

Sermon: “Answering the Call of Love” by Rev. Jason Cook

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If you've looked ahead on your order service you know we're going to be singing the song “Standing on the Side of Love” today, only we are going to be singing it as “answering the call of love” instead. The composer, Jason Shelton, has asked us to sing it that way from now on. The question is why?

In a word: ableism.

Ableism may be a new word to many of you. It refers to the discrimination against people with disabilities. This might include obvious expressions of hate, institutionalized discrimination in the form of systems that keep disabled people in poverty, and rejection of housing or job applications. So what does this have to do with this song, “Standing on the Side of Love?”

I remember several years ago when the “Standing on the Side of Love” campaign began in the Unitarian Universalist Church. Everyone was so excited with their buttons and those unmistakable mustard gold T-shirts. That color, not particularly flattering on most people, was chosen because it made us stand out. And there we were fighting the good fight all over the country, standing in our yellow shirts in front of White House fighting for marriage equality, in Arizona for immigrant rights, on reservations declaring indigenous peoples' water rights and on and on and on. “Standing on the Side of Love” was the slogan, and it even had its own theme song.

But beginning a few years ago, something began to be acknowledged. Our UU community, meant to be so inclusive, was not being experienced as such by some people. In particular, those who were disabled with issues around mobility did not find our churches welcoming. Back east, there's all those old historic New England churches with all their steps and narrow passageways. After all, some of the oldest operating continuously operating church buildings in the United States are Unitarian Universalist, such as Boston's King's Chapel, located right along the Freedom Trail alongside Unitarian Paul Revere's house and Benjamin Franklin's statue. And old, historic buildings are not known for their accessibility. And so the very people

that we say we particularly want to include in our community, the marginalized, those who do not feel welcome elsewhere, those who've experienced oppression in various forms, began to say we weren't doing such a great job of being hospitable to them. And this was reflected in things like our music: all those songs about "guide my feet while I run this race," or "we shall walk hand in hand" or "come, walk in rain with me." And in our very theme song one needed to *stand* to be on the side of love. What if you can't stand--what if sitting is your way of being in the world day in and day out? Sure, we can think of "standing" as a metaphorical term but when we start tracing the roots of why standing for something is a good thing, we begin to see ableism at its core. We begin to notice that words like crippled or lame or blind or deaf or idiot or dumb all come from this dualistic notion that there is a good way to be in the world and a bad way to be. These words deny the reality of some people's existence. "Standing on the Side of Love" reminded some disabled people every time they heard it that we weren't paying attention to the fact that there are multiple, valid ways to be in the world.

A lot of people feel resistance the first time they think about this. After all, language is full of metaphor and they say we can't worry too much about the origin of words. In the 1980s, those same arguments were used when some said it didn't matter if we said mankind instead of humankind because, of course, mankind included women. But we eventually moved through that conversation to make sure our hymn book is reflective of gender inclusive language. This is what we do. We go above and beyond the cultural norms to be inclusive. And this is why we listen when disabled people say "Standing on the Side of Love" is not the best way to talk about who we are as a people, at this particular point in time, anyway. And so, composer Jason Shelton, after doing some deep soul-searching and resisting for a while as we all do when we are confronted with something new, finally announced last week that he no longer wanted the song to be sung as "standing on the side of love." He wanted it to be sung as "answering the call of love."

This does two things. One, it addresses the issues that disabled people had in using the word stand as the preferred way of being and two, it suggests that there are no sides--that the world is too complex to be thought of as having sides. That as a people of faith, we are actively answering a call to love, not simply standing on a particular side. Late 19th century Universalist Lewis Beals Fisher said, "Universalists are often asked to tell where they stand. The only true answer to give to this question is that we do not stand at all: we *move*."

This change couldn't have come at a more appropriate time with the events of this week. Now is not time for us to dig ourselves into one place and stand on a particular side; it is time for us to *move*. It is not time for us to hold on to old ways of thinking and being; it is time for us to expand our circles of empathy. It is time for us to think beyond what we know. A few years ago people scoffed at the idea that the word "standing" could be hurtful to some. And yet here we are as a movement beginning to change around this issue, beginning to recognize that something that causes a group of people pain should be acknowledged and responded to. That we can change and adapt and be flexible. And so we now "answer the call of love."

But talking about love when we are disappointed and upset can seem counterintuitive. It is Martin Luther King who reminds us. "Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred." That can be a hard thing to do. We can feel anger when things don't go the way we want, and anger undirected can fester into bitterness and hate. Or we can take our anger as a sign that we are called to do something.

Unitarian Universalist James Luther Adams said, "A church that does not concern itself with the struggle in history for human decency and justice, a church that does not show concern for the shape of things to come, a church that does not attempt to interpret the signs of the times, is not a prophetic church." What is the prophetic church? "The prophetic liberal church is the church in which persons think and work together to interpret the signs of the times in the light of their faith, to make explicit through discussion the epochal thinking that the times demand. The prophetic liberal church is the church in which all members share in the common responsibility to attempt to foresee the consequences of human behavior. . .with the intention of making history in place of merely being pushed around by it."

I like that: we're not going to be pushed around by history. Instead, we *make* history. And how do we do that? We do that by responding just as we did to this idea of ableism. We listen, we wrestle with it, we struggle, we even grieve for the old, and then we find new openings in our hearts and minds. We respond thoughtfully, creatively, courageously. We answer the call of love, which isn't some greeting card platitude—it's hard. No wonder it's easier to give into hate, into authoritarianism, into the kind of governing that values order and control over personal freedom—we've seen that countless times in history, we see it glaringly in our world today, at this moment in time.

