Except To Love One Another | Delivered Dec 9, 2007
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Reading: Romans 13-14

We heard from Paul this morning, *that* Paul, the biblical Paul, but not the usual texts. There's a lot to choose from. As a friend of mine said, "He sure was fond of writing letters." Because of that fondness, Paul was arguably the most influential writer in the Jesus Movement—that wing of ancient Judaism which evolved into the early Christian church--despite the fact that he probably never met Jesus, only saw and heard of him through others.

In those early days after Jesus' crucifixion his followers were all Jews, and the struggle was within Judaism—between those who believed that Jesus was their much-awaited messiah, and those who did not. As the authors of Acts tell it, the man who would be known as Paul began life as Saul, and was an active opponent to the Jesus Movement's message. His conversion and call experience, complete with vision and voice of God, bore the kind of certainty most Unitarian Universalist ministers would love to have. Peter had already been chosen to head the mission to Jews, but it was Saul of Tarsus, later known as Paul, who took up the controversial idea of a mission to people outside the Jewish faith. He had a kind of circuit ministry, moving from one place to another, bringing news of Jesus' salvific death to the Gentiles.

It was in the mission to the Gentiles that the theology of salvation by faith gained ground, since the Jewish purity laws were not understood to apply to non-Jews. The reformed faith preached by Paul was struggling with its identity—how could people who did not observe the circumcision and laws of the Abrahamic covenant be Jews? But how could people who believed in one God, and Jesus as the Messiah, be anything but Jews? This is before the days of Islam, and of course, before the formation of anything that we would identify as Christianity. The only known monotheistic religion in that part of the world at that time was Judaism, and Jewish identity was determined by birth or by conversion, and by observation of the laws as required by the covenant. There was no place in society's structure for a monotheistic, Torah-based, Messiah-believing religion other than Judaism.

But Paul's mission was to bridge the gap—to bring Jewish and Gentile believers together with some measure of mutual respect and cooperation. It was a dangerous time to believe in a Messiah—you could lose your job, you could be beaten, you could be ostracized, you could be killed. In many places, groups that got too big or powerful or visible were violently eliminated. These people needed each other for spiritual and social support—the church was too small to risk being divided. They had to get along despite their differences of practice, belief, and origin.

All they had to work from was their common belief that Jesus was a heaven-sent savior, come to make the world better and help them do the same.

By many scholars' reckoning, Paul's letter to the Romans is one of the last letters he wrote, assuming the Pastorals are pseudonymous (HarperCollins Study Bible, p. 2115). It was probably written sometime in the year 56 or 57 of the common era (p.2113), and sent from Corinth (p.2114) before he sailed to Jerusalem.

In that letter, Paul spends a lot of time explaining that Jewish traditions are valid, that there are good reasons to observe laws of the covenant, but that there are other paths to salvation, too—that the observant Jews do not have the one right way to salvation. He eventually expands this to non-judgment of others' practices and finally to honoring others' needs and not imposing one's practices on others. (Rom. 14)

And it was in this context, interpreting Torah for a transformed world, that Paul wrote this morning's reading: *owe no one anything except to love one another.* Another translation makes it clearer, saying, "*the one debt which is never repaid, which is our love for one another*".

What Paul is telling this potentially divided congregation is that of all the obligations they face, purity laws and circumcision and obedience to the ten Commandments, the one obligation above all the others is to love one another.

How powerful, how radical to preach this as an observant Jew to observant Jews and Gentiles together, to say yes, my tradition has power and worth, but it is not the only way to God's favor. Above all else, we must love one another.

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but love is at least as much in the experience as in the intention, and that means we need to say it, we need to mean it, we need to live it...and we have to be understood. Our communities are built as Paul's were, of individuals in relationship with each other, and like them, we must find common language for understanding each other's lives and faiths.

If this is not the work of a liberal spiritual community, to foster open-hearted connection among people, what is? We do not exist to impart dogma; we do not exist to impart creed; we do not believe that we are the only ones with the right answer, and THAT makes us compelled to find tools for conversation, because we are called together into community to share our truths, to share our hearts, to share ourselves.

And in our conversations we strive for dignity, we strive for respect we strive to honor the fundamental humanity that we share. We don't always meet our ideals, but we reach for them with great grasping stretching motions, and if we are willing to take risks we might just get there.

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When we were in high school, my friends and I were fond of saying "Bad communication is the root of all evil." It was a summary born of experience in the classroom, in the drama club, in planning youth conference after youth conference with everything from registration to dishes in the hands of volunteers. After workshop leaders didn't show up or dinner had to be improvised for lack of ingredients we would sit there, three or four or five youth in charge of everyone else's health and well-being, with the purposes and principles humming in the back of our minds. We couldn't just write off the people—we knew them to be good, well-meaning, generally responsible individuals (usually). We couldn't just write off the planning—we had done our best to be clear about what we needed, when, and why. Moving from link to link in the chain of events, we concluded that bad communication was the culprit. If people said they didn't know what or when or how they were supposed to do something, then either we hadn't told them clearly enough, or they hadn't been listening. Bad communication. If we all thought someone else had it covered, it was bad communication. Between 1989 and 1993 we were watching the Berlin Wall come down and the Soviet Union come apart. We had spent most of our childhoods in the stale end of the cold war, and we knew all about the red phone from Washington to the Kremlin. Bad communication, much easier theologically than a power-hungry angel named Lucifer, was something that we could all agree

existed, unlike god or heaven or hell or the devil. And it was something we could all imagine solving, like a complicated math problem, one step at a time.

