

# Defeating, and Loving, Our Enemies

**Text of Sermon by Dane Smith**

**Unity Unitarian Church, St. Paul, Minnesota, Sept. 2, 2018**

This summer In Annapolis, in yet another bloody episode in the long-running tragedy enabled by our insane gun culture and our weak gun laws and our pernicious gun lobby, a deranged man with a history of making death threats was able to buy a shotgun and kill five people and wound several others in the offices of the Capital Gazette, a fine little newspaper serving Maryland's capital city.

The shooter likely would have killed more people if it weren't for a heroine named Wendi Winters, a senior community reporter who stood up, confronted the killer and actually charged him, armed with only a plastic garbage container and a plastic recycling bin. In choosing fight over flight, Wendi lost her life, but she may have lost it anyway, and several of her colleagues credit her for momentarily distracting the shooter and saving their lives.

Profiles and obituaries describe Wendi Winters as "elegant, self-possessed and dynamic," a meticulous writer and compassionate in her journalism. She wrote a "Teen of the Week" column and cranked out 275 to 350 feature articles annually. She was hyper-active with local good works and donated 11 gallons of blood — equivalent to five pints per year for 18 years straight, enough blood to save at least 72 lives. DaJuan Gay, a student at the University of Maryland at Eastern Shore and a former teen of the week, remembered how Winters actually helped him organize a Black Lives Matter march. That last tidbit might be a clue as to where I'm going. Wendi Winters also was a Unitarian Universalist.

I like this story because it illustrates the community spirit, and the sacrifices that many of us Unitarian Universalists make. And most of all, it illustrates, a little extremely, our essential fighting spirit, going back to the foundation of the nation, a heritage of standing up for our human rights, and more often, others' human rights and lives, and also just plain improving peoples' lives.

I also like the story because it also runs against an unfair stereotype of us, one that comes through in the old jokes about Unitarian Universalists or liberals being uncertain or confused, being so open-minded that we won't take our own side in an argument, or being

tolerant and accepting and bland and even timid. I used to worry that there was a wimpy Mister Rogers quality about us, but hey, have you seen that movie, you gotta! Mister Rogers, underneath that cardigan, was a studly man, a religious liberal and fighter, a strong advocate in the battle over how to foster development of healthy children, and against bad TV. It reveals under that sweetness and kindness a rock-solid conviction and courage to defy the prevailing direction with regard to child development, and to forge a quiet psychological revolution in children's television.

Look up on Wikipedia the list of notable Unitarian Universalists and you will see the names of hundreds of women, and a few good men like Mr. Rogers, who were in the vanguard, who pioneered heroically for hopeless causes that eventually prevailed, or toward which big progress was made. Most know that all those white male founding fatheds – oops, typo there, just one letter turns fathers into fatheds -- were disproportionately humanists or religious liberals who fought for the radical idea that people, white male property owners anyway, could govern themselves and could be rid of, once and for all, the Divine Right of Kings. The list includes Abigail Adams, a profound influence on both her husband and Thomas Jefferson, the second and third presidents, and on their shaping of the early republic. Other names: Louisa May Alcott, Susan B. Anthony, to Albert Schweitzer, Pete Seeger, and it includes dozens of fighters for suffrage and abolition of slavery and every imaginable human rights movement, and animal rights too, including the founder of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. There's an amazing number of pioneering scientists, from the discoverer of oxygen to a key inventor of the internet. It also includes Cool Hand Luke himself, actor Paul Newman, and the man who wrote the song Jingle Bells, and the guy who discovered the planet Pluto. And there are a couple of embarrassments, like John C. Calhoun, whose entire life was devoted to defending slavery and states' rights, but at least this year we finally got that fathead's name off our lake.

