

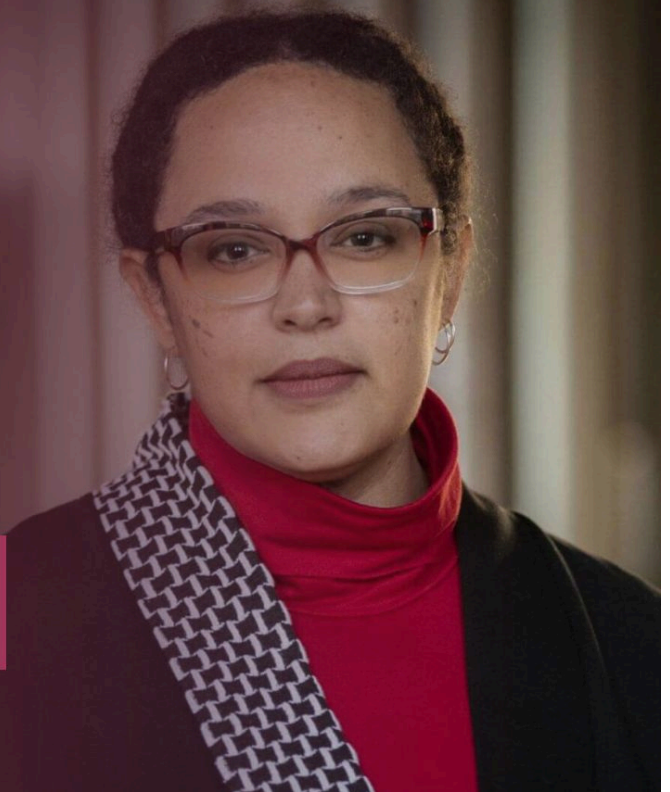
# To Love As If It Matters



FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF DALLAS  
WELCOMES SPECIAL GUEST MINISTER

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“She saved my life.” I keep hearing and reading these words as Black women in particular respond to the recent death of Judith Jamison, she who modeled life and truth telling and dignity and grace for us on a bodily level. I'm talking about a remarkable woman who I first encountered as a dancer with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and most recently experienced her as their artistic director all the way from 1989 to 2011. They honored her until her death last week as their artistic director emerita. You may know Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater as a renowned company whose mission and legacy centers on uplifting the African-American experience while transcending boundaries of race, faith, and nationality. The company speaks of its universal humanity, and to this day, proudly models values that I try to center in my own living. Every time I go to see an Ailey performance, I know my heart is going to break open, that I'll be called back into my body, and that the truths of my living will be returned to me.

This is a priceless gift that my parents gave me, and I don't know if it was my love of dance or their ability to witness how my heart returned to its rightful rhythm in those seats at City Center. But I saw more Alvin Ailey performances as a child growing up in New York City than just about anything else. In these liminal days, the practice of returning to the truths of my living feel central to what it means to live faithfully in this moment. What's centering you?

Woven throughout those earliest years in the audience at City Center for me are the breathtaking performances of Judith Jamison while she herself was still dancing. She danced and moved through the world with a heart broken open, and she told stories of holding fast to pride and possibility through the travesties of injustice and racialized violence and misogyny. Her movements paid tribute to Alvin Ailey's values and prophetic witness, and most of us who were privileged to witness her art

found ourselves forever changed by the experience. She became what I now call a living exemplar, one who moves through the world in such a way that the rest of us cannot help but bear witness and engage with the largest questions of life itself that are modeled through her very being. She challenges us without speaking a word. For me, Jamison was a disciple of Black history and Black excellence and a prophetic witness to the love that held all of that together. I carry her unspoken lessons with me everywhere I go.

Now, time and again in my own preaching and lecturing, I hear myself saying that what I most long for in Unitarian Universalism is a deep understanding of discipleship. Now, almost immediately then I pause and I explain my awareness that for some of us, a different word might resonate more effectively, but that new name has not suggested itself to me yet, and I don't really think the semantics of it are the point. Somewhere in the intersection between spiritual practice, theological engagement, lived ethics and daily choices exists a kind of awareness that makes us better Unitarian Universalists over time. Better in terms of our communal connections, our faithful living, and an ever-deepening sense of self as part of a larger whole rather than that semi-competitive individualism that can creep into our everyday norms.

