

More than Our Principles



A Sermon by the **Rev. Carolyn L. Price**
Universalist Unitarian Church of Santa Paula
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I fell in love with Unitarian Universalism when I was in my thirties, as, along with my two small daughters and reluctant husband I began to participate in our local UU church. Being a teacher in a past-life, pre-motherhood, I was naturally drawn (or actually, intentionally recruited) into teaching religious education.

And being who I am – who a lot of UU's are – somewhat perfectionistic, determined to be the best RE teacher I could, it wasn't long before I was writing lesson plans and entire curricula for the children's classes. And so it was that learning about our history drew me into the spell of the women and men whose lives, borne of the values of Unitarianism and Universalism, went on to change the world – and, as I took them into my world and my heart – to change me.

Over the summer as a congregation we studied the 7 principles of Unitarian Universalism, in a well received and well facilitated program. This morning I want to suggest that what matters more than the principles themselves – what has always mattered more – is when and how we act on them. You will often find in our liberal religious tradition that beliefs – whether they are individual or collective - are valued less than what we do

with those beliefs. Put another way – it is more like us to count deeds, not creeds.

Do all of you know that as a religious people, we have been in the United States for the entire history of this nation? We were active in the founding of the country. Many of the leaders of the American revolution (Jefferson, Madison, Franklin, Adams and more) were Unitarians or Universalists .

We were leaders in the long fight against slavery. Abraham Lincoln took the famous words used to describe our government, a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people" from a sermon by the great abolitionist Unitarian minister Theodore Parker. In fact, Lincoln kept a set of Parker's published sermons by his bedside.

Five Unitarians have been presidents of the United States.

We were leaders in the establishment of public schools, mental hospitals, safe nursing care, settlement houses, and much more. Women's rights were fought for and won by Universalists like Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross, and Mary A. Livermore, who visited this church – the legend goes – and for whom one of the longest standing voluntary groups in Ventura County, the Mary A's, is named (organized by our very own women!).

The Universalists were the first denomination in the United States to ordain a woman to the ministry - in 1863. And it was Universalist Dorothea Dix who pioneered prison reform and worked tirelessly to free the mentally ill from the shackles around their limbs, and the shackles in the minds of those in power who saw them as less than fully human.

In the field of literature – Horatio Alger, Louisa May Alcott, and Walt Whitman were all Unitarians. Horace Greeley, the well known journalist, was a Universalist. Ralph Waldo Emerson was a Unitarian minister... he is so cherished among us that the joke is told that, among ourselves, we really call him “St. Ralph”.

Unitarians and Universalists were in the battle fields with the boys and young men who served in the Civil War. The Unitarian Julia Ward Howe wrote a song, the Battle Hymn of the Republic – not so much to stir them to battle, as often is believed, but to give them comfort and strength.

A hundred years later we were in Selma with Martin Luther King Jr. One of the people killed during that time was James Reeb, a Unitarian minister, who was part of a large group of Unitarian ministers who had unanimously voted to adjourn the minister’s conference they had been attending many hours away so that as a group they could go and support Rev. King the struggle for equality among the races.

We are devoted to education. 75% of the members of our congregations have college degrees; more than 40% of us have advanced degrees. Horace Mann, the great educator, was a Unitarian. We have founded many universities – including, in California, Cal Tech and Stanford.

When we are at our best, and what we value is placed into action in the public domain, we have led social-religious critics to remark that, for a small movement, our participation in social action and ability to effect change in the world has been disproportionately high. We have done more good, in other words, than our relatively small membership numbers might suggest.

During the summer, Doris Vernon suggested to us that we may be one short in our principles though, that perhaps we would do well to add one that speaks about our commitment (as individuals and as a movement) to appreciating and celebrating life. The principle might read something like this: We affirm and promote laughing, dancing, singing, enjoying one another and this beautiful and all too brief life.

Now, this may sound trite, or even frivolous – but let's consider: When we choose to laugh, to dance, to sing and know joy despite the sorrows in the world – then, in a way every bit as full of meaning and power as when we engage in social action – we become more than our principles.

Even when times are hard – perhaps especially when times are hard, and our bodies and our hearts bend with sorrow, still – if we are true to this religious tradition – we do not turn our backs on the beauty of the world, or on its joy, or its potential to – someday, be, a better land for all.

This is what it means to be religious, to live each and every day as an act of faith. This is what it means to be more than our principles.

Ours is a religion that, while not denying the brokenness of this world, chooses to cherish what is good, to hold what is worth saving up against our bones and refuse to let it go.

Love one another, said the prophet and teacher, before he turned to go. Love one another as I have loved you. This is the message we bear in our bodies and in our beings; and our response is the promise we make again each week as we turn to go, back into our lives and the world.

We go, as individuals and as part of collective faith we call Unitarian Universalism, in answer to this ageless call; knowing that along with the men and women of history whose gave their lives to this end, we are all that there is; all that there ever has been. This is our promise; to take up the life we have been given. And so, along with our brothers and sisters of other faith traditions or none, we go, because we know it is up to us. It matters how we live our lives. Each of us; here, has the chance to be more than our

principles; to live each day and even in the face of pain and loss and sorrow, to live with hope and with joy. This too is an act of resurrection, is a miracle made flesh.

And before we go, today, let us imagine and pray that someday, long after we are gone, the people in this cherished space will look back and remember us, and smile – perhaps even laugh – saying, bless them for daring to live that way in those times; bless them for the work that they did; bless them, most of all, for how well they loved one another.