

## **A Principled Life: The Second UU Principle**

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Today I want to continue the series of sermons on the foundational Principles of Unitarian Universalism. Being second in the series, I'll share some history and perspective on the Second Principle, which speaks to our covenant to affirm and promote justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.

Those of you who are new to Unitarian Universalism need to know that our Purpose, Principles and Sources represent foundational statements of what this religious denomination finds important and strives to demonstrate in daily practice. While not a creed or a statement of belief, the Seven Principles do represent a set of common values which bind us together in a community of faith and support. You can find the full document referenced on the back cover of your order of service, or inside the hymnal.

In accordance with the Bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association of congregations, the Purpose, Principles and Sources are reviewed on a periodic schedule for possible changes or additions. The Commission on Appraisal of the national Unitarian Universalist Association selects and researches an issue of deeper meaning and better practice to UU every three years and is now engaged in a process of gathering input, information, and suggestions from UUs across the country on the Principles. Every congregation, every individual Unitarian Universalist, is invited to have input into this process.

To that end, after the service today, we'll begin the process of talking about our UU Principles, Purpose, and Sources in a congregational effort to provide feedback to the work of the Commission. I want all of us to get an idea of what the Commission on Appraisal is looking for, as well as begin to share some of our ideas about possible revisions. On December 9th, there will be a longer workshop during which we will go into more depth about providing input and feedback for the review process. Look for that workshop on Sunday, December 9<sup>th</sup>, following our morning service.

Many people are first attracted to Unitarian Universalism because of our faith tradition's strong stance on the side of social justice and the active part that our congregations take in a variety of efforts to make the world a better place to live. We show our ongoing support for social action by having it as one of the important ministries of our churches. We organize ourselves to take action and to be visible on matters of importance in our communities. It is not unusual to see each other in church, and then to see each other again during the week at peace rallies, school board meetings, or speaking up at groups concerned with protecting the environment or addressing homelessness or providing safety for our children.

UUs care deeply about what happens in the world and are actively involved in speaking up and acting out of our values for justice, equity, and compassion in our interactions with each other. We are justifiably proud of those in our historic movement who were there to oppose slavery, advocate for the rights of women, fight for civil rights, oppose war, and improve public health.

In relationship to this Principle, our heritage extends all the way back to the very beginnings of our faith tradition. Some of the earliest arguments over religious dogma in the newly forming churches of the Protestant Reformation were about the issue of

salvation. While the factions might agree that the key to Christian salvation was to be found in the life of Jesus, some felt that belief in Jesus as the savior was enough to insure everlasting life.

Others felt that belief alone was not enough. They believed that people are called by the example of Jesus to act with compassion, to seek justice, and to care for all of those in the community. In theological circles, this discussion is referred to as the “deeds or creeds” dilemma of salvation. The question becomes, are you saved by your belief in Jesus as the Christ, by your faith, alone – your creed – OR, does your behavior, your works, play a role in salvation, as well – your deeds?

Unitarians and Universalists were historically in the group that held that belief alone did not guarantee salvation. Rather, standing on the side of those who held that one’s life deeds speak volumes about one’s beliefs, we’ve felt that each of us has strong responsibilities to live and interact in community in ways that represent the best model of humanity. We have valued deeds over creeds throughout our history. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “what you are thunders so that I cannot hear what you say.”

In the words of Unitarian Universalist minister Edward Frost, “The very name Unitarian Universalist suggests a strong ethical component. “Unitarian” implies the unity of all beings, binding us together in one human family. “Universalist” suggests that our concerns are global in nature – that no one is excluded. Affirming and promoting “justice, equity, and compassion in human relations” articulates that tradition.”

While some may see the purpose of life as becoming holy, to then earn an eternity in heaven, UUs are more inclined to see the purpose of life as becoming whole, in the hope of creating heaven on earth. To do that, we articulate our hope for that heavenly community on earth as one characterized where a life of lived values includes justice, equity, and compassion.

This congregation has a history and presence of social action, a passion for making the world a better place, not only for ourselves, but for all of creation. Members of this community consider what they do for housing, the environment, worker justice, and other worthy causes as a part of their spiritual practice. For most UUs, it would be unthinkable to sit idly by while others in their own churches and the larger community suffer injustice, pain, or want and not take action.

Unitarian Universalist theologian James Luther Adams wrote extensively on his insights on society. In his essay “Theological Bases of Social Action,” Adams says, “The decisive element in social action is the exercise of power, and the character of social action is determined by the character of the power expressed.”

I find this an important framework for considering the impact of our Second Principle. We acknowledge that power is a reality in our world, and that each of us has some personal power to use in ways that influence and/or allow us to be influenced. We know that power can be used for good or for evil, and that we have choices about how we will use our personal power in every interaction of every day of our lives.

With our Second Principle, we acknowledge this power and boldly state how we will choose to exercise it – we will use it in the service of creating justice, insuring equity, and showing compassion in our interactions with ourselves and the larger human community. With this affirmation, we say that we will make choices about our actions that aim to honor the worth and dignity of others by seeking to create conditions where they are treated justly, fairly, and benevolently.

