

Alan Seale Sermon

Back to Basics: What Will We Live?

First Religious Society, Unitarian Universalist
Newburyport, MA
November 24, 2024



*Live in the present. Do the things that need to be done.
Do all the good you can each day. The future will unfold.*

--Peace Pilgrim

Reading before Sermon

For nothing is fixed

by James Baldwin

*For nothing is fixed,
forever, forever, forever,
it is not fixed;
the earth is always shifting,
the light is always changing,
the sea does not cease to grind down rock.*

*Generations do not cease to be born,
and we are responsible to them
because we are the only witnesses they have.
The sea rises, the light fails,
lovers cling to each other,
and children cling to us.*

*The moment we cease to hold each other,
the moment we break faith with one another,
the sea engulfs us and the light goes out.*

Sermon

So here we are almost three weeks post-election and the transition towards a new government is underway. As I see or hear headlines each day about that transition, all I can say is “Wow. Just wow.”

It's hard to know how to respond to what is happening, which takes me back to basics—paying attention to what really matters right here, right now—back to being clear about what I am called to live today. It brings me back to our Opening Words—the mashup of wisdom from Jon Kabat-Zinn, Peace Pilgrim, and Howard Zinn with a little Alan Seale and Transformational Presence thrown in.

We take care of the future best by taking care of the present now.

*So, live in the present. Do the things that need to be done.
Do all the good you can each day.*

*And remember that the future is an infinite succession of presents.
To live now as we think human beings should live,*

*in defiance of all that is bad around us,
is itself a marvelous victory.*

*So, stand tall in who you are,
be Love,
and shine your light.*

The future will unfold.

Different words perhaps, but that mashup lifts up what we as Unitarian Universalists hold dear. It's what we're about.

In 2018 Pulitzer Prize winning American author Marilynne Robinson published a collection of essays and talks titled *What Are We Doing Here?* In an interview in [The Guardian](#), she talked about her latest book and about fear and vulnerability as part of the human experience, her faith in democracy, a conversation she had with President Obama, and her hope for the recovery of liberalism.

Towards the end of the interview, she was asked what one single thing she believed would make the world a better place. And she said, "Loving it more."

Coming across that interview just in the last couple of weeks, her words gave me pause. Because it seems so basic, so simple. And it gave me hope, because it seems so basic, so simple. And, maybe not so easy as it sounds. This *love* thing isn't always easy. I'm certainly not always so good at it. Yet I recognize the truth in it.

We say every Sunday, "Love is the doctrine of this church. And Service is our prayer." Breathe that in. Poets and philosophers across time have said some version of, "What we do not love we will not save." So, Marilynne Robinson says to make the world a better place, "Love it more."

And that takes me to a deeper sense of love, not so much as a verb, but as a state of being—Love as a presence. To *be* Love. Even when it's hard. Even when what is happening goes against the very fiber of our being. Even when we're scared or angry or frustrated or anxious. Even when we're in disbelief about what could happen. Still to *be* Love. To show up as Love.

"Love is the doctrine of this church, and service is its prayer." How do we live into that affirmation of faith? What do we do with that when we're angry or scared or frustrated or anxious?

And that takes me back to the two questions that I really believe are the two most important questions of our time. They're really the foundation of everything. Basic, simple, and *not* necessarily easy.

1. Who do I choose to be? Who do you choose to be? Today, as we navigate our current realities, how do we choose to show up? You, me.

2. Who do we choose to be together? How do we choose to show up with one another?
What will we nurture in the space in between us?

How we are willing to be with these questions—how we *live* them—has the power to shape our relationships, our communities, our politics, policies, ethics, values. Who do we choose to be, and who do we choose to be together? In other words: What will we live?

If we can get that right, we're on our way towards healing. The root of the verb "to heal" is the Old English word *hælen*, which means to make whole—healing ourselves, our families, our communities, healing our countries, healing our world. We're in this together.

Last summer, an organization on whose Board I serve was in big turmoil. A particularly difficult and controversial situation was making us ask some hard decisions about how we would move forward. As that ancient wisdom teaching says, "As above, so below; as below, so above," I could see so clearly how the polarization and conflicts in our world were being mirrored in this organization. And I was struggling to clearly define my role in service of the long-term for the organization. Truth be told, in the ugliness of what was happening, I was struggling to remember who I am in the heart of my being and why I'm here.

I have a very active dream life and my dreams often bring me guidance—they're often "teaching" dreams. And so, on a night back in June, I found myself lying awake at 3:00 am after a big "teaching" dream.

The dream messages often come in single words, symbols, feelings, and metaphors, and this night was no different. The dream was reminding me of who I am and what mattered most to me, which helped me find my way through that situation. Yet looking back on it now, it also seems like a clear invitation for how we can show up as Unitarian Universalists in these unsettled times. Once again, it was so basic, so simple, and I really needed basic and simple right then. And I think maybe we all need basic and simple right now, even if it's not always easy.

So, the dream began with me seeing a man—maybe it was supposed to be me—tossing the words **Live** and **Bless** back and forth.

LIVE. BLESS.

Live. Bless.

Live my life as a blessing—hold the intention that my presence could be a blessing in whatever situation, whatever is happening—that I could be a blessing by how I live.

My initial thought in my dream was, "This feels pretty general, but OK, I can work with this."

Yet then came a third word: **CHOOSE.**

Choose. Live. Bless.

Choose. Live. Bless.

