



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

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**The Love of Wisdom & the Wisdom of Love:  
On the Ordination of Scot Hull as a Unitarian Universalist Minister**

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**Traditional Reading** (Proverbs 3:13-18): 13 Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, 14 for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. 15 She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her. 16 Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. 17 Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. 18 She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her; those who hold her fast will be blessed.

**Traditional Reading** (Mark 12:28-31): 28 One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” 29 “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ 31 The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

**Contemporary Reading** (“Pale Blue Dot” - Carl Sagan)

Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every "superstar," every "supreme leader," every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there--on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how

frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds.

Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.

The Earth is the only world known so far to harbor life. There is nowhere else, at least in the near future, to which our species could migrate. Visit, yes. Settle, not yet. Like it or not, for the moment the Earth is where we make our stand.

It has been said that astronomy is a humbling and character-building experience. There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known.

### Homily

Scot, I don't know all of the reasons why you chose these three passages to be read for your ordination, but I suspect maybe you don't *fully* know either. So my first invitation to you is to set a reminder for the anniversary of this day each year to spend at least a few minutes re-reading these three passages. What new insights might they reveal with each passing year? Or what old insight might they reconnect you to, that may have become lost amidst the ten thousand things that happen in any given year?

Those questions, however, can only be answered with the passage of time. And you asked me to preach your ordination sermon—so for now, you get to hear what I think about them!

Let's start closest to our own time. For your contemporary reading, you chose a passage from Carl Sagan's final book for a popular audience, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space*. It was published in 1994, two years before his death. (He was only 62 when he died.)

The inspiration for that final book is the Pale Blue Dot photograph taken in 1990 of planet Earth from 3.7 billion miles away by the Voyager 1 space probe: "In the photograph, Earth's apparent size is less than a pixel; [our] planet appears as a tiny dot against the vastness of space, among bands of sunlight reflected by the camera."

Turning to our traditional readings, do passages from millennia-old scriptures still matter in the face of our *insignificance* in the grand scheme of things? The photo on

the cover of our Order of Service is one of many facts that confront with truth along the lines of Sagan's words that from a deep space perspective, **"everyone you love [is] on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam."** (Although I will add that the more I've thought about it, it arguably sounds kind of cool when you say it that way. Or maybe I just have a perverse sense of what's cool!)

Anyway—since, prior to seminary, one of Scot's former lives included graduate school in philosophy, allow me to briefly bring in one of the passages that has stayed with me all these years later from my days as an undergraduate philosophy major. It is from the final paragraph of an essay titled "The Absurd" by the philosopher Thomas Nagel (1937-), who is the University Professor of Philosophy and Law, Emeritus, at New York University.

In the essay, Nagel is wrestling with our cosmological context as did Sagan before him. How shall we live once we know just how far we are from being the center of "life, the universe, and everything." Our planet is only the third rock from the sun. We are not even at the center of our solar system is; rather, we are on the edge of the Milky Way Galaxy that is merely one among more than two *trillion* galaxies in the universe. (And that's not even getting into the real possibility that we live not in a universe, but a *multiverse*.)

Once we become aware of our infinitesimal place in the larger scheme of things, reality can begin to seem absurd; hence, the title of Nagel's essay. One response might be to throw up your hands in despair and declare that nothing matters. Nagel disagrees with that choice, and here's the paragraph that stuck with me:

If a sense of the absurd is a way of perceiving our true situation...then what reason can we have to resent or escape it? ...It results from the ability to understand our human limitations. It need not be a matter for agony unless we make it so... Such dramatics, even if carried on in private, betray a failure to appreciate the cosmic unimportance of the situation. **If [in a universal perspective] there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that doesn't matter either....**

I love what he does there. If we don't matter in the grand scheme of things, then the grand scheme of things doesn't have to matter to us.

To sneak in another philosopher, this time the late American pragmatist Richard Rorty, this insight is “not to say something philosophical and pessimistic but something political and hopeful—namely, **if we can work together, we can make ourselves into whatever we are clever and courageous enough to imagine ourselves becoming.**” Since our situation is absurd, and there is nothing forcing our hand and guaranteeing either good or bad results, *the choice is ours—radically ours*—to do what we can on this “pale blue dot,” where we find ourselves.

Now, as Unitarian Universalists, we are typically a fan of choice. Our movement has been called A Chosen Faith. We value the importance of individuals freely choosing to be in covenant with us. We value each individual’s “free and responsible search for truth and meaning,” although occasionally folks among us overemphasize the “free” part of that search—and forget about the “responsible” part, but that’s a sermon for another day!

As UUs, we tend to be fairly ok with folks “picking and choosing.” **If a doctrine or practice feels obsolete, pretend you are in the film *Frozen*—and “let it go!”** But let’s keep the parts that continue to feel life-giving and relevant. I experienced a much different approach to tradition growing up in a theologically conservative church. I remember “picking and choosing,” especially in regard to the Bible, as something regularly condemned.

