



Thank you for attending this special service for the canonization of Dolly Parton. Within the Unitarian Universalist Order of Saints, she will be the first saint in the Unitarian Universalist Order of Saints. Now we understand. We understand Dolly is still living, which would usually exempt her from this honor, but we've made an exception for the exceptional in her case. In light of the merit of her good works, the testimony of beloved entrusted drag queens and the unmatched awesomeness of her selfless love of the world. You may be asking what is required for Unitarian Universalist's sainthood.

In other faiths, miracles are needed. But the rules for us are much tougher than that. Dolly has led a male dominated industry for decades, never once giving an inch on her integrity, never once apologizing for her expression of femininity and gender, and she wears five-inch heels while doing housework. So by our count, that's at least three miracles right there. But that's not enough. No, no. For Unitarian Universalist Saint, we need at least five non-miraculous, natural, not supernatural demonstrations, expressions and examples of love of all humanity.

So let us not delay any further. We have the work of the church before us friends on this special day. It's time for the naming and the qualifying good works of Dolly Parton. Are you ready? All right. First, Dolly proved science is real and good, and worthy. For Unitarians, Revelation is not sealed and science is one way new ideas and beliefs about our world are revealed. When the world was plunged into a pandemic, as theories, counter theories, conspiracy theories swirled in this country and around the world, Dolly invested a million dollars at Vanderbilt University's medical school to fund the early stages of the research that became the widely successful Moderna vaccine.

The US government would go on to spend more than a billion dollars on this discovery, on this treatment and the director of medicine at Vanderbilt University, Dr. Mark Denison did not mince words. The singer's donation funded its critical early stages. Not to get too very emotional. Anyway, << vaccine, vaccine, vaccine, vaccine. I'm begging you, please don't hesitate. Vaccine, vaccine, vaccine, vaccine. Because once you're dead, that's a bit too late >> That's what Dolly sang herself to her fans and to the world when she received the vaccine that she helped create. And it says here in the rules on canonization that Ms. Parton was awarded special merit for working veiled threats of death charmingly into a song she wrote and collected royalties from.

It's pretty good. It's that kind of first rate humble bragging, done with impeccable wit and talent is part of what makes her lock for this important Unitarian honor. Second, Dolly teaches that judgment of others' stinks. Someone said once, "Judge not lest ye be judged." In a commencement address to the University of Tennessee in 2009, Dolly shared a lot of advice with the graduates about professionalism, about courtesy, but she had some words about how to treat others as well.

Her words, "If you truly care for people, you won't judge them, and then you will learn to appreciate the uniqueness in every single soul." There is a reason we are including this among Ms. Parton's good works for all of us, Unitarian Universalists. You see from time to time especially where the actions of others are concerned and where those actions align with ideas or ideologies one or more of us might disagree with or maybe detest or loathe. We might, might paint a group of people with the same brush of blame and judgment and perhaps write them off as unworthy of as much understanding as we might be able to muster for someone we do agree with.

Not all of us, not you guys. Just some of us Unitarian Universalists. Now this habit is not unique to our faith. Indeed, it's quite common in faiths, but it's a form of judgment or a kind of contempt prior to investigation that distracts the tinkerer of these thoughts, the holder of these opinions from seeking and then seeing the real human uniqueness in each human soul. And like many good lessons, Ms. Parton wrote a song that helped people understand that. << Drag queen, drag queen, drag queen, drag queen. I'm begging you darling. Please don't take my man >> This is how Dolly actually began the second verse of Jolene at the Fox Theater in a show at Atlanta after asking first if there were any drag queens in the audience and then taking umbrage that there were, but they weren't all dressed like her.

In a world growing ever more hostile to this form of social critique and good old-fashioned fun, Ms. Parton demonstrates her love and celebration, lack of fear. Again, special merit is given though for working a good work into a song she wrote and royalties she collects.

