

## **The Universal Body: Disability Justice & Universalism**

Some sermons want to be books before they're even fully written. I want to spend so much time with you today. I want to turn this beautiful, formal sanctuary into a living room, to pour you a cup of your favorite tea, to sit together in ways that bring both of our bodies comfort. Instead of me standing up here like a teacher and you sitting down there like a student, I wish we were at my mom's wooden kitchen table into which I etched my initials when I was seven. Because, when it comes to disability justice, I'm not a teacher. I'm just a person with a body that wants to paint over the black and white *disability/ability* binary with messy and overlapping rainbow colors. I'm just a person with a body who wants to talk about the ubiquity and fallibility of bodies. I'm just a person with a body that wants to talk about the call I keep receiving from god to figure out how to place disability at the center of my work for liberation and justice.

Okay, so the call to place disability at the center of my liberation work actually came from my friend and disability justice mentor Laura-Marie, who might not be god. Or she might be. As a Unitarian Universalist I reserve the right to choose. Laura-Marie has taught me that many people are disabled, elderly, pregnant, or otherwise and might have different needs and a different pace in life; and that we can, together, live in a world where everyone is upfront about that and we can all get our access needs met. We live in a larger society where money is the main value, and honoring the inherent worth of all beings feels optional. She has taught me that disability justice is about creating the conditions so more people can show up, be honored, and be included in community. Which feels to me like a way to truly live our shared theology.

Of the many threads of our shared theology, our deep reverence and trust of the direct experience *is my favorite*. My love for that tenet of our faith is how deeply equalizing it is. Your experience of the world is no more or less precious, no more or less sacred, than mine is. There is no economic, intellectual, social, or ancestral gatekeeping to the work or rewards of divine goodness. There is no wrong way to do god. And that feels deeply universal – deeply Universalist – to me.

The theological framework for today's message is firmly Universalist, so let's establish a shared understanding. The Universalism we claim today evolved from the Christian belief that all souls would be saved by a loving and just god. This was a response to the Calvinist pre-deterministic beliefs that humans are inherently sinful and depraved and that only those who are chosen by God will be saved while all others are damned. And while the persistent dichotomy of Unitarian intellect versus Universalist emotions is inaccurately perpetuated even today, *reason* was the bedrock of original Universalism. As Universalist historian Ann Lee Bressler writes, Universalists argued that *reason* “dictated that a benevolent god would redeem all creation.” The doctrine of universal salvation was god's way of influencing human affection and turning naturally self-centered human beings to the love of god and the greater creation.”

There have always been perceived social barriers between the two halves of our religious ancestry. In Bressler's words, “Unitarianism was an elite, Enlightenment reaction to the harshness of Calvinist doctrine; Universalism was its rustic, less intellectual counterpart.” The itinerant, self-educated Universalist ministers who traveled and preached liberal faith to men and women of the laboring classes were a foil to the Harvard-educated Unitarians who hosted salons for thinking and speaking on topics of religious freedom. Where our two parent faiths gap and overlap is

interesting but is not the scope of this sermon. To paint with a very broad brush, Universalism is the half of our theological ancestry that believes we share a common destiny. I think we can fairly interpret that today as belief in our common goodness. Today, we're answering the call of Universalism to practice and receive love with no exception.

Our reading today was an excerpt from an essay called Access Intimacy, Interdependence, and Disability Justice by activist Mia Mingus. She said, "Interdependence moves us away from the myth of independence and towards relationships where we are all valued and have things to offer." Interdependence, justice, love – we claim these as some of our shared values. But is it really true that we've extended welcome to *all* people?

Unless you're someone with a disability that impacts the way that you exist in or are perceived by the world, or you are a caregiver to someone who experiences that, you may not realize the many ways that ableism creates and reinforces structures of injustice. In her book "What Does Ableism Look Like?", disability activist Emily Landau uses stories and statistics to explain the systematic and economic inequality disabled people face in the United States today. Here are a couple statistics that surprised me:

- In two-thirds of the United States, there are statutes in place that allow courts to deem a parent unfit on the basis of their disability, which means their parental rights can be terminated.
- The poverty rate for adults with disabilities is more than twice the rate for adults with no disability.

