



GOD IS ONE

AND LOVE

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That line, "But we make your love too narrow by false limits of our own," echoes in my mind and heart every time I hear that hymn we just sang. Today as we explore another part of our church's 1899 founding sermon by Daniel C. Limbaugh, in which he lays out the Unitarian belief in the oneness of God and God's eternal and illimitable love. We're invited to wrestle with what this means for us here and now, First Unitarian Church of Dallas in 2024. With our world so divided along religious lines. With people using their religion and their God as weapons against those who don't believe or practice like they do. It's hard sometimes to truly embrace the idea from which Unitarianism got its name, the oneness of God.

And by the oneness of God, I don't just mean the theological idea that God is one, not three. This non-Trinitarian theology is what distinguished Unitarians from other Christians very early on in the history of the Christian Church. What's harder to embrace, for me at least, is the idea that my God as a Unitarian Universalist is the same God as that of neo-Nazis marching in the streets. My God is the same God as that of many religious people who persecute others in the name of God. My God is the same God as that of those who protest outside our church because of our support of reproductive dignity and freedom.

My God is the same God as that of religious people who stockpile weapons in preparation for Holy War. My God is the same God as that of people who believe that you can pray the gay away. How could these possibly be the same God? Dr. Susan Ritchie, a Unitarian Universalist minister and scholar wrote an eye-opening book called *Children of the Same God: The Historical Relationship Between Unitarianism, Judaism, and Islam*, containing research with profound implications for

Christians, Jews, Muslims and Unitarian Universalists and how we understand our identities and histories in relation to each other.

From the very beginning of the history of Christianity, of which Unitarianism is a liberal expression, there was an assumption that our gods were one and the same. The early church councils which established the doctrines and creeds still held as foundational by the Christian Church were an attempt to differentiate Christianity from Judaism and to create an exclusivist identity. Unitarians resisted these moves to establish Christian identity over and against Muslims and Jews. Even in early conflicts between Jews and Muslims in seventh century Medina, Richie says, quote, "There was no doubt on either side that Jews and Muslims were disagreeing about the wishes of the same God."

Unitarians began coalescing and organizing religious communities in 16th century Europe at the intersection of Islam, Judaism and Christianity. In a time when these faiths mixed and mingled and influenced each other in ways that have often been glossed over or ignored in documented history. Our Unitarian commitment to religious freedom and respect of other religions grew out of the mutual respect and creative interchange between Islam and Unitarianism under the Ottoman Empire and from deep faithful dialogue between Unitarians and Jews in the same period. Some of our earliest Unitarian historical documents contain passages that are directly traceable to Islamic texts. Others praise Islam's acceptance of Jesus as a prophet, lamenting that Christianity doesn't return the recognition by acknowledging the prophet Muhammad.

The move away from seeing these religious traditions' Gods as one God was a power move, a move of empire. The powers that be were threatened by inter-religious dialogue and mixing and so they made one or more groups other. They built their power over others based on an exclusivist identity. And while there were Christians in the early church councils who did this, people in all of these religious traditions have done this at times. And when we do this, it breaks the kinship ties that are integral to who we are. We know today that a community that embraces differences without allowing them to divide us is a strong one. And our ability to hold the tension of different beliefs is a marker of deep and mature faith. I wonder what our world would look like today or even our communities closer to home or our families seated around the dinner table if we had, as Dr. Ritchie wrote, "No doubt on either side that we were disagreeing about the wishes of the same God."

Daniel Limbaugh spoke of this God as a father and to us as God's children. Whether or not you embrace the concept of God as a loving parent or believe in a less anthropomorphic version of God, or maybe you don't believe in God at all, but in a pervasive goodness in the universe. The foundational Unitarian belief remains that we all, everywhere, somehow, somewhere, sometime, are drawn by an eternal and illimitable love to honor this love through the way we live. And this too is challenging. Not only is my God the same God as that of radically conservative religious people, but that God's love holds us all. This is the theological core of our Universalist heritage, that God's love is too big to condemn anyone to eternal punishment. None of us are a lost cause and the hope and possibility of healing and right relationship is always present.

But really, even that person who shall not be named, you fill in the blank, there are many possibilities. I hear this question from you all the time. I believe that they may suffer the consequences of their actions in this life, but they won't be sent to some fiery realm after death because of it. When I think about people in our Unitarian Universalist history who were drawn by this love, I often think of George de Benneville, who coincidentally is the subject of our Unitarian Universalist history class right now, today over in the Hallman Building. De Benneville came from a privileged background and admittedly thought very highly of himself. So it was profoundly humbling when at the age of 12, he was sent to work on a ship. While in North Africa, he witnessed a group of Black Muslim men caring for a friend who was injured. He watched them tend to the man's wounds and cry and he thought to himself that it's impossible that, as he had been told, God could privilege him over these men because he's Christian.

