

Embodied Faith**A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation****By The Rev. CJ McGregor****Delivered on June 13, 2021**

Father's Day is near and I've been reflecting on my own father. I was raised Catholic by my mother and my father wanted nothing to do with it. This caused a small amount of tension in my house. It was what it was. My father simply did not participate in anything having to do with religion. My mother made up for it though being a devout Catholic. She was catholic enough for us all. I knew what blasphemy was before starting the first grade, at St. Mary's Parochial School mind you. Though my father didn't participate in our faith he would sometimes mock it which led to my mother calling him a blasphemer. I hold my father responsible for all the trouble I caused at my Catholic school. I learned from him to ask questions and not accept the dishonest dogma of my mother's faith.

Though my father didn't profess allegiance to a particular faith, I can look back now and understand exactly what he believed. Growing up my family was so poor. You're supposed to say, "How poor were you?" Let's try that again. Growing up my family was so poor. We were so poor the mice moved out of our house. One particular act of kindness involving my father that occurred when I was nearly eight years old is stamped on my memory. My father returned from work one afternoon during the Thanksgiving season. He carried a turkey that he received from his employer as all employees at his place of work did each Thanksgiving. I remember my parents talking about how grateful they were because there would likely not be enough money for a turkey for our Thanksgiving table. We relied on food donations collected at my Catholic school to eke out a Thanksgiving dinner.

This bird was not destined for our table. I remember watching my father carry and offer the turkey to a neighboring family. We could have really used the turkey, but the generosity of my father was greater than his fear of scarcity. It has recently occurred to me that this act of generosity was in fact an act of "paying it forward." We had received food through donations so it made sense to my father to share the wealth and deliver the turkey to a family that might not have as much as we would have—as little as it may be. This experience and many others like it have assisted me in developing a deep and genuine concern for the needs of others—spiritual and otherwise.

My childhood kitchen table was routinely graced by people with disabilities, in emotional distress, hungry, homeless, struggling with addiction, gay and lesbian folk all challenged by an inhospitable world. I watched my father, my family, welcome everyone to the table and as folks sat a while they were treated with dignity and were offered support, fellowship, and love. My father expressed compassion for others, generosity, understanding, acceptance of differences, and giving voice to the "underdog." These expressions of faith from a man who claimed no faith have become expressions of my faith today. The embodiment of faith offered to me by my father.

It is no surprise to me that I have dedicated my life through ministry in service to others. Prior to the ministry I chose to champion the rights and dignity of people with developmental and emotional disabilities. It is also no surprise that my voluntary associations have been with grassroots organizations reaching out to support others. My life, spirit, and my ministry have been deeply touched by witnessing the generosity and service to others by a man who said he had no faith.

In Paul's letter to the Romans he wrote, "confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart." Paul is telling early Christians to embody a Christ centered theology and in order to embody it one must not only say it, but live it, carry it in your heart. I hold this up not as a truth for us, but as an example of how faith is embodied. An embodiment of faith is not about appearances or lip service. It's not about good feelings. Embodiment of faith is a series of gestures or how we express our faith with our eyes, ears, mouth, feet, and healing hands. That is exactly what Paul is saying. Don't just say what you believe, show what you believe, embody it. How many times in your life have you been told to practice what you preach? I whisper this to myself all the time because I have a couple of hundred people watching. I embody my faith not only because that is what is expected of me. I embody my faith because that's how Unitarian Universalists live. And having dedicated my life to Unitarian Universalism, that is how I live. Our faith is a living faith.

