

Things Commonly Believed  
A sermon by Rev. Kathleen Rolenz  
Sunday, February 26, 2023  
Unity Church Unitarian – Saint Paul, MN

The year was 1887 and Rev. William Channing Gannett was...tired. Rev. Gannett was Unity Church Unitarian's second minister and had served this congregation nobly and well between 1877 – 1883. He left Unity Church for a position as a missionary and consultant with the Western Unitarian Conference, and a central role in a controversy about Unitarian identity that became known as "The Issue in the West." For the previous eight years, Unitarianism was in danger of splitting into two theological camps. Unitarians were essentially having verbal fisticuffs over the faith's identity and future. Some, knowing that Gannett had a way with words, asked him to write a statement – a unifying statement – that might help bind these disparate camps together. So, Gannett wearily took up his pen and began to write.

What was this controversy about? Unitarianism has been arguing about its identity since its early days on this continent when, with a sneer, we were called "Unitarians" by the Christian Trinitarians. After our founding controversy about whether God should be understood in Trinitarian or Unitarian terms, the Issue in the West became the most significant controversy in Unitarian history – and one that still has an impact on our congregation.

The issue was whether or not Unitarianism is primarily a Christian faith, which should uphold the Bible as our primary text, Jesus as our source of moral and ethical inspiration and God as the central figure of worship; or if we were becoming more of an ethical faith with respect for, but not a necessary reliance on Christian theology and metaphysics.

Oh, the heat and angst that this controversy created! One clergyman said that American Unitarianism had become nothing but "...a medley of doubts and denials, petty criticism and secular teachings, ...(it) finds fault with Christ himself or silently leaves Him out of the account...and sinks the Bible to the level of books of other religions." <sup>1</sup>

But the Reverend Jenkin Lloyd Jones, then the Secretary of the Western Conference represented the other view– the growing movement of Unitarians that were influenced by the insights of science and evolution, the interpretation of the Bible informed by the new Biblical criticism, and the belief that the religion of Jesus could be detached from its historical Christian roots, reflecting instead a universal morality, ethics and the active pursuit of truth, righteousness and love in the world. It was Rev. William Channing Gannett who introduced the idea that perhaps Unitarians could come up with a simple statement of "the things most commonly believed among us" as a middle path between the Christian/Theists and those who thought Unitarianism should move into a broader acceptance of more universal morality and idealism.

So, Gannett took up his pen, beginning with a statement that still holds true for Unitarianism today: that "the Western Conference has neither the wish nor the right to bind a single member by declarations concerning fellowship or doctrine." Which means, when you join a Unitarian Universalist church, you will not be asked to assent to a creedal statement of belief. Yet, Gannett continues "it thinks some practical good may be done by setting forth in simple words the things most commonly

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<sup>1</sup> Lyttle, Charles H. Freedom Moves West, pg. 165.

believed among us – that statement being always open to re-statement and to be regarded only as the thought of the majority.”<sup>2</sup>

The Things Commonly Believed Among us is a long statement – too long to be read in full here. But let me share with you a few of the highlights, modestly adapted for more gender inclusive language: “We believe that to love the Good and live the Good is the supreme thing in religion; we hold reason and conscience to be final authorities in matters of religious belief; We believe that this self-forgetting, loyal life awakens in humankind the sense of union here and now with things eternal – the sense of deathlessness and the sense is to us an earnest of the life to come. We worship One-in-all, that life whence suns and stars derive their orbits and the soul of humankind its ought that light which lighteth every human that cometh into the world, giving us power to become the children of God, that love with which our souls commune.”

After seven years of debate and word-smithing, Gannetts statement was finally adopted, reducing tensions and putting an end to theological hostility. Although the hostilities died down, the ongoing quest to define our faith in a single statement - or series of statements has continued.

Why is this so important? Imagine for a moment, you are sitting around a dinner table with family members you haven’t seen in a while. They are all talking about their church or synagogue or mosque. One of them turns to you and asks “Don’t you go to that Unity-arian church? What do ya’ll believe anyway?” And you find yourself desperately wanting to have a single statement - what we call your elevator speech in mind – to express this faith which has given you faith in religious community again. You stammer a bit at first – and then, you recall the first of the UU’s Seven Principles: “We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of all persons...” and then, you remember another one “and the free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” The faces around the table look puzzled, so you remember what your children were taught in Sunday School, “we’re the church of the open mind, the open heart and open hands...” and then you go on to tell them what you’ve learned as a member of this church. What your children and teenagers have learned. Your family may still look uncertain, but at least they are assured that you are not attending the Church of Satan.

