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 Arlington Street Church
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Love is My Religion

What's your religion? The bouncer behind the desk outside the ICU is clearly skeptical. I've introduced myself as the minister, but I'm dressed in dungarees and a tee shirt, not to mention the fact that members of the clergy should be in bed at 11:00 on a Saturday night. I'm asking to be let into the highly restricted inner sanctum to visit a member of our congregation. I say, *Unitarian Universalist*, and she says, *What religion is that?*

So now I have a choice to launch into my elevator speech: a belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every being, and that we are all deeply interconnected ... or to recite all seven of the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism ... or maybe just to remind her that, surely, she's attended a labor rally here at Arlington Street. But I'm in a hurry, keenly aware that the person I'm visiting was dying when I got the call at home, 20 miles away.

What's your religion? Channeling Ziggy Marley, I say, *Love is my religion*. Much to my surprise, her face softens, and she opens the door.

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Over the years, many of you have complained to me about Sunday-only religions, where what happens for one hour on Sunday morning has precious little to do with what happens in the other 167 hours in the week. The more publicly pious the people, the more suspect. If Jesus knew what was happening in his name, he'd die.

At its heart, Unitarian Universalism is a 24/7, seven-days-a-week religion. But it's up to us to *live* it, because our religion, like every other faith on the planet, is only as good as the way in which we live our lives, only as good as that to which we pay attention, and the choices we make.

I once heard my esteemed predecessor in this pulpit, our friend Victor Carpenter, say something that suggested to me that we can know what a person's religion is by looking at their checkbook. Today, it would be our

credit card statement, but the point is that we need look not much further than where we're spending our money to know what we value. Victor had met a young student from Ireland who told him that if he knew which restaurants the Irish bishops frequented, with whom they ate, and who picked up the tab, he could prove how out of touch they were with his country's young, unemployed people. It's easy enough to pick on the bishops. What about us?

How are we spending our discretionary income – material or immaterial – and in what are we investing? What – and who – is showing up in our calendars? How are we spending our time? What are we watching? What are we reading? These are great questions for job interviews and first dates, by the way; actually, they're just a more acceptable and legal way of saying, *What's your religion?*

Every once in a while, an ordinary person will do something so extraordinary, it shakes us from sleepwalking through our days. I collect stories of everyday heroism. They are the gospels of my religion. *My religion is love.*

A friend I'll call Pat was a little boy when his father was pulled over on a dark night on a long, quiet stretch of highway in the Midwest. His father told him to crawl into the back seat, lie down on the floor, and remain completely quiet, no matter what. As the police officer approached their car, Pat covered his head with his hands as his father tossed empty beer cans out of the front seat into the back.

There was bright light, a man's voice, and then his father's voice, thick with alcohol. The car door opened and shut, there were footsteps, and again, the flashing blue light. Then there was silence.

Pat's father had been arrested and driven away. No one else knew Pat was there. He lay on the floor in the darkness of the back of his father's car on the side of the road, too terrified to cry.

And then the blue light came again, and footsteps, and the car door opened. "Patrick," said the officer. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know you were here." Pat remained silent, as his father had instructed. The officer slid into the back seat. "You must have been so scared! I would have been really scared, and I'm a police man!" He stroked Pat's back. "Patrick, I'm going

to give you a special medal for bravery. And I think you've earned a ride in the cruiser. Would you like that?" Pat was too frightened to speak. The officer bent down, gathered up the little boy in his arms, and held him close. Pat remembers his clean-shaven face, the smell of aftershave, and the officer's tears on his cheek. "It's all right now, my brave buddy. It's all right," he said, taking off his shiny badge and pinning it to Pat's jacket. "Let's take a ride and go home to your mom, now. You can work the siren."

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The Dalai Lama says, *Kindness is my religion.*

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What's your religion? I want to invite you to join me in looking at your answer through the lens of your life. *What's your religion?* Does what you do and with whom you do it fit with your answer? Does what you spend, watch, and read match your aspiration for the kind of person you want to be?

A few years ago, I crossed paths with a woman I had known when she was a child in the religious education program at our church in Brewster. She was there during the time a member of our youth group died in a car accident. The woman told me Cindy's death changed the trajectory of her life; she remembers attending the memorial service and realizing that the measure of our lives will be in what people say about us after we die. Actions speak so much louder than words. *How we act – every day – is our religion.*

You know I love the spiritual practice of doing at least one good thing in secret every day. If someone sees you, it doesn't count! It's a game, and it's fun. You can feed someone's expiring parking meter. Clean up the kitchen at work. Leave an anonymous note of encouragement or inspiration on someone's desk or in the pocket of a jacket hanging on a rack in a store. Let someone in in traffic. Leave flowers in the vestibule of a nursing home.

Or it doesn't have to be anonymous.

Exiting an intersection, a woman turned too sharply and sideswiped another car. While an older gentleman hopped out to survey the damage, she remained frozen in the driver's seat, sobbing.

He came over to the window. "Are you all right, young lady?" She said that she was, apologized profusely, and explained that her car was

brand new – a wedding gift from her husband. He was going to be really upset.

“Oh, I’m sure it will be all right,” the gentleman said. “Your husband will understand.” Still stricken, the woman opened the glove box and pulled out the registration. Attached to it was a sticky note that said, “Honey, just in case you ever have an accident, please remember that I love you, not the car.”¹

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My religion is love. My religion is peace.

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An eight-year-old boy was standing alone, staring intently into the window of a sporting goods store. A woman saw him – saw that his clothes were dirty, and his coat wasn’t warm enough. Concerned, she asked him what he was looking at. He looked up at her and said a little shyly, “Well, I was just sort of praying and asking G*d for those sneakers.”

Later, she said that at that moment, looking into his little face, something in her just broke open. Without hesitating, she said, “Well, let’s go in and see about that.” And she just sort of took over; she brought him to the restroom and had him clean up a little, helping him balance on one foot at a time as he got one foot and then the other into the sink to wash it. Then she bought him the sneakers, and socks, and a warm jacket. It turns out he’d never had anything new before; he was completely overcome.

“Lady,” he said, “can I ask you a question? Are you G*d’s wife?”²

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My religion is gentleness. My religion is generosity. My religion is justice.

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Beloved spiritual companions,

What’s your religion?

It’s only as good

as that to which we pay attention,

and the choices we make;

only as good as the ways in which we spend our lives.

Ordinary people can do extraordinary things.

¹ Joel Osteen, *op cit*, pp. 149-150

² Joel Osteen, *Become a Better You*, p. 192

While we're alive,
may something in us break open.
May we know tenderness and bravery,
tears on our cheeks,
and great love.
May we be G*d's wife.
May we say, *Love is my religion.*