

## **They Is Welcome in a Love Beyond Belief**

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We speak a living language, which means it is always changing. Our understanding of ourselves changes and therefore our language changes and vice versa. Gender roles change, our understanding of race and racism changes, and our language changes to help us think these new thoughts. For example, some of us don't fit into a *he* or *she* box and we're realizing that gender itself doesn't fit into a *he* or *she* box. So neither of those pronouns work. To help us think these new thoughts, we are using *they* in a singular sense more often.

What we say has effects. Language is one of the things that effects how whole we feel as individuals, and how whole we feel as a community.

When I started this collaborative ministry with this congregation, you used a different covenant than the one we spoke today. With the support of the Worship Team, I made two changes a few years ago now. It's probably long enough ago that the current covenant feels more or less "normal" to you all now. The first change was moving from "love is the doctrine of this church" to "love is the doctrine of this *faith*." The way we use the word "church" it can tend to mean a particular congregation or a particular building, and Unitarian Universalists have a larger scope than that. Unitarian Universalism is a faith tradition; so: Love is the doctrine of this *faith*.

The other change was to add the phrase "Love Beyond Belief" to the end. It used to end "thus do we covenant with each other." The covenant is a reading in the *Singing the Living Tradition* hymnbook, and in the book it says: "thus do we covenant with each other and with God." So the congregation had already changed it to take "God" out of the picture. I shared with you all at the time that covenant is sort of a three-legged stool: Some transcendent something is always part of a covenant, otherwise it's just a temporary agreement or contract. Many people when talking about Unitarian Universalism had started using the phrase "Love Beyond Belief" to characterize what our faith tradition is about, so that's what we put in the "God" spot. Love beyond belief.

But I'm not sure I've ever told you what that phrase means to me. We all have beliefs. Some of them we choose, and some we're not quite so intentional about. We don't think about them. We make assumptions. I don't think it's possible to act without making some assumptions. I assume this chair is going to hold me up and I don't really think about that assumption. But it is good to know what our beliefs are. We can take a look at what we say and what we do and ask: what beliefs do my words and actions express? In some ways, beliefs set limits and boundaries to the world as we understand it. Our beliefs set boundaries on what God is or isn't. Unitarian Universalism as a faith

or a spirituality starts with humility: I don't know everything. We don't know everything. And we strive to be open to new information, new ideas, new ways of being. bell hooks writes that, "To open our hearts more fully to love's power and grace we must dare to acknowledge how little we know of love in both theory and practice."<sup>1</sup>

The Love that acts in the world—it is not bound to the boundaries of whatever we may believe in the moment. As UU minister Sean Parker Dennison says in the meditation called "To Invoke Love": "To invoke Love / is to approach each day and every person with wonder, / anticipating Love's arrival." The Love that our faith proclaims — we side with love — is a Love that goes beyond whatever boundaries our beliefs might be. Love is always challenging us to risk being open. To risk letting go of anything that gets in Love's way, anything that tries to set a limit or tries to say "love stops here." Love doesn't stop. This is the *agape* love that Martin Luther King, Jr., preached about. This is love that isn't a feeling. It is a happening. The "continuing community creating reality" in MLK's words or in Sean Parker Dennison's words: "To invoke Love / is to guard against assumptions, / take care with our words and practice forgiveness." Love lives through us in what we do and say.

Unitarian Universalism is about living a commitment to a love beyond belief. And the primary way that commitment is lived is in our congregations. Right here among us. The psychologist Erich Fromm says "Society must be organized in such a way that [the human being's] social, loving nature is not separated from [their] social existence, but becomes one with it. [ . . . ] To have faith in the possibility of love as a social and not only exceptional-individual phenomenon, is a rational faith based on the insight into the very nature of [human beings]."<sup>2</sup> Love is something we live socially; it's not just a capacity than an individual possesses. Now, let me put that together with another insight of bell hooks': "There can be no love without justice." We want our congregations to be loving communities. We want our congregations to model beloved community. We want our social existence together to be one with Love. That means that our faith-motivated justice work begins right here, in how we are with one another.

