



FREEDOM

The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our own faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community.

Freedom rests at the paradoxical heart of our country. In 1775, American colonists created a “don’t tread on me” flag that proclaimed liberty or death in the fight against Great Britain, and that sense of prickly patriotism remains a vibrant — and malleable — part of American culture. Civil rights leaders organized “Freedom Summer” in 1965 in an effort to win basic voting rights. In his influential *Capitalism and Freedom*, economist Milton Friedman argues the free market created political freedom. Former President George W. Bush justified a 2004 invasion of Iraq with the slogan “freedom is on the march.” When quarterback Colin Kaepernick knelt on the sidelines to protest police brutality, his actions spurred a feverish debate about freedom of speech, with Kaepernick’s supporters and detractors both presenting themselves as defenders of American freedom. A constant yearning to be free pulsates through our history, shaping American identity itself.

Unitarian Universalists feel similarly passionate in their celebration of religious freedom. Our fourth principle makes a “free and responsible search for truth and meaning” an act of religious devotion. Our hymnal has an entire section on Freedom songs. In the hymn *As Tranquil Streams* (#145), we sing about “a freedom that reveres the past, but trusts the dawning future more.” This freedom reminds us that revelation is not sealed and that searching for deeper truths and prophetic answers is a part of our religious call.

Of course, that fourth principle has changed over the years, and it’s worth considering what that teaches us about our relationship to freedom. For example, a “free and responsible search” used to be *first* on the list, the starting point of UU principles. In 1985, it was demoted to the fourth spot, as the “inherent worth and dignity of all

people” became our first principle. The wording changed as well. When the Unitarians and the Universalists merged in 1961, we took a principled stand “to strengthen one another in a free and disciplined search for truth as the foundation of religious fellowship.” In its most recent formulation, the word disciplined disappeared. And instead of searching for “truth as the foundation of religious fellowship,” we seek out “truth and meaning” without a sense of relationship.

Yet individual freedom of thought can never alone sustain spiritual growth. Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams proclaimed that a free person’s faith required working in community, being part of a larger whole. “The free person will be unfree,” Adams said, “will be a victim of tyranny from within or from without, if his or her faith does not assume form, in both word and deed.” For Adams, freedom demands that “we yoke ourselves to each other because a commanding, sustaining, transforming reality finds its richest focus ... in free, cooperative efforts for the common good.” Most of us probably think of yokes as antithetical to freedom, evoking bondage and repression, not freedom and liberation. But Adams believed that individual freedom cannot not bring liberation. Thinking ourselves to freedom is not the only way. Working together with others — and sometimes deferring to their ideas — helps us achieve our collective liberation.

Maybe the Easter story might help explain freedom in a fresh way. As Unitarians, Easter’s promise of the salvation of a risen Christ holds little sway, yet our history yokes us to this sacred day. So listen to the Rt. Rev. John Shelby Spong, an Episcopal bishop and theologian, who believes that Easter is best understood as an annual reminder to seek liberation for ourselves and

others. For Spong, Easter is the ultimate story of freedom, rather than a sacrificial redemption from sin.

In this telling, Jesus mattered because he lived a life of radical freedom, becoming “so frightening to those who are not free — and who cannot admit that they are not free — that they rise up in anger to destroy [him].” Jesus defied the cultural and social norms of his day, focusing on radical justice work even in the face of brutal imperial power. Remembering Jesus as an advocate for freedom and liberatory justice reminds us that what “human life needs is not a divine rescue. What we need is a life so open, so free, so whole, and so loving that when we experience that life, we are called into the reality of love.” In this telling of the Easter story, Spong reminds us, freedom means being open to love that transforms us and helps us transform our world.

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Freedom Theme Resources

BOOKS

Common Sense by Thomas Paine (2018 reprint)

Making All Black Lives Matter: Reimagining Freedom in the Twenty-First Century by Barbara Ransby (2018)

Voice of Freedom: Fannie Lou Hamer: The Spirit of the Civil Rights Movement by Carole Boston Weatherford (2015)

A Room of One’s Own by Virginia Woolf (1989 reprint)

MOVIES

13th: A Documentary (2016)

Free Solo (2018)