Third, Dolly says, "Reading and learning is for everyone." For we Unitarians, the free and responsible search for truth is important, and if your mind isn't boggled yet, friends, prepare yourself for this one. Dolly Parton founded the Imagination Library 30 years ago. She has used funds to open libraries and to provide books to schools focusing her efforts on increasing literacy among the youngest and the poorest children in this country.

In the past few years, the Imagination Library has started sending books directly to children in their home, building libraries in their homes as access to libraries decreases in many parts of the country. Would anyone care to guess who was not in the first service? Would anyone care to guess how many books Dolly Parton and her library have provided to children under the age of five?

The correct answer is more than 200 million books. Yeah, clap. That's fine. Are you listening, Dolly? We're cheering for you. Presently, one in seven children under five receives a book from the library every month. That is 14% of all children under five in the United States. I've kept up this little act about canonization. I got to step aside for a second and just say this. It's astounding, right? Is everyone else completely gobsmacked? Okay, good. I don't even know where to start with that kind of dedication to one of the most important ways to change the trajectory of lives and perhaps even this country itself, that ensuring the early and sustained literacy of the youngest among us.

Okay. Now I'm back in the thing. Fourth, dolly shows that trusting your gut is holy work. As Unitarians, we believe in trusting reason and the decisions we make. When Dolly Parton was on The Porter Wagoner Show for a while, she took a huge risk when she left and went out on her own. The way she was being treated and the word spoken by her partner as she left degraded her and she knew she needed to move on and she trusted her gut then. And in her pain, she wrote the song we heard today sung so beautifully by April and Deborah. Once again, yeah.

Really. I Will Always Love You. That song of forgiveness and understanding for someone who treated her poorly was a hit for her and it was one of the first signs that Dolly ever got that she was going to be able to support her family as an artist, which was actually her goal the whole time. It was very exciting then when Elvis Presley approached her about recording and releasing a cover of that song. The only problem was Elvis wanted half of the publishing rights to the song, which his manager said was customary for the recording a song and she said no.

She trusted her gut and then cried and cried and cried. An idol of hers that she'd seen and loved would've sung her song, but it would've put the whole thing she planned to support her family in a less secure footing. And that ended up being a very important decision. Dorianne Laux wrote a poem about this decision, so I'll let her tell you about it. But like any king, he wanted his gold and Dolly, a poor girl with a big family wanted to leave her songs to them and she didn't know she was waiting for Kevin Costner.

Aren't we all a little bit? Anyway, that's not in the poem. I just had a moment, but... All right. I'll start over. She didn't know she was waiting for Kevin Costner who suggested Whitney sing it for The Bodyguard insisted on the acapella intro. When Dolly first heard it, she pulled off the road, turned up the radio, marveled at how Whitney took her simple song and made it a mighty thing. Beautiful Whitney, who also covered five octaves with her perfect vibrato.

And though Elvis and Whitney died early, Dolly lives on. Her voice unchanged by age, lilting across the stage at 74, her life far from over still singing and singing, and singing a mighty little thing. The combination of one of the greatest writers with arguably the greatest singer of a generation on that

record changed Dolly's and Whitney's and all of our lives forever. And if country legend is true, Dolly wrote that song and Jolene on the same day. Right? Genius. Trust your gut indeed.

Fifth and final, Dolly tells us, "Sex is good and your body is your own." Heard. Us Unitarians, learning how to be ethical in our relationships and how to care for our own bodies and love the bodies of others is holy work. Now I know what a lot of people are thinking about when they think about Dolly Parton. They're thinking about two big things. All y'all need, church. What is wrong with you? Grow up, people. Find Jesus.

The two big things are that the way she carries herself and presents herself publicly and how she is direct and write out there about her body. Now she is a small-framed woman with an ample bosom, a figure she maintains blonde hair, a lot of makeup, and some pretty great clothes, including a lot of high heels. Now, in that same address to the University of Tennessee in 2009, she had this to say about her own appearance. "I usually try not to give advice, information, yes, but advice, no. But what has worked for me may work for you too. Well, take for instance, what has worked for me. Wigs, tight clothes, push-up bras, high-heeled shoes, five-inch high-heeled shoes. All I got to say, take my advice and some of you boys out there may find yourself on a little different career path than you might've planned."