Whether you are a long-time member of this church, or of Unitarian Universalism; or if you are brand new to our faith, the desire to define who we are continues to evolve. We don’t have anything like the Nicene Creed that has remain essentially unchanged since the 381 CE, which is a clear statement of belief. For some evangelical Christians, to profess one’s faith is simply to say: “I accept Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior.” But the closest thing we have to a statement of things commonly believed among us – are what’s known as the Seven Principles and Six Sources of Unitarian Universalism. An older version of these can be found inside the front cover of the grey hymnal, which were adopted in 1984 and 1985 General Assemblies – the annual gathering of UU congregations which had to vote on “things commonly believed among us”, to include them in our By-laws, of all places.

Since the publication of this hymnal, many Unitarian Universalists have joined in advocating for adding what’s called “the eighth principle” – which reflects our commitment to becoming an anti-racist, anti-oppressive institution; and back in 1995 we DID add a 6<sup>th</sup> source, which is: **Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions** which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Since 1986, the Seven Principles and the Sources of our Faith have been posted, summarized, liturgized, and re-framed for teaching to our children. Overall they seem to have captured the hearts

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<sup>2</sup> Lyttle, Charles H. *Freedom Moves West*. Pg. 189

and minds of Unitarian Universalists ever since, as a good summary of our faith - until for enough people, they didn't any more, for many different reasons.

And this brings us to the discussion and vote which will be on the floor of the continental General Assembly of Unitarian Universalists in June 21-25 in Pittsburgh, PA in person and on-line. At that General Assembly Unitarian Universalist will be asked to vote on a new statement of "things commonly believed among us," which will replace the Principles and Sources of our faith as we have known them since the mid 1980's. You can look the recommendation up in a web browser under the shorthand phrase "UUA Article II Commission" because that is where they appear in the UUAs by-laws.

Ordinarily, I try to avoid doing sermons that may feel like insider baseball. But, as you may recall, two of the five tasks of interim ministry is to explore a congregation's identity and to help forge deeper denominational connections. Being connected to this larger conversation about the ways in which we express our faith as Unitarian Universalists will have implications not only for those who are here now – but for our children and grandchildren's generation to come. It is both a statement of theological beliefs and our identity as a faith tradition. So it's important, not only for that dinner conversation with your relatives, but what we teach in religious education; how we frame adult faith formation and what is not only posted on our walls, but what gets written on our hearts.

The first thing you'll notice is that the two-fold formulation of Principles and Sources – in the form we have known them since 1985– is gone. Instead, the UUA Board instructed the Article II Commission to consider Love (with a Capital L) as the unifying affirmation. This is what they said: *We therefore charge this commission to root its work in Love as a principal that guide in its work; attending particularly to the ways that we (and our root traditions) have understood and articulated Love, and how we have acted out of Love.*"<sup>3</sup>

The other instruction the Commission got was from the 2021 General Assembly which overwhelmingly voted to instruct the Commission to "include in the principles a clear and direct statement that accountable systemic anti-racist and anti-oppressive actions to build Beloved Community are part of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist".

So, with these two charges, the Article II Study Commission got to work. The Commission hosted webinars and zoom sessions. They reached out to dozens of stakeholders; heard hundreds of pieces of advice from hundreds of members. They prepared small group ministry packets and held focus groups, individual interviews. One of the chairs reached out to me for my opinion on how these new statements might be used in worship and liturgically. Instead of the Principles, Purposes and Sources, they have substituted Values and Covenant.

Why? The commission wrote this: "[while] the principles express a shared ethic...it does not name these values explicitly, nor does it name many other values important to us collectively. It also gives no guidance on how we might approach living out these values in our congregations and the world." As far as the covenant part of this, the commission rightfully noted that currently our Principles ask us only to "affirm and promote...", but we believe we should expect more from a covenant." The commission states. As one member put it "we need more verbs"

They also felt – not surprisingly- that our current principles and sources were too wordy. They created seven single-word values, each with a short sentence of explication, would be easier to

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.uua.org/files/2023-02/article-II-study-report-2021-23.pdf>

remember and could be used as touchstones in our conversations, in congregational governance and in our education settings. Those words can be found on the cover of your order of service this morning. 9:00 AM These short statements are also the ones which we read as part of the responsive reading this morning.