Unitarian Universalism has put extra effort in the last few years into how we are with one another in our congregations and other UU groups and institutions. One of the heartbreaking things we've been learning is that by and large we are not as welcoming as we think we are. One recent study interviewed trans\* and non-binary UU's and reported back a whole range of small to large instances of unwelcoming and worse behavior. One person interviewed described their experience this way: "My congregation talks a good game about fighting oppression but turns down every opportunity to walk the walk. . . . It became too exhausting to try to attend a congregation full of privileged people who want ally points without doing any work."<sup>3</sup> And a more recent report focusing on the experiences of UU's who are Black, Indigenous, People of Color, came back with similar findings. For example, the commission carrying out the study "frequently heard that we should be focusing on

climate change rather than antiracism work.”<sup>4</sup> I can imagine a black UU hearing that and feeling an *ouch* and *more*. The UUA Commission on Institutional Change said in their report that “The work of becoming more equitable, inclusive, and diverse within our congregations is justice work. If we cannot do this well, we cannot be effective as justice partners.”<sup>5</sup>

This is subtle, difficult work. The work of justice and love is the work of transforming ourselves.

A local therapist who identifies as non-binary and who works with trans, non-binary, and other gender-expansive people shared with me a story about people’s reactions to someone asking questions about how to use the pronoun “they” when doing the writing they had to do as part of their job. (Did you notice I just used *they* to refer to an individual? I’ve done that a lot this morning.) I’ve heard this question from others, too. You can find a lot of YouTube videos about this! Do you say “They is” or “they are” when you are talking about one individual? The short answer is this: In this same way I just said “you are” when talking about an individual—we don’t say “you is,” we say “you are”—you also say “they are” when talking about an individual. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, there are instances of using a singular *they* that date all the way back to Beowulf in 1375.<sup>6</sup> Even so, lots of people have remarked to me that this singular *they* feels awkward. And as a recovering writing teacher, this is a journey for me, too. It can seem like a small thing—but the amount of resistance I’ve heard to “they” as a singular pronoun betrays how *big* challenging these subtle assumptions and beliefs *is*.

But think of the Love you are committed to practicing—the love that can’t arrive without justice. That love means recognizing a question like what grammar to use as a real question. And that love means recognizing how those of us who are non-binary are made to feel not seen, not respected, when someone uses a pronoun for us that doesn’t fit — that is not who we are. Being committed to a Love Beyond Belief, a continuing community-creating reality, means being more hospitable, more welcoming, more inclusive. My cis-gender awkwardness around using “they” for my friend who asked for that isn’t as important as their being welcomed, respected, held in love. The wonder of beloved community is in living a call to be like-hearted.<sup>7</sup>

But here is the thing about welcoming and being inclusive: In order for a welcoming to be most inclusive—radically hospitable—you have to be welcoming *before* there is someone there in front of you to welcome. If someone is here already, you are already too late: if you haven’t already welcomed them, you haven’t welcomed them. In order for a commitment to the radical inclusion Love calls for to *really* be real, we have to be practicing that radical welcome and inclusion *always ahead of time*. To practice this internal justice work—work that is so important if we want to grow into a larger spiritual, soulful, mindful wholeness; and work that is the *vital foundation* of our practice of justice in the world—we must practice a *preemptive* radical inclusion.

Next week's service is going to explore this more fully. Our speaker next week is the brilliant justice consultant CB Beal — from whom I learned the term and the fundamental importance of the practice of a *preemptive radical inclusion* — and they will offer you what I've experienced as a transformative understanding of a practice of justice that makes love real.

If we practice a continual changing and growing of ourselves to more fully embody the love that is justice, we become agents of love and justice that change lives.

May it be so.

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<sup>1</sup> bell hooks. *All About Love: New Visions*. William Morrow, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Erich Fromm. *The Art of Loving*. (1956)

<sup>3</sup> "Experiences of Trans Unitarian Universalists: Report on the 2018 Survey of Trans UUs." January 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Commission on Institutional Change. *Widening the Circle of Concern: Report of the UUA Commission on Institutional Change*. June 2020. 68.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> "A brief history of singular 'they.'" Oxford English Dictionary. <https://public.oed.com/blog/a-brief-history-of-singular-they/>

<sup>7</sup> This is an insight of Alex Kapitan and Rev. Mykal Slack.