We have a list of seven Principles, and all of them interface with each other to create a whole fabric of values. You simply can't affirm the worth and dignity of others and not want to see them also treated justly, equitably, and compassionately. To create justice in the world, then, becomes a natural extension of our concern for others.

This is the UU version of the Golden Rule – do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Our Second Principle affirms our desire to see everyone treated justly. Many of our country's early leaders were either affiliated with Unitarianism or were familiar with the religious precepts of this faith tradition. You can see echoes of our historical emphasis on the creation of justice in the earliest documents in our nation's history – the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. (I want to acknowledge that these lofty ideals were not, and are not, applied equitably in our country. We still have work to do.)

When we speak of equity in our Principles, it is important to notice the choice of words. I think we have a habit of using the terms “equity” and “equality” as though they were interchangeable. They actually are not. Equality implies that everyone gets the same, that all are equivalent. While that may be a laudable goal, in reality and in many ways, we all are not, in truth, all “equal.” Some people are more “equal” than others.

Our Principle speaks to our goal of promoting “equity” – a desire to see fairness built into the system so that people get what they need. In this way, we acknowledge that some people, in order to enjoy the fruits of life, need more and different kinds of help and support than others. Our Second Principle speaks to our commitment to see that resources are provided equitably.

Realizing that none of us can navigate the treacherous waters of life alone, we seek to support each other with compassion and tenderness. Compassion, from the Latin, means “to suffer together” – knowing that at times, the best response we can make to one another is to be there for each other in pain, sorrow, and suffering. With compassion, it is only natural to respond to others who suffer with a desire to do something, to take some action that will help to alleviate the source of their pain. Calling ourselves a compassionate people is a call to action.

Let me share with you a story from Japan:

Long ago, an old woman wanted to see for herself the difference between heaven and hell. The monks in the temple agreed to grant her request. “First, you shall see hell,” they said as they put a blindfold over her eyes.

When the blindfold was removed, the old woman stood at the entrance to a great hall. The hall was filled with round tables each piled high with the most delicious feast – fruits and vegetables, desserts to make your mouth water. The old woman noticed that there were people seated just out of arm's reach of the tables. Their bodies were thin and their pale faces convulsed with frustration. They held chopsticks almost three feet long. With the chopsticks, they could reach the food, but they could not get the food back into their mouths. As the old woman watched, a hungry, angry sound rose into the air. “Enough,” she said, “Let me see heaven.”

When the blindfold was removed the second time, the old woman rubbed her eyes. For there she stood again at the entrance to a great hall with tables piled high with the same sumptuous feast. Again she saw the people sitting just out of arm's reach of the food with those long chopsticks.

But the people in heaven were plump and rosy-cheeked, and as she watched, the musical sound of laughter filled the air. And then the old woman laughed, for now she understood the difference. The people in heaven were using those three-foot-long chopsticks to feed each other.

This morning's reading, and this story, speak to us about our interconnectedness. We need each other and have obligations to one another in creating a good life on earth. Among our Seven Principles, the Second encourages us to action in the larger world, spurs us to be aware of what is happening around us and to do what we can to improve our lives, the lives of those around us, and the lives of millions who share the planet with us now and will inherit this place from us in the future.

I used these words from Edward Everett Hale as a benediction a few weeks ago, and they are applicable for today's message, as well:

I am only one, but still I am one.

I cannot do everything, but still I can do something.

And because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do something that I can do.

Perhaps one of the limits of the Second Principle is that, in its current form, it limits our affirmation and promotion of equity, justice, and compassion to our "human relations." We've agreed to seek these ends for people, but what about for other life forms, for the rest of the interconnected web of which we are a part (a preview of our Seventh Principle)? Do we treat the ocean with compassion? If so, what would that look like? How might we express justice for animals, or under what circumstances could we contemplate offering them equity?

While I'm sure that there are arguments both for and against extending the Second Principles considerations beyond human relations, at least it is something to add to our consideration of the implications of what we are affirming and promoting in this statement of our foundational UU values. We have to think not only of the words we are saying, but we also need to reflect on what those words mean in a practical and real sense.

How will we carry out, in our day-to-day life, the words that we choose to represent us as a denomination? What are the implications for what we are then called to do and not do, as a result of the choices we make about how we describe our covenant with one another?

UU Minister Harry Meserve once said, "If you were arrested for being a Unitarian Universalist, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" I don't think being a UU is illegal, yet! In this imaginary tribunal, we'd be asked to show how our lives were a demonstration of our convictions, and we might be asked to provide examples of how we had lived our values through the Seven Principles. These are not mindless, passive, or easy to spout platitudes for Unitarian Universalists to crouch behind as a quick, convenient statement of faith. They represent a vital, living commitment in our spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical lives, as well as in the life of our denomination and our congregation.

I hope there's enough evidence to find us all truly deserving of being called "Unitarian Universalists." Blessed be.