People like John C. Calhoun, and more importantly their bad ideas, just never go away. To me it comes down to a fatal human flaw, this tendency toward tribalism and separating ourselves from from each other, of feeling or wanting to be superior to others and destined to rule others. You think we are moving past it, and it erupts and gains a foothold and prevails. We are in those times, even though 3 million more Americans voted against this idea than for it, and now many any of us are in full-blown esistance mode, perhaps as never before. This summer I was privileged to join the Poor Peoples Campaign, and helped in particular with news media relations. I thought it represented one of the most complete and more spiritual counter-attacks of the various resistance efforts. Like Martin Luther King's great effort 50 years ago, just before he was gunned down, the Poor People's Campaign was rooted in the battle for civil rights and against racial disparity, but it extended logically to all poor people and class inequality, to immigration policy, to environmental degradation and climate change, to

the perils posed by the American war machine and militarism, and to the rights of women and to all our diversity in gender. We drew strength from poor people themselves, and an amazing array of religious people, Jews, Catholics, Protestants, Native Americans, Muslims, and others. We shut down the light-rail line to protest ICE and we shut down Kellogg Boulevard in St. Paul to draw attention to livable wage demands. People from this church got arrested, some more than once. As a practitioner of polite professional practical progressive policy, how's that for alliteration, I was nervous about this whole thing. My only time in the streets was covering protest as a journalist, and being occasionally impressed but also skeptical about its effectiveness. But this old fathead learned some important things. For instance, when I found out that the demonstration protesting treatment of immigrants included a demand by our partner group for actually abolishing ICE, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, I was nervous. I thought it was a reach, somebody has to oversee immigration after all, and wouldn't reforming it be enough? On the advice coming from Rob and Janne and other congregation leaders that we should follow and not lead, not pre-empt, like educated affluent white people are wont to do, I went ahead, and prepared a release that followed the leadership of our partner. I was still nervous about how my reputation for careful professional policy framing might be affected. I could picture other old guys saying things like Dane has finally gone around the bend, the cheese has slipped off the cracker, or he's a socialist after all. Six weeks, later the Atlantic magazine comes out with a cover story that reveals how ICE has become a militaristic rogue organization and a consensus that it ought to be abolished or completely re-ordered into its original status until 15 years ago, as a much more benign Immigration and Naturalization Service. So NOW that the establishment media has weighed in, I feel more comfortable, and proud I've been out front on this one, but I also feel a little sheepish for not trusting more in the wonderful young immigrants who had much more first-hand knowledge than me, and were right about the policy position that should to be taken.

So the times call for us to fight like hell, like never before, but this is creating a lot of consternation in our churches. A recent article in UUWorld magazine grappled with this noting that "it seems to us that UU leaders and many congregations have embraced justice work as central to our movement, in ways not seen in a long time, and in way that some UUs are experience as unsettling or disruptive...Some UUs are responding to this new focus with excitement, some with relief that we are finally living what they see as our calling (while) others are expressing caution, frustration and alarm." The article was headlined "Do you HAVE to be an activist to be a Unitarian Universalist?"

The article printed responses from various UU leaders and here are two that seem to be very different. One responder said: "I am frankly tired of hearing fellow UUS saying "I am not an activist" or "I didn't come to this faith to be an activist because it misses the point. This faith requires something of us in return for being our ideological home, and that requires that

we get up, get out, and build the world we dream about. I don't care what anyone calls themselves, but if you aren't called to act in, on and through our Principles, maybe you shouldn't call yourself a Unitarian Universalist."

OK. I kinda like that. Here's another perspective: "I find it disturbing that this question has to come up. There are many ways to express and live out the Principles, and values we hold dear. Activism is certainly one of them but not everyone has to take to the streets. We all have our gifts. And not everyone is suited to this kind of work...And those who are drawn to activism will often need times when they need to step back for quiet reflection and restoration."

Well, I kind of like that too. I'm SUCH a Unitarian, love the paradox, and truths in tension. The simple and very ultimate answer of course is, hey, we are the original people who say you don't HAVE to believe anything or do anything to come to this church, and I'm not aware of any excommunication of heretics or backsliders or negligent activists, at least in the 30 years we've been coming here.

It's just my personal opinion, but I think this congregation tries to find this balance. It seems to me that most Sunday sermons are not as righteously, and sometimes self-righteously, centered on social justice and political action, as my own. My excuse is, well, it's always the day before Labor Day and it should be a progressive celebration. But it seems to me that the extraordinary variety of things we offer to our congregation and our community does reflect the balance that most churches try to find between action and reflection on the divine, and the Great Mystery, and restoration and meditation. Let's remember too all the things this church does, including the collection plate proceeds, for direct service to people in need. The example of Wendi Winters, whose UUism seemed to be more about direct community service than activism, loving indiscriminately friends and temporary enemies alike, by giving blood, is instructive.