She writes the jokes, not me. And you girls better be careful too. Seriously. I wanted to tell you that the way I look is a country girl's idea of glamour. It comes from a very serious place. There was what you call a town troll up in our town, up in Searville. Well, I thought she was the prettiest thing I'd ever seen when I was a little girl and every chance I had, I'd go to town, I'd see her and I would say, "Oh, she's just so pretty." And they'd say, "Oh, she's just trash." I thought, "That's what I'm going to be when I grow up."

"I know that sometimes I look it, but hopefully I'm a little more than that. I'd like to believe that there's a brain beneath all this hair and a heart beneath these... Well, them." She said it, not me. In our faith, we hold the inherent worth and dignity of all dear to our hearts, right beneath these them. And these words of self-awareness and empowerment, with these words, Dolly pierces the veil of that outward persona to let in this explanation that she is allowed to like how something or somebody looks, how dressing or expressing herself makes her feel and to maintain the autonomy and the right to do it.

Now, she is companioned, accompanied in this task by legions of fans, managers, lawyers, her own savvy and confidence, which is no little feat. Charisma, all of those things. But in those legions of fans among them who lack all of these trappings of power, who lack all the security and clout and confidence are those, are those who may not even yet be able to name that power, may not be able to yet explain the freedom, may not know the prayer yet that she answers for each of them in their lives to be wholly themselves in public. A dream that remains far, far away.

For many who are watching now, I dare say some who are here. Sex is good. Your body is your own. Dressing how you feel comfortable and according to the way you want to present yourself in the world needs more fierce defense than just Dolly Parton. And this tiny mighty force does it with every fiber of

her being so that others may not feel as alone and the world when they do too. And this year, Dolly's husband of almost 60 years died. Our hearts go out to her as so many of us have known a grief like that in our own lives.

Carl Thomas Dean was the other part of Dolly's family and she said publicly a few times that she knew always kids were not part of her future, but she has so many children, nonetheless. At that concert in Atlanta, when she sang to the drag queens not to take her man, Dolly, then right after that addresses the mothers in the crowd. In this way, I'll let the poet, Dustin Brookshire, who is at the concert explain it. They say, "Seated with an auto harp, Dolly told us about her coat of many colors and love for her mother. She asked if there were any mothers in the audience. A few yelled, several hands shot up, including my mother's. Well, I dedicate the song to all the good mamas out there. I placed my arm around my mother, squeezed her tight, leaned my head against hers. I gave her that moment."

It's with this, I close the canonization proceedings today and leave you with this proof I've offered. And I leave you with more than a set of accomplishments, more than defiance of norms and staying strong like an island in this oncoming stream so many of us face. I leave you with not only a saint, but a loving parent to so many who are lost, to many who are alone, who have found their places of birth, especially here in the south, to be places at times, many times unwelcoming full of fear-mongering.

I leave you with the expansiveness of love and the stretch of an embrace of a mother to millions who knows that she and we will be working in shifts day and night, night after day, to make of this world one that all God's children can enjoy, all God's children can flourish in, and where all God's children can feel love, science is real, and good, and worthy. Judgment of others stinks. Reading and learning is for all. Trusting your gut is holy and sex is good, and your body is your own, and defending these ideals is holy work. I leave you now to consider this evidence as you ponder the coming weeks and years and the role Dolly has played in your lives and the lives of others.

May you be guided in your discernment by eyes caked in shadow and mascara, lips redder than the sweetest strawberries ready to be plucked and the greatest set of beliefs right out before you that you could ever ask for. But most of all, may we be guided like Dolly in all things in love. And may that continue long. May it ever be so blessed be. And amen.