

# Loving Your Neighbor and Keeping the Holy Days

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Of the six sources of our living tradition the fourth source is “Jewish and Christian Teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.” For some UU’s, negative experiences in Jewish or Christian congregations has led to a discounting of these traditions as a resource. And yet the depths and richness of both these traditions have much to offer us if we will only look. Today I’d like to explore, with you, a few of these insights and look at the ways they might enrich our lives.

In Judaism I’d like for us to think about liberation, the experience of wilderness and the call to keep the holy days. In Christianity there is Jesus’ radical interpretation of the Hebrew God’s call to love your neighbor and there is the miraculous experience of Grace.

The story of the book of Exodus tells the story of liberation that is central to the identity of the Jewish people. We are told that the Hebrew people were enslaved in Egypt. In his book Understanding the Bible John Buehrens, former president of the UUA observes that in many ways the Hebrew people were like Hispanics who cross the boarder into the United States. Driven by famine the people came to Egypt looking for opportunity. They were not chattel slaves in the sense that they were not bought and sold but rather exploited workers, building cities and temples for the glory of Pharaoh.

The scriptures tell us that God called to Moses from a bush alight with fire that even so was not consumed. And God told Moses he had heard the groaning cries of his people and that Moses was elected to lead his people to freedom.

How many of us have not felt enslaved in one way or another? Perhaps our slavery is not due to material poverty, perhaps it is a poverty of the soul. Who among us have not felt that we would like for God to hear and acknowledge our sorrow, our groaning; that we would like some company in the darkness?

This part of the Exodus story holds this up as a possibility. The possibility that when we cry out our cries will not go unheard.

Moses, much against his better judgment, goes to Egypt and with his brother Aaron asks the Pharaoh to let his people go. The Pharaoh’s heart is hard and it takes ten plagues visited upon Egypt before he allows the Hebrew people to go. Then he changes his mind and amasses his army to bring them back. They escape because of the miracle of the parting of the Red Sea. There is a midrash or rabbinic commentary that says that it was not until Moses placed his staff in the sea that it parted. Another midrash says that it was not until the people stepped into the water itself that the miracle occurred. And there is a feminist midrash that says the first step was taken by Moses’ sister Miriam. The same sister who saved him when he was a babe in arms.

What the rabbis are saying is that a leap of faith and more than that a commitment was made before the waters parted.

What kind of commitment can each of us claim for our own liberation? What leaps of faith are we willing to take to be liberated from our fear? From our assumptions about the limitations in our lives? Who among us will take the first step?

And so the people are led out of Egypt but not immediately to the promised land. They must sojourn in the wilderness for forty years. During this time they are given manna from heaven to sustain them but

more than that they are given the law. The law is the gift of the covenant with God. When the people are given the law they say “All that the Lord has spoken we will do and we will hear” or “We will do and we will understand”.

We children of the enlightenment think that understanding must come first. But the people of Israel are saying something different. They are saying to God we will be in covenantal relationship with you. We will do first and by doing we will understand. We will keep the holy days.

Why keep the holy days? Why indulge in empty ritual? What is the sense of that? In his book God Was Not In The Fire Rabbi Daniel Gordis sites many reasons for ritual. Two of these are ritual as a source of connection, and ritual as a mitzvah or command.

While there are holy days throughout the year in Judaism there is also the weekly observance of Shabbat. God’s command in Exodus is *“the Israelite people shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout the ages as a covenant for all time: it shall be a sign for all time between Me and the people of Israel. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth and on the seventh day he ceased from work and rested.*

When the kids were little and therefore less likely to object John and I instituted a monthly observance of the Sabbath. Like most UU’s we tailored it to our own needs. None the less on the weekend I didn’t have to prepare a service we turned off the phone on Friday afternoon when Sam got home from school and for twenty four hours we didn’t use anything electronic, we didn’t watch TV or use the computer, we did not buy anything, we didn’t drive anywhere and if the phone rang we didn’t know it. In many ways it was a subversive act for we removed ourselves from the consumer culture. If people wanted to talk to us they had to come visit. It was a time of extraordinary quiet. It was a time to really value relationships. We read with our children. We really visited with friends and deepened our sense of community. We walked to the library. When we went on sabbatical we let the practice go and I regret that we did. Unfortunately to re-institute it would invite the wrath of our children and I’m a bit embarrassed to admit that, at least at this point, I don’t have the energy to fight that fight,

Then again perhaps I don’t have the energy because I have not built Sabbath into my life. Perhaps not the orthodox way we did it. But a time to reconnect, to really see the people in my life, to renew my love for them and for God.

Keeping the Sabbath is also a command. Now in our individualistic society we don’t like the idea of that. We want to be freed from the “shoulds” of life. Rabbi Nancy Fuchs tells the story of her daughter’s first day of middle school. Up to that time Fuchs’ had no idea really if keeping the Sabbath had meaning for her children. That day her daughter came home with a planner she had been given in order to organize the more complicated homework expectations of middle school. Fuchs could see that her daughter felt pressured. Then her daughter sat down with the planner and immediately crossed out Friday evening through Saturday exclaiming “I can’t do homework on the Sabbath.” And Fuchs cheered silently thinking “Yes! The Law makes us free!”

Another reason obligation is not such a bad thing is that sometimes that is all we have to keep us going. Sometimes faith leaves us. Sometimes we doubt all that we held to be true, sometimes we are truly at sea and ritual can be an anchor. I was once told a story of a young woman whose husband died and who left her with two small children. Looking back on that time the woman said “You know I wanted to die myself but we were out of peanut butter.” In this obligation to buy the peanut butter she kept the holy days until life had meaning again. She kept the holy days and in keeping them she saw to it that her children did not lose faith in life.

