

## Inherent Worth and Dignity©

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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“We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” This is how the Seven Principles of the UUA begin. You will find our Seven UU Principles printed on the back of your Order of Service. We put them there as a reminder of the values we hold. We put them there because of the significance they hold in our religious faith. How significant are they? We can get a sense of their importance by noticing where they can be found. The Principles are very near the beginning of the Unitarian Universalist Association Bylaws. Article I, which precedes the Principles, is only two sentences long. The Principles, starting with the sentence I began with, come next in Article II. So our bylaws begin with a sentence stating our name, the Unitarian Universalist Association, a sentence identifying the religious organizations that came together to form the UUA, and then the Principles we “affirm and promote.”

The Principles then clearly hold considerable significance in our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition. And what about the inherent worth and dignity of every person? The fact that this is the first of our Seven Principles is no happenstance. It is first for a reason, a reason that goes back to the distant roots of our religious tradition. Rev. Sewell goes on in her article to trace some of these roots that are deep within both our Unitarian and our Universalist heritage. The roots go back much further than the beginning of these two traditions however. The roots go all the way back to the first book in the Hebrew Bible, or what many Christians refer to as the Old Testament. I recognize that while many UU's are avid readers, the Bible isn't typically considered a must read. Yet even if you haven't read the Bible there is a story in the third chapter of the book of Genesis that most of us know at least in part. It is the story of Adam and Eve and how they were cast out of the Garden of Eden for eating from the forbidden fruit. The story portrays the reason humans supposedly went from being created in the image of God to being spurned by God. Humans were spurned for the act of eating from one particular tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The story, often referred to as the story of the fall of Adam, is considered by many in the Christian tradition to describe the very first act of sin by our earliest ancestors. From this story has come a belief that is foundational to the vast majority of those who are members of the Christian faith, the belief that we as human beings are born into sin. Not only are humans born into sin, humans are inherently sinful and therefore unworthy of God's love.

My first significant encounter with this message was when I attended a summer bible school around five years old. After coming home in tears for a second time, my mother decided to stop having me attend anymore. Then, in my teens, I encountered this message again when I began regularly attending a church of a different protestant denomination. As I look back now I realize that something important, something I now take for granted, was missing in these early experiences with religion. That something was the acknowledgement that I had, and that every person has, inherent worth and dignity.

If we look back into our Universalist history we will notice that hundreds of years ago our religious forbearers began to challenge the focus on human sin and

unworthiness. Ministers such as John Murray and Hosea Ballou preached that all humans were worthy of God's love. In the early days of the nineteenth century Murray was offering this message, "Give them not hell, but hope and courage, preach the kindness and everlasting love of God." Ballou went so far as to say that not just those who believed in Jesus would be reconciled with God but that this would occur for every person. These messages were not only radical for their time, they were heretical.

As our reading earlier pointed out, UU's today generally focus more on this world and this time, than on God or the possibility of some afterlife. But the message that everyone is worthy of love, that everyone has inherent worth and dignity no matter what they believe, is just as important today as it was when Murray and Ballou lived. When I consider many of the contentious issues in our country today, it seems clear that the message and the value that is contained in our First Principle is as important as it was during the time that Murray and Ballou lived. Today the worth and dignity of significant numbers of people are being denied and even assaulted. The message that is our First Principle deserves to be not just preached inside our building, it deserves to be shouted from our rooftop. The message of the inherent worth and dignity of every person deserves to be spread throughout our community, our state, our country and our world.

It is evident that since the time of Murray and Ballou there have been tremendous changes. Our mode of transportation has shifted from foot and hoof power to combustible and electric engine power. Now we don't just walk or ride, we fly. Our methods of communication over distance have transformed from the written word on paper to texting and tweeting on smart phones. In regards to the worth and dignity of every person, however, the changes that have occurred are nowhere near as significant as the manner in which we get from one place to another or how we communicate at a distance. Today denial of the worth and dignity of every person isn't limited to religious organizations or religious beliefs. Today the worth and dignity of significant numbers of people are being assaulted by individuals who aren't religiously motivated, by groups that assert one group of people is superior to another group of people, and by politicians at all levels of government.

The message of human unworthiness has changed little over the past two hundred years. The message contained in our First Principle on the other hand has changed in a very specific and significant way from that of Murray and Ballou. For Murray and Ballou worth and dignity were tied directly to God. There is no reference to God in our First Principle or, for that matter, in any of our other six Principles. In Unitarian Universalist congregations every person's worth and dignity is affirmed regardless not only of their ideology but of their theology or lack thereof. This constitutes a significant shift, one that opens the door to all, regardless of what a person believes.

Other significant changes regarding the issue of worth and dignity have been taking place beyond the bounds of our UU congregations. I would like to mention one in particular that deserves our attention. The perspective that is contained in our First Principle is gaining more attention and acknowledgement worldwide. Reading #475 in the back of our hymnal is from the Charter of the United Nations. It states, "We, the peoples of the United Nations, Determined...To reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women, and of nations large and small" and it goes on. We are not and have not been

alone in asserting the worth and dignity of every person. That said, we are, and have been for a very long time, asserting this perspective both clearly and powerfully.

The perspective of the inherent worth and dignity of every person focuses on making this life the best it can be, not for the few or the chosen, but for all. This is a very important message that we offer. I would assert that this is one element of the saving message we offer to those who enter our doors. Now I understand that we UU's tend to have difficulty with some words and concepts, and the phrase "saving message" may fit in that category. But I would ask you, if you would, to consider the possibility that we have something others might find to be a "saving message." Imagine for a moment what it might be like to be a person who lived immersed in the message that their very essence was sinful and defective. (pause) Now imagine what it would be like not only to hear but to feel that every person, including you, has inherent worth and dignity. How much relief from guilt and shame, from fear and inadequacy, could result from hearing and recognizing that you have inherent worth and dignity, just as you are? For a person who has been told or who has come to believe they are inadequate, defective or sinful, hearing such a statement could have a tremendous impact. For such a person this could easily feel like a "saving message."

I contend that people deserve the opportunity to consider alternatives to the perspective that every person is first and foremost sinful. I contend that people deserve the opportunity to recognize their own inherent worth and dignity. I contend that if every person, every single person, was able to realize their worth and dignity, the world would be transformed for the better. I would go one step further and contend that if each and every person realized their own worth and dignity they would be more inclined to recognize and honor the worth and dignity of others as well. I firmly believe that there are people who want to know the perspective contained in our First Principle. I also believe there are many who would appreciate the opportunity to claim it as their own. In order for this to occur, people need to hear, they need to see, and they need to feel the message we have to offer. The message needs to come then not just from our brain and out our mouth; it needs to come from our heart and through our hands as well. As Rev. Sewell stated so well in our reading today;

"Imperfect as we are, this principle calls us into right relations with others. It calls for profound respect, even when we differ with the views and behavior of another. It calls for gentleness and forgiveness and the understanding that redemption is just a decision away."

Our First Principle calls us not just to have an open mind but to have an open heart as well. The perspective contained in our First Principle needs to be shared and each of us has the ability and the opportunity to share it. So as we go forth today may we be willing to share this fundamental perspective of our religious faith. May we share, not only in word but in action as well, that every person has inherent worth and dignity.

May it be so.