Discipleship is often assumed to mean the practice of following just one specific religious leader. Have you heard this definition before? Right, usually to the point of trying to model our actions on their way of life. We see this often in Christian teachings as community members are invited to become Christ-like in their living, and there's virtue in that practice. And yet the idea of discipleship is not limited to the relationship to one master teacher. We can become disciples of larger ideals such as love or justice, choosing to make significant life choices that center and emphasize those values in the world.

So discipleship can be as much about being the student of a particular set of teachings as it is following one specific teacher, and that's closer to what I imagine when I think of what a UU discipleship might look like. I dream of a welcoming non-coercive, invitational way of living that is counter cultural to society as it is at the moment, that places ideals such as compassion, mutual aid, justice and ethical interdependence at the heart of how we make our choices, how we grow in our faith, and what we choose to model to the world. Yeah, this is everyday practice. This is not a lofty thing that we kind of imagine on Sunday morning or perform for each other. This is about yes, what we believe, but it's not just how we answer what we believe, it's how we make recognizable choices in our living.

I would like my life to be resonant to those who would be guided by values similar to mine. I would like to remain open to new interpretations of what it means to love as if it matters to people other than myself and for that community to whom it matters to be larger with every passing day. I want to live challenged and inspired by the things we collectively hold most dear in our liberal and liberating tradition. And for me, that lightens the challenging times like these days. It gives me resources to combat despair, and it reminds me that I'm never alone and that by my living, I can make room for someone else to thrive.

So how does the Unitarian Universalism of your understanding shape the everyday decisions that you make when you are far from church, far from church, when times are hard, and most especially when not a single person is watching? How does it impact the conversations that you have with loved ones or the things that you teach to children? How does it encourage you to stay connected to each other? These are most certainly days when we are helped in answering the calls we're hearing right now, to pace ourselves, to follow frontline communities and long-established leaders and the work of justice, to resist those reactionary responses to election results. I can't be the only one, the never-ending announcements of incoming national political leaders by having something stable to hold onto. How might our faith, our simple everyday ways of staying connected to our living tradition help us to not be buffeted about by the 24-hour news cycle or by messages that I truly believe are intended to drown us in despair.

I've been offering a lot of prayers and messages lately and all through the privilege, and it really is a privilege of speaking with UUs across the country. I've been held by the wisdom of one of our UUA staff chaplains, the Reverend Victoria Safford. She reminds me of how I wish to move through life as a disciple of love itself. In her upcoming addition to our recent publication, *Love at the Center: Unitarian Universalist Theologies*, Reverend Safford writes the following.

"Now and here in this unlikely, perhaps unreplicated gorgeous world, this shimmering sorrowing world, we exist together. No scientists, no sorcerer, no sacred text can ever fully tell us why or how it's happened. This existence, whether we ask our whole lives long in the idiom of astrophysics or a child's dazzled wonder, we are here now and we all belong, beloved, and therefore, my work and however imperfect it may be at the end of the day, my work and my joy is to strive to act accordingly as if your presence, whoever you are, wherever you are on this earth, in your presence, I were in the presence of the holy. I have no other words to describe it, this love that guides us, calls us, heals us, and holds us in its hands."

Beloveds, this is a teaching on love that I can hold fast to in difficult times, to strive to act accordingly. Discipleship, being ridiculously courageous in love. Am I saying that it is my practice to center and everyone's dignity and worthiness even in the moments when they are acting in profoundly immoral ways? No. No. I said earlier this morning that my mother was my first theologian and she used to tell me how good it was that she is not God. But I am saying that it is part of my calling to de-escalate, to disrupt attempts to violate my own dignity and worthiness or that of others. Once we have had a real moment to process our outrage, our fear, our numbness, worries, or disbelief. Once there has been time to discuss real strategy and values, community, justice and well-being, once we have listened to those, including those in this congregation and its powerful leadership who have been doing the work of justice for decades, it's going to be time to respond. On what will you ground that response?