- The median income for Americans with disabilities is less than 70 percent of the median earnings of those without a disability.
- In the years between 2015 and 2023, more than 800 disabled people, worldwide, were murdered by their caregivers. Oftentimes, media outlets would report on these cases using language that shows sympathy for the killers, framing it as though caregivers were relieving themselves of a burden.
- During the Covid-19 pandemic, many states and countries issued guidelines explicitly calling for disabilities to be considered as a reason to not provide lifesaving health care to sick people.
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Per the CDC, as of 2024, over 28%, or more than 1 in 4, of adults in the United States had some type of disability that impacts their cognition, mobility, independent living, hearing, vision, or self-care. Because the current administration invests heavily in devaluing and dehumanizing any group of people that doesn't fit its definition of "ideal," there's no way to know whether that number has changed. However, given the increasingly limited access to affordable and comprehensive healthcare and the fear that seeking support may result in unwanted governmental intervention in one's life, I think we can fairly assume that 28% is the bottom threshold for how many adults live with disability in this country. If we applied that ratio to this sanctuary, which holds about 125 when full, more than 35 of us would be disabled.

And the church, both in policy and practice, doesn't have a record of dispelling the hierarchy and cruelty of ableism. In her book, "My Body is Not a Prayer Request," disability scholar and wheelchair user Dr. Amy Kenny tells stories of well-meaning church folks saying things to her like, "In heaven, you won't have to use a wheelchair,"

or “I’m praying for your healing and wholeness.” This excerpt from her book helps us remember that disability is not a monolith:

Let disabled people lead in imagining what new creation could be for us. For some, that’s using wheelchairs; for others, it is not. For some, it includes God using ASL. For others, it means seeing. Who’s to say it will be the same for all of us? The disability community is a diverse group of various physicalities, mentalities, and beliefs. Learn from us when we tell you how we imagine restoration. Let our imaginations for restoration light the way.”

Dr. Kenny is a Christian and speaks from that lens. Most of us are not Christian, but we cannot deny the fact that we exist in a society heavily influenced by Christian norms and morals, and that our government is increasingly influenced by an end-times framework that centers domination and apocalypse. It is crucial, more than ever, that we are grounded, certain, and clear about what we believe to be true about disability, bodies, and the role of our religious community so we don’t perpetuate theological wounds that *anyone* is possessed, in need of healing, less than whole, undeserving of dignity, or cursed.

Maybe you’re thinking that the more egregious examples of ableism from within the church and the wider world are easily combatted by the way we practice interdependence and love, but I encourage you to interrogate your own practices for the nuanced microaggressions most of us don’t even think twice about...

Are you still using phrases like “that’s so crazy,” or “we have a blindspot,” or “it’s so lame!”? All of these colloquialisms are ableist, and the disabled community has asked

us to find alternatives that don't perpetuate the belief that being crazy, blind, or lame is a bad thing. The hymn that we sang today, one of my longtime favorites, *Wake, Now, My Senses*, makes references to hearing and seeing – things not all members of our human community experience.

Many of us are familiar with the requirements for accommodation that the Americans with Disabilities Act (or ADA) makes for our physical shared spaces. Ramps, accessible restrooms, and nearby parking are often seen in our spaces, along with sound amplification options, hymnals with large print, and sometimes signage with braille. Did you know that churches and their activities are exempt from Title II and Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which specifically address making the modifications and accommodations necessary for disabled people to fully participate in a space.

How about how we craft our services? Let's assume that someone with the desire to join us on a Sunday morning is able to get through the door and into a seat. What assumptions are we making when we build a service thinking that all bodies can sit still, comfortably in a pew for an hour? How about when we assume that consecutive minutes of still silence is meditative or contemplative for everyone? How about when we assume that all bodies and brains can absorb a 2900 word-sermon from a seminarian?

Do we have chairs that work for and fit all bodies? Are there ways for all people of all sizes, ages, and body needs to participate in our justice activities with full dignity?

It's good and right for us to wonder how effectively we serve the people who sit in our pews and participate in our stewardship drives, but I also wonder about the people not here with us. When parents with disabled kids come through our doors, do they feel that our approach to religious education assumes access needs or do they have to armor up for a fight? When folks with migraines come through our doors, do we welcome them to a low-scent space with reserved areas for those with sensory sensitivities or do we wait for them to ask for something and then scramble to provide? When a person with narcolepsy joins us and stands up a lot to stay alert or falls asleep in our pews, are we distracted as a community, more annoyed by the disturbance their body is causing to our idea of church?