Which brings us around to the "Loving" word in the sermon theme, and a confession that the title is a bit of a bait-and-switch. I was trying to drive up attendance. We don't or shouldn't even think about our fellow humans as enemies, not even #45 or Steve Bannon, and we sure as heck don't keep lists of enemies, and we shouldn't want to defeat people, but rather defeat the ideas and systems and policies and conditions that bring unhappiness and misery to people on the wrong side of all our various inequities and iniquities.

Again, we have no creed, but loving is a thread that runs through those seven principles, which are these. The inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice, equity and compassion in human relations; acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations; a free and responsible search for truth and meaning; the right of

conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large; the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all; respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. The words “winning” or “defeating our enemies” is not in the principles. We are obligated to love all our fellow humans, to be patient.

I was actually confined in a summer camp for Unitarians in northern Minnesota over the last week, Camp Unistar on Star Island, in Cass Lake. I recommend it. I had the privilege of leading a conversation and program, two hours each day, around the theme UUs and Public Policy. I figure campers would be pretty rabid and eager to talk about strategies and tactics for winning this fall, and they were, but somewhat to my surprise, the one subject that seemed to animate them most was one I broached on how to be more loving and understanding toward our adversaries and toward red America, and at least some of those people who have been temporarily misled by #45, Public Enemy #1, oops, I should not have said that. That’s a trick I learned from #45: say something mean or outrageous, then when the whole world gasps, apologize insincerely. You secure the base and keep your approval rating above 40 percent.

To a person, the campers were intrigued by the Better Angels project, a bipartisan citizen's movement to unify our divided nation, dedicated to bringing red and blue Americans together, building new ways to talk to one another, participate together in public life, and influence the direction of the nation. This effort is led by our own Bill Doherty, Bill led a session here this summer, specifically to help blues talk to reds, and the experience for me was almost as fulfilling as the Poor Peoples Campaign. In this effort, among the expectations to abandon are that you can persuade others to abandon core beliefs, or that facts will be agreed upon and logic followed, or that your conversation partner (or enemy) will match your openness. I like this core principle: “everyone needs to save face, no one is portrayed as stupid, blind, or narrowly self-serving.” The technique is actually a lot like standard marriage therapy and that’s apt, because what we have is a family in serious danger of coming apart.

Which brings me around to my crazy redneck cousin Bubba in Texas, with whom I’ve been arguing philosophy and religion for a half-century, and some of you may recall previous stories about my ongoing “conversations” with him. My wife Mary and I were tempted at times over the years to cut off relationship with him because of the stream of often racist and sexist crap he sent by e-mail, which he thought was funny. Like too many conservatives, he thought that if he had one or two close friends who were black or Mexican, he could not be a racist and we didn’t need policies that correct centuries of systemic racism and discrimination.

I'm not sure whether my patient efforts at being a Better Angel are the reason, but Bubba over the last year or so has really turned a corner, or in Texas parlance, he's "off of number #45 like a dirty shirt." "He's poor excuse for a Christian," is how Bubba would put it. Bad news is Bubba has cancer. He's had some horrible bad breaks in life, but he trusts in Jesus to bring him home and deliver him from this vale of tears and into heavenly bliss, and I know for sure that he believes this with all his heart and soul, and I've told him I'm very happy for him. And I really am. Converting him or defeating him is not what I want to do.

And the important last thing we have to remember, is that WE ARE WINNING, if you take a look at the very long view and megatrends in our world, and the impact that humanists and scientists and progressives are having. The reigning apostle of this cockeyed optimism is Steven Pinker, a Harvard professor and author of books on language, mind, & human nature. and his latest book is the antidote to despair over #45, and the new fascism, and Putin and illiberal democracy and the rest. It's entitled "Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science and Humanism" and he should have added "democracy." With about 75 charts, Pinker shows how humanists and progressives and scientists and people of good intention who have faith in progress have improved human existence in nearly every way, over the last century in particular.

I believe that there is an inevitability to progress and to our winning and improving lives, and this faith can give us comfort, even as we consider our activist alternatives. Here's a final thought, which I've seen attributed to various sources. Our own Theodore Parker, the man who said "Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice," would probably add that it bends not of its own accord, or because it can do no other — but because of countless hands reaching up to bend it towards justice sooner rather than later."

AMEN!

