



A Call to Faith in Turbulent Times - A Call to Love*

Greenville UU Fellowship

Covenant Group Session Plan

PREPARATION

- Find some quiet time before beginning the session. Ground yourself in whatever spiritual discipline you practice, or simply take a few minutes to breathe and release your day, and any associated concerns.
- Set out cloth, decorations, and chalice.
- Made note of:
 - My name is _____
 - I am part of or claim these communities: _____
 - I am here today because _____

OPENING (15 minutes)

Welcome participants. To include those who are new to the group, offer the Mutual Invitation model, developed by theologian Eric Law, with these words or your own:

Introductions begin with the leader, who holds power in the group. The leader introduces themselves, then gives away the power by inviting someone else to introduce themselves and to then invite another person to do the same. The process of self-introduction and invitation continues until everyone has been invited to speak. Today's self-introduction will include your name, what community(ies) you claim as yours, what brought you here today.

Chalice Lighting/Opening Reading:

Invite a participant to light the chalice. Read these words from Zen teacher, Karen Maezen Miller, used with permission, or invite someone else to read them:

First, be quiet.

Give away your ideas, your self-certainty

Your judgments and opinions

Let go of defenses and offenses

Face your critics

They will always outnumber you

Lose all wars

All wars are lost to begin with.

Abandon your authority and entitlements

Release your self-image

Status, power, whatever you think gives you clout

It doesn't, not really...

Give up your seat

See what you are unguarded..

A prisoner of no one and nothing

And now that you are free

See where you are. Observe what is needed.

*Do good. Quietly.
If it's not done quietly, it's not good.
Start over
Always start over.*

FOCUSED CHECK-IN:

Invite participants to take a deep breath together and sit in silence, taking in the words just spoken. Then, begin the focused check-in using the question, "How is your heart?" Invite participants to respond as they are ready. It is okay to have some silence while participants think about the question.

Reading

Take turns around the circle reading this sermon by Rev. Elea J. Kemler

This sermon was preached by the Rev. Elea J. Kemler at the First Parish Church of Groton, MA on January 29, 2017. Used with permission. An audio file can be accessed at this link: <https://uuacdn.s3.amazonaws.com/videos/self-guided-ministry-call-to-faith-in-turbulent-times.mp3>

Over 800 years ago, the Muslim mystic poet, Rumi, wrote:

*Do not stray into the neighborhood of despair.
For there are hopes: they are real, they exist -
Do not go into the direction of darkness -
I tell you: Suns exist.*

Friends, it has been a hard week in our country. You know the reasons why, you know them in great and worrying detail. I know that many of you, like me, have spent a lot of hours in front of our computers and televisions and phones this week, frantically reading, scrolling through Facebook posts and articles, turning on the news and then turning it off again in anger and sorrow. Some of you, peace-loving people all of you, have told me that you are throwing things at the television, that you are screaming obscenities at your computer radio. Some of us are in a fog of depression, of overwhelm, our eyes are hurting from too much squinting at screens, our hearts hurt from too much bad news. And yes, we need to know what is happening. And we need to know about each executive order being signed, each threat to freedom of the press, to health care and education and vulnerable people, and the environment. We need to pay attention and stay awake. Yet many of us are finding paying attention and staying awake makes us enraged and afraid.

But as the writer and long-time activist, Anne Lamott, reminds us:

It (can be) good to be afraid, when it mobilizes us to fight tooth and nail for what is right, when it pricks the balloon of our complacency, when it gets us back on our feet. A lot of us are both afraid and devoutly faithful at the exact same time, for ourselves, our kids, our elderly, our country, but what is true, is that courage is fear that has said its prayers.

Courage is just fear that has said its prayers. We can be afraid and brave at the same time, and praying helps. And by praying I simply mean connecting with what is larger than us, with what we truly believe at the core, in the gut, in the heart, whether it is the God of our understanding, or the spirit of love and compassion, or just human decency and dignity that we believe in. To pray is just to steady ourselves. It is to ask for help from a deeper source, and to be reminded of this one important thing: We are not alone in this. We are not alone in anything.

So as you might imagine, I have been reading feverishly all week trying to figure out what we are supposed to do. I'm trying to figure out how we are supposed to respond when our own government is acting in ways so vehemently opposed to the values and principles of our faith. If your email inbox and Facebook feed looks anything like mine, you now have countless petitions to sign, action guides to follow, post cards to write, requests for phone calls to make to senators and representatives. And it's all urgent, there's nothing that is not urgent and there is more every day. So I wanted to be able to tell you what we should be doing. I wanted to be able to tell you how we are going to protect our values and our country which is under siege in a way many of us have never experienced before. I wanted to tell you how we are going to most effectively and strategically use our considerable powers, our considerable resources, in service to our values, in service to the people whose lives will be most deeply and terribly impacted by the policies and actions of this new administration, and in service to the earth itself whose health is already so precarious, and so fragile.

And then I remembered this is week number one. We don't have to figure it all out by today. We just have to begin. I also remembered that I have two very specific jobs here with you this morning. My first job is to help you to take care of your own spirits, and to help you to take care of one another's spirits because this is a long road. And this is a time when all of our strength and all of our hope and all of our faith will be called for. And my second job is to remind you of some extremely good news. We already know what we are supposed to be doing, in the big picture, I mean, in the biggest picture, if not in the specific details. What we are supposed to do is love. And Love is hard, but we can do hard things.