As he said, the behavior of these men was more a reflection of religious uprightness than his own. This experience challenged the core racial class and religious narratives that were part of his self-identity and planted the seed that bloomed into a fervent Universalism. He began preaching Universalism around Europe, but was not well received just like the Unitarians a couple centuries earlier whose belief in the oneness of God was seen as a threat to those in power.

But then he had another experience which solidified his Universalism even further. He fell very ill and probably went into what we now know as a coma, but he was declared dead. In this state, he had a vision. Angels, God, Jesus, Adam and Eve all featured in this vision in which he was told that there is no hell and that God loves all people. 42 hours after being declared dead, de Benneville woke up from his coma, rose from his coffin, and went on to preach in his words, "The universal and everlasting gospel of boundless universal love for the entire human race without exception."

It's quite a conversion story, isn't it? We don't have a lot of those in our history. As he went on preaching Universalism around Europe, he continued to receive threats to his life. So he moved to what at the time were the colonies and settled in Pennsylvania. From this home he led Universalist revival services and he witnessed the Revolutionary War. There was no place to bury British soldiers who died in battle near his home and so he allowed them to be buried on his land. He figured that they would all end up in the same place eventually, that is heaven, and so he might as well be hospitable toward them now. The graves of enemy soldiers remain right next to the graves of de Benneville and his wife to this day.

Could you be so hospitable? Could you expand the lens through which you view the world and those who are different from you? Could you shift your own self-identity so radically? It's not easy, but this is what it looks like to live as if God is one and God is love. I've seen this practice emerge again and again in the history of this church, First Unitarian Church of Dallas. It was not uncommon in the late 1800s for Unitarians and Reform Jews to exchange pulpits as we shared common hopes and recognized that we were children of the same God.

When Temple Emanuel welcomed a fledgling group of Unitarians into their space to worship and form a church here in Dallas, it was an acknowledgement that despite our differences, we are stronger

together. It was this belief in the oneness and love of God that led our church to invite Indian poet and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore to speak here in 1921, expanding the religious horizons of over 1,000 Dallasites who came to hear him speak. And it was this belief that led our church to open the doors to Muslims in Dallas who were looking for a space to pray and who grew to become one of the largest mosques in the country.

Now, I imagine that these moves did not come without some controversy. They were bold expressions of our values, values that Limbaugh articulated at the founding of this church and which live on and challenge us in powerful ways today. As Unitarian Universalists, we say that all religions have a piece of the truth. No one of us occupies a privileged spot in relation to God or truth or ultimate meaning. To think that we do shrinks God, which is the message of Glen Thomas Rideout's poem *After All*. His poem so beautifully encapsulates the expansiveness of God, drawing on the foundational ideas contained in Limbaugh's sermon and articulating them for Unitarian Universalists today. God is a word that people of many faiths use to point to what draws us, holds us and calls us towards truth, meaning, and goodness. Rideout counters the image of Father God that is so present in Limbaugh's sermon with a God that is not limited by personification or objectification, nouns or pronouns. God is so much bigger after all and is waiting for us to stop naming her and to see all of him. God has many names and God is one.

Now, these are big ideas, I know. And they mean nothing if they're not embodied and put into practice. I shared with you some of the ways that our church over the course of its 125 year history has turned these beliefs into action. And we will continue building on this legacy as a church, finding ever new ways to live our values and keep the flame of Unitarian Universalism burning brightly. But I also want to bring it down to the individual level, to you and me. In this season of such immense political tension and anticipation. I know I feel it, do you feel it? Yeah? I've found myself often uncomfortable in conversations where those who believe or vote differently are demonized.

Other people's beliefs may be hard to comprehend, their words may be harmful, and their actions may be utterly inhumane, but they remain human. And to believe otherwise is to stoop to the level of discourse all too present in our political sphere that tries to justify, for example, calling immigrants animals. Like Michelle Obama said so wonderfully back in 2016, "When they go low, we go high." To which Stephen Colbert said, "I totally understand going high when somebody goes low, but the bar is so low that staying at your own altitude still means higher. Do I actually have to go up here or can I just be normal? Do I have to be a saint? Because down here I'm pissed off."

Leave it to the late night hosts to say what we're all thinking, right? But what I mean by this is ground yourself firmly in who you are and what's important to you, not just in opposition to someone else. Or to quote Daniel Limbaugh, "Be drawn by this great love to honor yourself. Praise all that is good and holy by living a life that upholds love and justice, and never forget you are loved eternally and illimitably." May this be a source of hope and courage, and a chart and compass to guide your way. Amen.