So what are we meant to hold onto in these times and how do we move forward? My colleague, the Reverend Nancy McDonald Ladd, who serves as Director of Communications and Public Ministry at Unitarian Universalist Association, asked this question another way when I told her what I would be preaching about this morning. Reverend Nancy wants to know how we become disciples of a living

tradition rather than a sealed revelation? She asks what it means to be dedicated disciples of love. What I so appreciate about working with her is that she constantly brings us back to our shared values as that which claims us as Unitarian Universalists rather than the other way around. It's not enough to say that love lives at the center of this tradition. We must also ask what it means to live as if love itself matters. This is about choosing day by day to be students or disciples of a living tradition, one that is ever evolving and asks us regularly to find new ways of expressing our deepest theological truths.

This does not mean that we do away with what we have known. That's never what it's been about. It means that we interpret what we believe for the times that we are in. Our living tradition, I'm sure you've heard this in the sanctuary is born of the free church movement and it relies on us. It does to be stewards of a future that brings hope to our communities. It relies on us to stay faithful to the values of our living and to bear witness to that goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. Even in this liminal moment, no matter what happens in this nation or in the world. I know that here at the first Unitarian Church of Dallas, you are rightly proud of your decades-long commitment to the work of justice in a community that does not always fully share or support your beliefs.

I think you have a lot to teach us in this movement about how to be faithful stewards of the shared values that we are living into anew in our living tradition. I suspect you have a lot to share with one another and with Unitarian Universalism writ large about what it means to hold your Unitarian Universalism close in your day-to-day living. I want to thank you for your profound presence in our faith and for the deep abiding faithfulness of your shared ministry. My prayer is that together held fast by the promise of a love that abides, we will take this collective moment to lean fully into the here and now, to pull into our bodies and our beings all that calls us back to our best selves, that we might hold with grief of this moment, yes, to hold it with honesty, with openness, with reverence, for the sacredness of all life.

This time of worried run-up to inauguration for many of us can also be a time of healthy lament. Lament is a spiritual practice. And as we hold with gratitude, the immense work undertaken by UU the Vote, by other ongoing efforts to bring our values to bear on the moral conscience of our nation, may we be helped to also hold with repentance and regret the foundations of misogyny, racism, xenophobia, ableism, cis-sexism, economic exploitation, and white supremacy that continue to place so many lives at risk. I pray that we can pause together in this moment, to take time to listen to those whose lived experience and leadership have wisdom, to offer and to resist the immediate reactivity of the day, that we might trust in a larger loving strength, in a community of hope, resistance, and possibility that holds us in difficult times and challenges us to reflect honestly on the histories and legacies of injustice that continue to haunt and harm our nation today.

Can we hold those painful legacies together, aware both of the ways that we benefit from them and the ways that we are harmed by them, just for a moment? Can we hold fast to love as a future alternative that calls us to stay together in community, to fight for our collective power and to stay true to that which we hold most dear in the years to come? As we are reminded of all that drives our commitment to shift those legacies of dehumanizing violence through our living may we remember that the choices we make as a nation do not impact all of us equally, but that all of us will be called to

resist the trappings of power and unearned privilege as a people together. There are many who will attempt, who are already calling on us to the work of reconciliation and wholeness without acknowledging those legacies. Are you hearing it already?

May we be reminded that that work cannot begin to move forward until we ourselves are clear about all that brought us to this moment and the real shape of our own living within that history. I believe that we are called to a faithful striving instead. Our Unitarian Universalist tradition reminds us that it is only collectively together that we might be saved from the trials and tribulations of injustice.

Beloveds, what is your faith asking of you right now? How will you hold another faithful possibility through grief, through hopefulness, through the yearning for beloved community long enough, long enough that it might save a life, strengthen a spirit, teach a mind, or encourage even a nation? How might you be a UU disciple in your own understanding of our liberal and liberating tradition each day?

God of many names and one abundant love remind us of our best selves in the weeks, months, and years to come. Help us to believe in goodness again and to call that goodness into being. Help us to model that goodness gracefully that someone might someday say of us, "They saved my life." We saved our lives together. Let us choose love, beloveds, love again and again, and again, and again and again. May it be so. Amen, ashe and blessed be.