The three words took the shape of a triangle. That's significant to me because, archetypally, the triangle represents ascension, transcendence, a grounded base ascending to a higher aspiration.

Yet quickly then the triangle transformed into a circle with these three words forming the circle. And the circle represents wholeness, flow, connection, creativity, feminine energy, oneness. So, I thought in the dream, "This makes sense. I can feel the flow. I can embody the circle energy and these three words as we move forward in the organization."

Yet almost before I could finish that thought in the dream, a fourth word dropped into the mix: **LOVE.**

So now there was:

Choose. Love. Live. Bless.

Choose. Love. Live. Bless.

And the circle had become a square, the number four, representing foundation, structure, form, masculine energy—something solid, something I could lean into, something that would support me in my role. And looking back on the dream now, I'm reminded of Marilyn Robinson's advice about the single thing we can do to make the world a better place—*Love it more.*

So, I thought, "Great, now I have a solid and strong foundation on which to carry out my work here and to support me in my role."

Yet then a fifth word dropped into the mix: **SERVE.**

Five words forming a pentagon:

Choose. Love. Live. Serve. Bless.

Choose. Love. Live. Serve. Bless.

And this made me uncomfortable. Because in numerology, "5" is an unstable number. It's off-balance. It brings the unexpected—not necessarily good or bad—just unexpected. And therefore, not always easy to work with.

Yet bringing in the word **Serve** felt critical, especially with the other words, "Choose" in particular. I could *choose* to live in service of the moment, I could *choose* to serve a greater potential, I could *choose* to tap into "what wants to happen" and move towards that. I could *choose* to serve a greater good for this organization—indeed in everything I do.

And then I thought, "Well, number five—unstable, off-balance. And that describes the world we're living in. It's uncertain, unsettled, unstable. So maybe I just have to work with the pentagon and this unsteady energy as we go forward with the organization."

Yet as you might already anticipate, here came one more word: **Learn.** And it was the last one. Now six words forming a hexagon:

Choose. Love. Live. Learn. Serve. Bless.

Choose. Love. Live. Learn. Serve. Bless.

And suddenly it all came together. In numerology, the number 6 is about home, family, community. And now the dream was really connecting for me. And the last word to be added—**Learn**—was also hugely important. Because I believe we came into this life to learn, to grow into the greatest potential of who we can be. And that when things are not going well, instead of beating ourselves up, we are better served to ask the question: So, what am I being asked to learn right now?

The hexagon felt even stronger and more solid in that moment than the square had. I felt like I had a very strong support and instructions for how to move forward, not just with the organization, but in life. And then the hexagon transformed into a circle again made up of the six words. Later I saw the image of the six words with “Back to Basics” in the center that you see on the first page of this transcript.

And then the words all began dancing together. As I was first thinking about this sermon a few weeks ago, an image began to take form as the “Back to Basics Circle Dance.” Which is now feeling like perhaps another way to look at what makes up the foundation of a Unitarian Universalist life.

Not long after that dream last summer, I heard Father Greg Boyle speak at Chautauqua. He founded Homeboy Industries in East Los Angeles in 1988 to be a service organization and employer for gang members as a way of helping them turn their lives around. Today, it has become the blueprint for over 250 organizations and social enterprises around the world. If you ever have the chance to hear Father Greg speak, do it. His talks are made up of stories of being with those young men on the streets—stories that never fail to break open my heart even wider and bring tears to my eyes.

So, when I heard Father Greg speak this past summer, the great civil rights leader and activist James Lawson had just died a few weeks before. And Father Greg told a story about being with James Lawson after Senator John Lewis died, and how James Lawson described John Lewis as a man who was “so gathered”.

I had never heard that term—“so gathered”—be used to describe a person. Yet that word—that concept—hasn’t let go of me since then. For me, it brings a whole other sense of what it means for us have our lives together, to know who we are, to walk in the world in complete alignment and congruence within ourselves.

And then I come back to Love being our doctrine and service our prayer. And for each of us to ask of ourselves: Am I gathered in the whole of who I am? Am I gathered in my heart, soul, mind, and body to be able to meet whatever circumstance or situation is suddenly in front of me?

And what about us together? Are we gathered in the whole of who we can be together? Are we gathered in heart, soul, mind, and body to be able to meet whatever happens?

In my work in Transformational Presence, our guiding mantra is:

*Stand tall.
Be Love.
Shine your Light.*

For me, that Love and Light are so much bigger than my own love and light. They are universal. They're like Source. They're sparks of Creation expressed in unique ways through each one of us. And the mantra itself is a call to action—a call to live in service of a greater good—a call to live in service of something larger than ourselves.

On the day after the election, when I was writing my first post-election Substack message, two other mantras came to me—perhaps a bit more pithy and more to the point for where we are right now.

The first one:

*Know why you're here.
Keep your focus.
Don't get distracted by the noise.*

The second was even more succinct—maybe it's the t-shirt version:

*Know what matters.
Live that.*

It seems to me that these mottos are really what being “gathered” is all about. These mottos are what our affirmation, “Love is our doctrine and service our prayer,” is all about. And it's what the “Back to Basics” Circle is all about:

Choose
Love
Live
Learn
Serve
Bless

As we navigate the transitions of the coming weeks and months, and all that may come in front of us in the next few years, may we all be “gathered” in who we are, in how we choose to show up, and in how we choose to be with one another not just here in our church, but also out in the world.

May Love be our personal doctrine as well as the doctrine of this church. And may Choose, Love, Live, Learn, Serve, and Bless be our prayer.

May it be so.