Authority in our postmodern culture has been transferred from those who express their faith in action to those who merely talk about their faith in a vacuum. It's easy to find examples of this. Throughout President Donald Trump's election, and the time since, evangelicals have been among his staunchest supporters. Trump's rise revealed an evangelical movement more nationalistic than religious. People go to church every Sunday, testify of a god, read quotes and defend themselves with Bible verses, but beyond this false shadow is a reality. They leave church and oppress, discriminate, exclude, and judge. From creation to the end, Scripture (Bible) does not reveal a God of all talk no action but a God of action, of works, of signs miracles and wonders – indeed a God of less talk and more action. Indeed, when you remove the false cover of crammed Bible verses, and you look personally in their lives, you will wonder where is this god they are talking of. An empty wagon makes the most noise. Embodying our faith is a practice that encourages an ongoing attentiveness in every circumstance of life. Our UU faith is not just a segment of our lives—it is our life.

Last Sunday I held up James Luther Adams, Unitarian minister and theologian. In fact, I've held up Adams hundreds of times in this sanctuary. Beyond the reason and intellectualism of our tradition I think one of the most important things to understand as a Unitarian Universalist is the embodiment of our faith. Adams says there is no need for us to go from person to person to tell and explain our personal theology. They only need to look at our voluntary associations to discern what we believe. That is, they only need to look at the life we are living, engaging, and practicing to tell what we believe. This is foundational for living our UU faith. That is why I cite Adams so often. As Unitarian Universalists we MUST grasp this.

Do you remember when you weren't a UU then watched or listened to a UU and said to yourself, "Oh my god, I am a Unitarian Universalist or Wait a minute I'm a UU!" Or maybe someone observed your life and your actions and told you that you were UU. You were living like a UU who embodies UU values, your virtues were a match. This what being a Unitarian Universalist means. We live what we believe.

Our faith is focused not on what we believe, but how we love. It is a fact that people with the most fervent and orthodox beliefs have been known to engage in some of the most dastardly acts. Christopher Hitchens and other prominent non-believers take great pleasure in pointing out this discrepancy in religious faith. I would agree with Hitchens that the rise of fundamentalism in various parts of our world is one of the most frightening of contemporary social and political developments. When we place another beneath us, set apart from us, we tear out a part of our human heart, and then anything goes, for that person has become Other. For Unitarian Universalists, the question is never “What do you believe?” but rather “What kind of person have you become? What are the fruits of your living?”

Every strand of the UU tradition holds up a mirror to our lives and to the society in which we live. *We are a profoundly human faith.* Whether we see our charge as loving our neighbor or ending the suffering of all sentient beings, whether a transcendent dimension is part of our worldview or not, our primary focus for religious action is the well-being of this world. We wrestle with our ideas about human limitation and human power and acknowledge that our understandings are imperfect.

We are a responsible faith. At our best, we are able to respond to our deep sense of interconnectedness with both the natural and human worlds. Whatever our source of religious inspiration, we understand that humanity must take its responsibility for the state of the world seriously. We humans have created many of the ills from which we and all creatures on this planet suffer. We have the ability to relieve suffering, if only we find the will to do so. Our diverse sources of religious inspiration power our will to act.

We are a hopeful faith. We are a faith of possibilities, aspiring to be a transformative faith, a justice-seeking faith. We would create a space for the realization of possibility, called “Beloved Community.”

The choice to belong to the UU faith tradition is a choice to embrace a call to the disciplined embodiment of our values and commitments. Our values include fairness, compassion, respect, responsibility, and honesty. Our fundamental commitment is to live a life in service to these values and to live that life in covenantal community with others who have also committed to live such a life. As simple as this may sound, the work of embodiment is complicated and messy. When we strive to embody our values and commitments and live a life that is morally engaged we inevitably encounter ethical dilemmas where deeply held values and commitments appear to be in conflict.

This can give rise to moral anguish, inner conflict, and even interpersonal strife. Some people may be inclined to avoid conflict and the kind of work embodying values and commitments requires of us. Those people will likely depart from the UU faith tradition. Those who remain are those who find joy and meaning in the call to embody our values and commitments, and all the work that embodiment asks of us. I hope all of you find that joy and meaning in our community life. I am glad to journey with you who have chosen this faith as we share the work of embodiment together. If my father was alive today, I’d call him this Father’s Day and ask him, “Do you know you’re a UU?

May it be so.