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As my understanding of evil has evolved, I have moved away from this definition, and then back toward it. If “evil” and “sin” are ways of naming a brokenness in the world, then certainly bad communication is part of the problem…and that means that good communication is part of the solution.

Let’s make a world where we assume that we mean well.

Where we teach our children how to be loving and graceful with each other.

Where we learn how to be together in disagreement, where conflict means convergence and not separation.

The extraordinary possibility in our faith tradition has nothing to do with staying where we are comfortable and everything to do with the sticky messy work of transformation.

Speaking and being heard is tough work; we need all the help we can get.

When I lived in Minneapolis I recycled religiously, I composted, I conserved, I ate organic, I cooked for myself from local foods, I had no TV and didn't miss it. Why? Because everyone was doing it. Really. All my friends had compost bins on their counters or worm bins in their living rooms, we had a favored Community Supported Agriculture Farm and a grocery store that sold the foods we wanted to eat. Recycling was comingled at curbside and everyone knew what went in the blue bin and what didn't. When I left Minneapolis for Chicago I rapidly discovered that people got angry when I asked if they composted before putting my teabag in the trash.

I don’t know what they were thinking, but I can guess—I think they thought I was judging them if they didn't compost, using the question to subtly point out what they should have been doing. That's not what I meant, but that's what they heard. And they heard that because there was no culture of compost in Chicago. It just wasn't something people did. Recycling wasn't well-supported by the city, so it was haphazard at best. No one in the city had easy access to CSAs, and environmentalism meant walking to get groceries. It was a city, but it was not like Minneapolis, and the shift took some adjustment.

...and once I left the community which had so completely embraced environmentalism it was much harder to maintain it myself. I got sloppy about recycling, couldn't imagine where I'd find a CSA, and recognized that trying to start a compost pile in our apartment building would be a recipe for rats. Not particularly committed to the city or to a lifetime of city living, I concentrated on classes and felt my integrity slip.

I know there were people who did it all, but I rapidly found my limits and found that I was not going to be one of those people.

If I was not going to be one of those people, then why bother at all? I could feel the slippery slope into apathy tugging at my cuffs and sleeves.

A similar thing happens with our communication. When we immerse ourselves in a culture of careful and clear communication, we are often able to live in greater integrity with ourselves and with the people around us. We relax about saying what we need to say but are careful about how we say it, which allows us to be more real, which allows us to be more intimate, which allows us to build stronger and more lasting connections. Unfortunately, training for adulthood can be treacherous. In most contexts, the more "adult" we get in this culture the less real we can be--expressing our feelings is considered juvenile or immature; expressing our needs or our wants is called selfish or aggressive. And we have to work hard to find the means to express what we think in ways that will be understood. At the end of a long day of frustration or struggle, that kind of patience and grace is hard to find...but in a community which is trained to good communication, we can be called back to our best skills by others who model them and use them.

When we are not surrounded by good practices we forget--we forget not only to use them, but that we can use them, or that they exist at all. When we're tired we prioritize, looking for things we can choose not to do, and what we end up choosing to drop is often the stuff that helps keep us from slipping further out of consonsance with our own beliefs. So we figure we'll just do it the "easy" way this once, no one else will notice and we're tired of carrying the standard for this community or that one...and then that leads to discontent, which leads to unrest, which leads to skirmishes or outright battles. I choose military images intentionally--what we are working to build is peace; what we are working to prevent are little wars.

In Getting to Yes authors Fisher, Ury, and Patton lay out a basic form for collaborative negotiation rather than positional negotiation. Somehow, they say, we need to get everyone on the same side of the table--we all want the same thing in the end--and then talk about how we can achieve it together. That same-side feeling helps to reduce anxiety and fear, which helps us reach for more true perspectives, even if they may also be more vulnerable. That added shot of truth--real motives, real goals, real hopes and dreams and fears--means that we are really working toward a common goal, not a pair of diverging hidden agendas.

My brother tells me that even negotiation classes at Berkeley are teaching this model.

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Dr. Marcia McFee (http://marciamcfee.com) says, "Let us speak about the deepest things we know, right away." (Comment at the Conference on Contemporary Worship, February 2007, San Diego, CA; from personal notes)

And my heart calls YES, my soul calls YES,

...but to speak about those deep things we must know that we will be received with open hearts.

I dream of a world where we have learned to say what we mean and hear people out without judgment, without fear, without that cringing panic that comes from taking a big leap off a bigger cliff and hoping you have learned to fly.

I have hope for a world where our congregations are not torn apart by schism, where we have learned to be together in community through the rough places, where no congregation has a reputation that keeps people from its doors;

I am working for a world where congregations and other intentional communities are really able to function with intention, where no means no and yes has the full power of an unequivocal, certain yes.

I am on fire for a world where there is a culture of clear communication based on a passion so strong that even the UUs and the Lutherans will stand up and shout "I BELIEVE!"...and mean it.

And we *will have* a world transformed by our love for each other, made over into a place where we know we mean it and that knowledge allows us to be ourselves.

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We sit here this morning many, many generations and schisms distant from the hopes of a few passionate preachers in the Middle Eastern desert, but our ideals haven't changed much. We still need each other; our country and our church are founded on unity in diversity, and on many voices, many paths, and many truths.

And we're still looking for ways to be a congregation together.

May we say no when we mean no.

May we say yes when we mean yes.

And may we make every possible effort to speak clearly

to listen well,

and to understand with grace.

blessed be and amen.