But to answer the call of love—this is what we do. This is who we are. Tough times call for a tough faith. This is the faith tradition we have chosen to be part of. This is the faith tradition that historically answered the call of love when both Universalists and Unitarians said, “Wait a minute; we don’t think only certain people are worthy of salvation. We think all people have value.” And out of that one thought grew so much we almost take for granted today in the United States: kindergarten started by Unitarian Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, votes for women thanks to Universalist Susan B. Anthony, humane lives for the intellectually disabled thanks to Unitarian Dorothea Dix, the American Red Cross thanks to Universalist Clara Barton, schools for the blind thanks to Unitarian Samuel Gridley Howe, female clergy thanks to the first ordained American woman minister, Universalist Olympia Brown—and I could go on and on for days. Really. This is the legacy we are tied to. Social services in this country were created directly out of our tradition in the early 1800s. These were people who answered the call of love—who went against the tide of society, who advocated for a loving, just society that was unheard of at the time.

I like to say that Unitarian Universalism is the great American religion—*that nobody’s ever heard of*. And, of course, that’s not really true—lots of people have heard of us, but nowadays, most of them are scholars and historians. Once upon a time thousands flocked to hear the words of Unitarians like Ralph Waldo Emerson or Theodore Parker, Unitarian preachers who espoused revolutionary ideas that shook up this nation, made us rethink what it meant to be human, made us face our own complicity in the horrors of slavery. Once upon a time whole towns and villages gathered to hear the words of those uniquely American circuit riding Universalist preachers like Quillen Shin or Thomas Starr King with their messages of unconditional love. Somewhere along the way, we’ve forgotten how to bring our message to the people—and now, more than ever, people need to hear our message. We represent an antidote to authoritarianism, and believe me, there are likely people hurting out there even more than some are in here. There are people who are already disenfranchised who are feeling more isolated. Heck, I even had a stranger call me this week. He had found our church on the internet and was desperate to speak with someone. Elderly, poor, on government assistance, on the verge of being homeless, he now saw no future possibilities ahead for him. He just wanted someone—anyone—to listen.

And what about others, those who would embrace authoritarianism? Why would they do so? Well, there is something attractive in the idea of giving power to someone else, someone who will supposedly buck the system, shake things up, and who promises that things will be better. People want to believe in that. They want to believe things will be better.

And that's why I say the hardest thing I will say today: that if we are to answer the call of love, then we have to begin showing others that things can be better, but in a different way. We have to be compassionate, flexible, and we have to listen to others who think differently than us in that same way that we heard those concerns about ableism. Yes, we interrupt racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, transphobia, and so on when we witness it—no doubt about that—but we can't answer the call of love if we haven't listened first to the question. We can remain unmovable and think ourselves superior, we can think we know it all, but that will do nothing for us. And all those patron saints of our faith tradition, those who built this country, whose ghosts haunt the freedom trail in Boston, whose memories live on in New England and all over—those Unitarians and Universalists call us now to live up to their legacy. To be that prophetic church that isn't pushed around by history, but makes history. To be the Great American Church that *everybody's* heard of because we stop thinking we're above telling people about ourselves, because we start inviting our neighbors to come visit, because we start doing the things that really welcome people who might be different from us. Because we stop putting our individual needs first and start thinking as a larger movement, thinking as people committed to offering refuge and being courageous changemakers.

And so today, if you feel grief or despair, I don't ask that you move out of it at this moment. Sit in your grief or despair for a while longer. We all have to take our time.

But when you are ready, we have work to do. And we are some of the people who can do it. We are the people who can offer sanctuary to immigrants who need it now, more than ever, who can show solidarity to our Muslim neighbors, who can protect the rights of the BLGTQ community. We are the people who welcome in atheists and agnostics and theists. We are the people who say that what matters most, what is central to the experience of going to church, isn't a set of beliefs about the afterlife or narratives about a particular god, but how we treat each other as human beings, how we live out our lives on this planet. That understandings of God and what stories and sacred texts are of value are going to vary from person to person, but at our core all humanity should share the value of being loving, kind, just human beings who answer the call of love over and over. That this idea is foundational to religious life, that everything else—and I say this with full respect--is a different way of dressing it up, sometimes profoundly and meaningfully, but nonetheless different clothes upon the same central idea.

And know that we can grow and change, but always true to this love central to our core. That while once we *stood* on the side of love, now we *answer* that call, and that is because we took the time to listen, grow, change, and be flexible. We will need those skills in the coming years ahead. We will need to not stand on one side and call it love—we will need to move through multiple places and spheres, answering the call of love wherever we hear it, even when it's faint, even when it's obscured by the ugly cloak of racism or xenophobia. We will look for love where we can find it and we will nurture it, protect it, and grow it. And, if we do that, there can be change. And even we will change in the process. We owe it to our Unitarian and Universalist forebears. We owe it to ourselves. But most of all, we owe it to this country and all the diverse, wonderful, wounded, fragile, strong, whole, and broken people in it.

Let us not just hope but let us do the work so that our hearts and minds will be open to hear that call and to answer it.

Love needs us. Love calls us. Let us answer that call.

As Unitarian Universalists. As Americans. As citizens of the world.

May it be so.