

## **“God is Love *and* Love is God”**

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This is a sermon about God and Love. Or, more precisely, it is a sermon that suggests God *is* love *and* Love *is* God.

The idea for this title comes from the radical feminist theologian Mary Daly. In her seminal 1973 book, [Beyond God the Father](#), Daly argues, “If God is male, then male is God.” In other words, if you depict the creator and ruler of the cosmos as *male*, then this effectively assigns the highest possible value to the gender identity *male*. “If God is male, then male is God.” In making this argument, Daly breaks with centuries of Christian tradition that depicted God as *male*. God as Father. God as King. God as Son, in the male person of Jesus. Male. Male. Male. Why do we even give God a gender, ponders Daly. In fact, why even assume God is a person? Or, as Daly writes, “Why indeed must ‘God’ be a noun? Why not a verb - the most active and dynamic of all.”

And what if that verb was *love*? God is love and love is God.

The idea of God as love is an ancient one in the Christian tradition. The Christian scripture of 1 John 4:7-8 states: “*Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup> Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.*” Alas, as with many religious texts, how these verses get interpreted has varied widely and sometimes in ways that justifies some pretty *unloving* attitudes in my opinion. However, one interpretation of God’s love—universalism—is part of our story as a church.

As a quick recap, Unitarian and Universalist both refer to Christian denominations that emerged in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1961, these two denominations merged to form the Unitarian Universalist Association of congregations, of which First Church Boston is a member congregation. Prior to the merger, First Church was a Unitarian congregation (...although they were a late joiner and then rather inconsistent in their support throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century). However, what you may not know is that the Rev. Charles Chauncey, Minister of First Church for 60 years in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was an early universalist. Indeed the 1630 covenant that served as the basis of membership was [replaced](#) after nearly 150 years with a “Declaration of Faith” that reflected Chauncey’s universalist teachings.

In short, Universalism is the belief that God’s love will ultimately redeem all people from sin. The emphases here are on *love* and *all*. Universal salvation emerges from *love*. A love

that does not exclude any but welcomes *all*. One does not have to offer a list of good deeds longer than the bad ones. One does not have to present an argument that you're the "right" kind of person or that you're perfect or even just good enough. In Universalism, God's love is simply deeper, wider, and stronger than any sin. In the words of one [21<sup>st</sup> century author](#), "Love wins."

But what if you don't believe in an afterlife? Or, if you're not really concerned about a divine being named God determining your destiny? Actually, for many Universalists, hell is not a place in another time, but rather hell is a quality found in our living here and now. Unitarian Universalist minister, Joanna Crawford, powerfully conveys this message in her [2014 blog](#), "To Love the Hell Out of the World." Crawford calls for an "extravagant, wasteful" love that opens us to the "heartbreaking pain" of the world, but also to a flow of gifts that fill our hearts and our lives with joy. Love is a risk. She writes:

To love the hell out of the world means to see with our hearts, fragile and unprotected. To accept that life is shattering and excruciating. To see the hell in a world, in a group, in a person, in a tear. To know that it is the experience of both the oppressor and the oppressed, as we are both.

We are both. Oppressor and oppressed. We have been harmed by others. We have been the one to harm. We have experienced our own hell in moments of heartbreak, loss, and maybe even cruelty. We also bear witness to hell when our news feeds fill with stories of terrorist violence, refugees seeking survival, urban encampments littered with needles, or children gunned down at school. We know hell here and now.

And we can choose to love the hell out of the world.

I first encountered this idea of *loving the hell out of the world* in a t-shirt. [*This t-shirt*] Their appearance at the UU General Assembly some years ago also struck the Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray. In a 2018 [UU World column](#), Frederick-Gray, the then-UUA president, wrote:

Imagine what might be unleashed or transformed if each of us in our congregations asked, "How are we loving the hell out of the world?" How does this mission call us to re-think the ways we have been living, investing, and working for our values in the world?

What might it mean "to love the hell out of this world" as a congregation that affirms "Love is the spirit of this church"? What might it mean to you to love the hell out of this world?

This is a sermon about love *and* God because in my understanding of God, God is a verb and that verb is love. “God is Love *and* Love is God.” To obey God, then, is to love the hell out of this world. To walk in the ways of the God’s teachings is to do the work of love here and now with our own hands.

At times such work of love may flow easily from us. We see a need we can address and we act to fill it. We witness a harm and reach out to help heal or comfort. Or we recognize an injustice and do what we can to make it right or at least better.

Sometimes love emerges with joyful abundance of laughter and connection, a fount of blessings. Sometimes love breaks us open as we risk encountering the heartache of a world threaded with experiences of hell. Yet here too we are called to love. As Crawford writes, *“Bone-chillingly afraid we may be, but we step forward. We are the only form love will take and the work is ours to do.”*

God is love and love is God. When we depict God as verb, that verb is assigned the ultimate value. What if that value were love?

On the back of your order of service, you’ll see an image of the values proposed in the revised Article II of the UU Association bylaws. You’ll notice that at the center is love. The text that accompanies the image in the [proposal reads](#):

Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values. We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love.

When I read this, I can feel the roots from today back through centuries of universalist theology of love, even to the Rev. Charles Chauncy of First Church Boston. What indeed might happen if we vote love to be at the center of our values as a congregation, as an Association of congregations? What might happen if we chose to do the work of loving the hell out of the world?

To me God is not male, nor is God a person or a noun. God is a verb called love. A love that takes form in the work we do.

Amen.