So how do we take care of our spirits right now? I have some ideas. Here are some things I would like you to try this week and at the risk of giving you one more email in your inbox to read, I will send you this list, so you don't have to try to remember all of it.

Number one. I would like you to go outside every day. I would like you to look at the sky. If you're feeling tired, lean against a tree. You can sit down and let the earth hold you up. Take some deep breaths. I would like you to do this more than once a day, if possible. The more times you do it, the better.

Second, I would like you to choose news sources that you trust, just a couple of them. Read or listen to those sources and let the rest of it go. Do not read, listen, or watch news all day long, because it will not help you. We need to know what is happening. But too much of it leads directly to the neighborhood of despair that Rumi has told us to stay out of. So sometimes you must turn off the news and put on some music or read a poem instead. Rest your eyes and your mind. Because this is a long road we are on. And all of our faith and hope and strength is going to be needed.

Number three is, choose some voices you trust. Just two or three. And focus your attention on what they are saying. Figure out who your leaders are, the people whose voices and wisdom and experience help you, and listen to them, and let the rest go. I am paying very close attention to Rev. Dr. William Barber right now.

Number four, I ask you to think about the two or three causes and issues you are most passionate about, that you feel the most connected to, and keep your focus on those things.

Number five, I ask you to do something to build your resilience every day. Do something to you a little stronger, a little braver, a little more able. I ask you to speak about something, to tell your truth, to practice disagreeing with someone if that is what is hard for you, to practice respect and patience and kindness with the people you disagree with if that is what is hard for you. To say no to something that you believe is wrong. Say yes to something that you believe is right. And to keep a list and share it with the rest of us.

And finally, number six, I ask you to do something to resist every day. Do something to resist what you don't believe in and to support what you do believe in. Make one phone call. Write one post card. Give five dollars. Show up for a meeting. Show up for a conversation that feels tender or difficult. Say "thank you" to someone who you believe is showing up with leadership and courage. Make a list and share what you are doing with the rest of us.

The second part of my job this morning is just to remind you of what I know you already know: Love is the answer. And I don't mean the feeling of love. I mean the force of love. I mean love as power, I mean love which insists that we all belong to one another.

Valerie Kaur, the young activist who wrote the words of the prayer this morning, is one of the other leaders I am following right now. She writes:

Love is an action, not a feeling. It is the choice to extend our will for the flourishing of other people, our opponents, as well as ourselves. And when we love even in the face of fear and rage, we can transform. We can transform an encounter, a relationship, a culture, a country. When we love even in the face of fear and rage, love becomes revolutionary.

This week I saw a Facebook photo of my dear friends and oldest colleagues, Lee Bluemel, who serves the UU congregation in North Andover. It was a photo of her at the Women's March in Boston and she would be embarrassed but I wish that I could project it up here for you, that picture, so you could see the sunlight on her face. She had this beautiful smile and she just looked lifted up. She was full of joy. In the photograph she was holding a poster and I couldn't make out the words so I kept enlarging the photo until I could read what they were and they were wonderful words. The poster said:

Love is hard. Love for people, especially those who are different from you. Love that says "I see you as a person." Love that says "let your unique light shine in the world!" because each of our souls touches the divine mystery. Love that says "we're on a journey together, and my fate is tied up with yours." Love that grabs you and won't let you go until your whole life is dedicated to standing on the side of love. Love that changes the world. Love is hard. Do it anyway.

Love is hard. We belong to one another. And we can do hard things.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

1. In what ways can we help take care of each other's spirits? What care does your spirit long to receive?
2. What blocks you from unleashing your love on the world?
3. Can you name at least one thing that will encourage you do the hard thing of loving?

SHARING AND DEEP LISTENING: We take time to reflect on the readings and questions, responding one at a time as we are moved, without cross-talk or discussion. Passing is allowed, but everyone has the opportunity to speak once before anyone speaks twice, and we listen deeply to one another without needing to formulate a reply, or fix, or help, or set anyone straight.

SILENCE (2 minutes):

OPEN DISCUSSION: We take some time to share what we have appreciated about the sharing, and what questions or longings we have now. Responsive conversation is OK during this portion, but continue to practice deep listening.

CLOSING READING:

Still Queer in America

*we were erased and still we loved
we were shamed and still we loved
we were expelled and still we loved
we were laughed at and still we loved
we were hunted and still we loved
we were sacrificed and still we loved
we were marketed and still we loved
we were legislated and still we loved
we were murdered and still we loved*

we were murdered

and still

we love

~ Becky Brooks, used with permission.

Ask participants to mull this question in the days ahead: “What commitments and values will you continue to hold, no matter what?”

Extinguish the chalice.

*This session was adapted from a small group session series: *A Call to Faith in Turbulent Times*, authored by Marta I. Valentin, a UU minister currently serving in Medford, MA. This is the second session in the series.

All four sessions in the series are available online at <http://www.uua.org/re/group/call-faith-turbulent-times>