Judaism teaches that God will hear our cries. That we can be liberated from slavery, even if that slavery is of our own making. There are gifts awaiting us, even or perhaps especially, in the wilderness.

And if we keep the holy days, the holy days will help us to love more deeply and in the dark times will see us through.

And what of Christianity? What can it offer us? I was raised a Unitarian Universalist and when I was 36 I was baptized by a good friend and teacher of mine. Within the baptismal liturgy was the question "Will you proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ?" As we went over the liturgy before the ceremony I said of that question "I can answer yes to that if you understand that I can do that without mentioning Jesus" He answered "I believe it can be done. I don't believe I could do it but I believe it can be done."

In saying this I was following in fairly exalted footsteps, at least as far as the Unitarian tradition was concerned. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian Minister and Transcendentalist Theodore Parker preached the sermon we heard an excerpt of today. Amid his many flowery words his ultimate conclusion was that doctrines and dogmas, sects and theology were transient and would change with the times or pass away. He suggested, much to the horror of his contemporaries, that even Jesus himself was not essential to the truth of Christianity. The truth, what would endure, was love of God and Love of Neighbor. God is love and so we are called to love one another, this lies at the core of Universalism as well. Simple. Simple but not easy.

In his story of the Good Samaritan Jesus sets forth a radical interpretation of the command to love your neighbor. He gives us an outcast of society and shows that when all the socially acceptable people passed by the wounded man, it was the Samaritan alone who stopped to care for him. The outcast, the scorned man is the neighbor whom we are called to love. And maybe more difficult for us, it is the wealthy, the Christian fundamentalist, the CEO of a socially irresponsible company that we are called to love. We may not like them much but we are called to love them.

This radical love was the foundation of the work of Martin Luther King. This radical love is embodied in the Amish community who reached out in forgiveness to the family of the man who killed their children. These are the big examples. These are the examples that may intimidate us. And yet we can be part of this call to radical love in small ways as well.

Novelist and minister Frederick Buechner tells of being in a small grocery store with his wife who reminded him of his diet when he asked her to grab the cream. "Well" he replied "You only live once" to which the harried woman at the register interjected "Isn't once enough?" And Buechner writes: I said "You only live once," and the woman said, "Don't you think once is enough?" and in a way she was right. In our semi-deafness and semi-blindness, in our killing of time, our boredom, our thirst for the dream of tomorrow and our neglect of the miracle of today, to the degree that this or something like this is our life, once is certainly enough. But in another way, a thousand lives do not seem enough, not when we are really alive. ... We are really alive when we listen to each other, to the silences of each other as well as to the words and what lies behind the words. 'Looks as though we might get some rain' somebody says *Speak to me for Christ's sake. Know me. 'Don't you think once is enough?' I'm bored and tired as hell, if there's such a thing as hell. A cup of cold water.* We are really alive when we are together as human beings, when by sunset or daybreak or by fluorescence of a grocery store or the shabby twilight of a church the walls between us crumble a little... We are really alive when we love each other, when we look at each other and think "Grace and peace be with you, brother and friend". When there is such life as this once is not nearly enough."

Love one another. Listen to each other. Really listen for the words behind the words. The need, the wonder, the sorrow, the beauty. Listen for these.

In her book *Walking on Water* Christian author Madeleine L'Engle

tells the story of a Hassidic rabbi, renowned for his piety who was unexpectedly confronted one day by one of his devoted youthful disciples. In a burst of feeling, the young disciple exclaimed, 'My master, I love you!' The ancient teacher looked up from his books and asked his fervent disciple 'Do you know what hurts me my son'

The young man was puzzled. Composing himself he stuttered ‘I don’t understand you question, Rabbi. I am trying to tell you how much you mean to me, and you confuse me with irrelevant questions’

My question is neither confusing nor irrelevant rejoined the rabbi ‘For if you do not know what hurts me, how can you love me?’

We are afraid to ask ‘what hurts you?’ or at least I am sometimes.

And yet the essence of love is to know not only what hurts another but what gives them the greatest joy.

In writing about prayer author Margaret Guenther says that we often start out praying for those closest to us which is natural but the trick is not to get stuck there. She writes “When I quiet my words and let myself simply be open, I find myself praying for the people who are dying *right now*, the babies who are being born *right now*, the frail old woman lying sleepless in a nursing home, *right now*, the prisoners who are being tortured *right now*.” Such moments are moments of Grace for out of a deep sense of peace we are able to widen the circle of our love.

Grace is not something earned but something freely given. Grace is the moment that comes sometimes when we know in our bones we are loved. We are accepted. We are forgiven.

Theologian Paul Tillich wrote this about Grace “It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel our separation is deeper than usual... It strikes us when, year after year, the longed for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness and it is as though a voice were saying: ‘You are accepted. *You are accepted*, accepted by that which is greater than you the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything *Simply accept the fact you are accepted.*”

When we can accept, despite our estrangement and self-doubt, despite our imperfections, that we are acceptable, that we are loved for who we are; in those moments when we can simply accept this wonder and this mystery, we can reach out and love others more deeply and with great joy.

In our living tradition revelation is not sealed so who knows what other sources of wisdom may yet inspire and challenge us. In the meantime our Jewish and Christian heritage promises liberation and learning, radical love and abiding Grace. May it be so.