we then openly share with each other. May we accept the demands of being people who believe in love.

Amen, Ashé, and Blessed be.

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