Do we even know what our people need? To call back on Dr. Kenny's words about allowing disabled imaginations to lead the way, I'm reminded of the slogan *nothing about us, without us*. "Nothing about us, without us" has been used since the 1990s in the disability justice community to communicate the idea that no policy should be decided without participation and leadership that represents the affected group. Is disability reflected in the leadership of our churches and association?

I want to pause here and harken back to my initial disclosure today – I'm no teacher when it comes to disability justice. But I do know that we don't have to be perfect at something before we try doing it together. By examining our practices through a disability justice lens, we commit to thinking before we speak and act. By opening our hearts to learning about the needs of our community, we can create policies and practices that *assume* diverse needs, rather than waiting for someone to self-advocate and responding to an individual request.

This work is inextricable from all other justice priorities. The racialized experience that every one of us has in a white supremacist society? That happens in a body.

Our experiences of sexism and misogyny that happen in a patriarchal society? They happen in a body.

The capitalist pressures that equate our productivity with our worth? That judges the value of our body.

Our work toward economic, racial, and gender justice is insufficient if it's not grounded in the wisdom and diversity of bodies. And when we don't do that, what message are we sending?

**By not placing bodies at the center of our work, we will always be leaving someone behind, telling someone they don't matter.**

In 1987, the Unitarian Universalist Association began funneling human and financial resources to a planning committee tasked with collecting information regarding how welcoming our congregations were to gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. Despite Unitarian Universalist churches and fellowships being “more welcoming than most religious spaces,” the planning committee found that the experience that many queer people had in UU spaces was marked by negative attitudes, deep prejudice, and profound ignorance, ultimately resulting in implicit and explicit prejudice. Once realizing that our intention to be inclusive did not match our impact, the 1989 General Assembly voted to initiate the Welcoming Congregation Program.

Today, most Unitarian Universalist congregations are recognized as Welcoming Congregations, including [yours]! This was a critically important and compassionate shift our communities made from performing welcome to truly embodying it. But

there is one aspect of the Welcoming Congregations effort that I want to clearly uplift – the responsibility of *the congregation* to deeply understand the experience of queer people and incorporate it into all programs, including religious education. Rather than a queer person walking through our doors and having to explain who they are and what they need, a congregation is responsible for engaging queerness in theory and practice to prepare, as best as possible, to extend a heartfelt and informed welcome.

This is not how we approach disability. We assume the disabled person will arrive and self-advocate, and will request accommodations so they can access an environment built mostly for able-bodied folks. I think it's time for a change, and that it is incumbent upon us to learn more deeply about the disabled experience, both from the people in our community and the many, many disability justice activists that represent all genders, races, ages, needs, and experiences.

We can only rebuke the discard of disabled bodies that is seen in the policies and practices of our wider community if we establish and uphold liberation that puts disability justice at the center. Only from that place – of intimacy, care, freedom, and interdependence – can we ever truly widen love's circle.

So, as we continue in our shared ministry in the world, how fast are we moving? And in our speed, who is being left behind? How are we communicating, and in our dialogue, who fails to understand? How do we identify success, and in crossing the finish line, what is sacrificed?

We have an opportunity here to make an important corrective. When we align our actions with a theology of universal love, we are saying a powerful *no* to a culture that

says some bodies matter and others don't. We are, in the words of the Universalist Clarence Skinner, "speeding the readjustments which can make life here and now justify our hopes". We are using modern religion to truly "sanctify the world."

So, I ask us to consider this: what is the usefulness of universal love and salvation today, especially to a community of people trying to make heaven *right here*? In times of increasing separateness, that which returns us to each other is well worth the effort. That is the balm of Universalism, a dissolve of the boundaries and barriers that lead us to believe, act, vote, preach, teach, spend, and live from places of division or fear. It is our Universalist ancestry that invites us to embody the repentant hearts and confessional postures so often relegated to our Christian comrades. But this work, that which starts in the heart, is what repairs the ways that our many daily actions wound each other.

May we channel universal grace and love as we commit to leaving no body behind, to listening into rebuke and criticism about how we've done harm, to step over our own comfort and desire to be right, to bear witness to the anger and indignation resultant of being cast aside. I end today with words from scholar and educator Dr. Takiyah Amin, a decades long UU, who said, "You cannot be in covenant if you believe in supremacy. If you believe fundamentally that your humanity is better and above somebody else's humanity, you cannot be in covenant or right relationship with them." If we believe that all bodies and minds – even those that don't conform to societal norms – have inherent worth and dignity, may we answer the invitation and offer universal grace and love to all.

In the spirit of practice, may it be so.