And it is here that those millennia-old scripture passages that Scot chose may have some significant wisdom for us early twenty-first century mortals amidst all our absurdity. When you heard that passage earlier from the Gospel of Mark, did you notice that ***picking and choosing is precisely what Jesus did?*** He was asked, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Behind the question is that Jews have traditionally identified 613 commandments (or *mitzvot*) in the Torah.

So Jesus was being asked which one of those 613 was most important. He could have said, “Picking and choosing is bad; all 613 are equally important.” Or he could have chosen one of passages that has been used to justify patriarchy, xenophobia, or violence. Instead, he did pick, and he *chose love*.

Jesus, who would have been familiar with all 613 commandments from the Torah, chose to lift up what we call Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (also known as the *Shema*) as

the first and greatest commandment: “You shall love...God with all your heart...soul, and...might.”

And he didn't stop there. Jesus went the “second mile” beyond what his questioner asked, and named the *second* greatest commandment. This time, Jesus looked to the book of Leviticus. Especially after choosing the love of God for the gold medal, perhaps it would have been logical to choose a more “realistic” option to receive the silver. After all, he was looking to the book of Leviticus, which is replete with oppressive content as well as the occasional standout feature. (If you're not sure what I'm talking about, check out Leviticus 25 about the year of Jubilee.) In the midst of a book that also has a lot of restrictive rules regarding holiness, Jesus singled-out the following verse for the second greatest commandment: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). That's some savvy “picking and choosing!”

And let me say a little more about why this whole “picking and choosing” is so important. More than a decade ago, I was a minister in northeast Louisiana, one of the most conservative parts of the country. And when I would sometimes find myself in debates about whether same-sex marriage should be legal, the single most common strategy I would encounter is someone quoting one of the seven so-called “clobber passages” in the Bible that people have so often used to justify homophobia and heterosexism. (The same dynamics play out around other classic “clobber passages” used to justify slavery, sexism, racism, genocide, and other atrocities.)

After quoting such a passage, I would often hear someone say that they wished the Bible didn't say that, but that's what it says, and “We can't pick and choose.” (Psychologists call this defense *externalizing!*) When asked to present a more progressive perspective, I would sometimes begin by showing a short video clip called “[Prop 8: The Musical](#).” Some of you may recall that Proposition 8 was passed in 2008, adding an amendment to the California Constitution that said, “Only marriage between a man and a woman is valid.” In the video, a group of conservatives and a group of liberals are fighting about what the Bible says about homosexuality, when suddenly comedian Jack Black appears, dressed as Jesus.

When asked if the Bible says “'These people' are an abomination,” he replies, “Well...it says the exact same thing about this shrimp cocktail.” Jack Black as Jesus

continues by saying, "You know, the Bible says a lot of interesting things...like you can stone your wife or sell your daughter in slavery." Aghast, someone in the crowd objects, "Well, we ignore those verses." Jack Black as Jesus wastes no time in retorting, "Well then, **it seems to me you pick and choose. And if you pick and choose, why not choose love instead of hate** – after all, your nation was founded on the separation of church and state." Jack Black as Jesus then slowly fades away saying, "See ya lata', sinners!"

Although many millennia have passed since these traditional scripture passages were first written, this piece of ancient Jewish wisdom seems as relevant as ever: given a choice of 613 commandments, "the greatest of these is love." Or in Dr. King's words **"I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear."**

Now, let's talk a little more about love. I mentioned earlier that Scot and I have the academic study of philosophy in common. Philosophy comes from the combination of two Greek words. The first half, *φιλο/philo*, means ("love"), and the second half, *σοφία/sophia*, mean "wisdom" – so **a philosopher is a lover of wisdom**. That spirit is beautifully represented in the passage Scot chose from Proverbs: "Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding...." But, Scot, here's the thing: you didn't end up with that Ph.D. in Philosophy – not that there's anything wrong with that. (I didn't either, although it's a path I considered at one point.) But you have ended up with a Master of Divinity, although there may yet be further degrees in your future.

What I want to lift up this afternoon – on this your ordination day – is that there's something significant in you feeling called to quit your job and go back to school not to finish your doctorate in philosophy, but to earn a professional degree in ministry. I hope and expect you will bring your wide-ranging love of philosophy – your love of wisdom – to your work as a UU minister. I suspect it will continue to serve you and those around you well.

Even more importantly, **may your ministry shift your heart ever more fully from the love of wisdom to the wisdom of love**. Scot, when you have a choice – and we almost always do have a choice – *choose love*. We are twenty-first century Unitarian Universalists. As UU ministers – and you are about to become one – we have so much

freedom over what to preach, what to teach, and how to spend our time. And **since we get to pick and choose, why not choose love?**

For now, I'll leave you with these words of wisdom from Helen Schucman (1909-1981), a professor of medical psychology at Columbia University in New York who unexpectedly found herself caught up in channeling words of love such as this piece of wisdom: **“Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.”** Your task, Scot—as you prepare to go from this sanctuary as the newest ordained minister in our living tradition—is *not* to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.”