My first reaction to this massive change may have been similar to yours. I crossed my arms, drew up a grimace and got a bit grumpy. Love at the center of our faith? How Hallmarky I thought. Interdependence, Pluralism, justice – might as well say “mom and apple pie.” Besides, I know the old principles and sources almost by heart. They mean something to me. They have become my sacred texts. But then, I heeded the advice from the commission – which is actually a helpful practice for a lot of things we may encounter for the first time.

They suggested: *Read it the first time and observe how it makes you feel. Read it a second time and observe what it makes you think; and then read it a third time before thinking about any suggestions.* So I did – and something in my heart began to soften. I realized that I wanted to cling to that which was familiar and comforting. As abstract as the principles and sources may seem, I remember when I first encountered them and how thrilling they were to me. Could anything repeat that first experience – almost like the first time you fell in love? And I realized no – the Principles and the Sources that I knew represented a time and a place in my relationship with this faith that doesn't necessarily reflect the ways in which Unitarian Universalism has changed NOW.

When I first came into Unitarian Universalism, we were still doing sweat lodges as part of our understanding of what it meant to be multicultural. We talked about racial justice without having a clear understanding of how white supremacy culture has shaped Unitarian Universalism. We looked back nostalgically on our involvement in the civil rights era without fully acknowledging the pain of what was then called the Black Empowerment Controversy. We gave lip service to the presence of GLBTQAI persons but many churches would never considering hiring a gay or lesbian Religious Education Director. . A lot has changed. And so have I – and so have you – and so have we – those who align ourselves with this particular faith tradition.

So here's how my mind changed. I've begun to see the integrity of both the process and the outcome of this new Values and Covenant that we are being asked to consider. I'm beginning to love what the Commission has put forward. Here's a few things I'm falling in love with:

- I love that they use seven single-word values to describe our principles. As you can see, the other six values included in the cover diagram surrounding Love are Interdependence, Equity, Transformation, Pluralism, Generosity, and Justice. Each of them is defined by a short descriptive sentence, followed by aspirational statements of actions that we covenant to take together.

- I love the fact that the new statement explicitly seeks to preserve each of the Seven Principles within the new statement – sometimes using carry-over words and phrases, sometimes in different language with similar meanings.

- I love that instead of just “affirming and promoting”, each of those values is followed by a covenant statement about what we promise together to do as Unitarian Universalists who hold these values in common.

- I love that the Commission encourages us to let go of a laundry list of our spiritual sources, and instead invites us to affirm the diverse inspirations from sacred and secular sources that ground and sustain us.

Finally, I love the fact that a new statement of inclusion commits us to being an association that empowers and enhances everyone's participation, especially those with historically marginalized identities.

I don't know where all this is going to end up, but, if there is anything that I hope you will carry away from this sermon today, it is this: The effort to articulate what is commonly believed among us is as old as liberal religion. It is a part of our living tradition that, as our 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian James Luther Adams said: "is not bequeathed through some law of inheritance: it must be earned, not without dust and heat, and not without humbling grace." This proposal will be voted on at General Assembly this June; and if it passes this first vote, will go onto a second one in June 2024. I won't be able to go to GA this year in person, but I am signed up as a voting delegate to watch it here, at Unity Church. I encourage you to watch it with me and together, we'll continue the conversation.

When Worship Associate Sara Ford and I were discussing this service, I asked her to see if she could find a reading that would somehow illuminate this process without hammering home a particular point of view. She found Nikki Giovanni's poem "a journey." I love it, because it poetically describes the process we're in right now – as we make this journey into an old and new identity.

*"I have heard," she writes "from previous visitors, the road washing out sometimes and passengers are compelled to continue groping, or turn back, [and] I am not afraid of rough spots..I don't fear the success of this endeavor..."*

For all the dust and heat that has been kicked up from this process of exploring our identity; of wandering in the wilderness; of trying to find our way back home, we will do this together, with humbling grace and with the sure knowledge that a living faith is an evolving faith. My prayer for us is that we continue to evolve in such a way as to keep opening our embrace to include all who place love at the center of their values...and that we continue to cultivate a spirit of gratitude and hope for our faith and our future – together. May it be so.