

Centered in Love—United in Action

Pledge Drive Kickoff Sermon ~ Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preacher
Sunday, March 15, 2026 ~ Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: Gonna Keep on Moving Forward (Emma’s Revolution), #318 We Would Be One (Sibelius/Wright), Life Calls Us On (Shelton/Gibbons). Choral music: Walk with the Wind (Peggy Watson, arr. Matt Falkner, words of Hon. John Lewis). Piano music: Spirit of Life (Carolyn McDade, arr. David Zabriskie), Down in My Soul (African American Spiritual, arr. Moses Hogan)

Reading “Love at the Center,” by Rev. Abhi Janamanchi

Rev. Janamanchi is senior minister of the Cedar Lane UU Church in Bethesda, Maryland. He is a Unitarian Universalist Hindu and has been a guest in our pulpit. This appears in *Love at the Center*, a book about UU theologies. In 2024, delegates to the UUA General Assembly approved a statement of UU values and commitments which puts love at the center of our tradition.

Putting love at the center means recognizing that love is the force that guides us in our relationships, our actions, and our commitments. Love is memory and intention. It is the traditions that nourish us and the promise to honor those who have gone before. Love is the bond that keeps us together in hard times and in good times. Love is the hope that despite our failings, we will make it through—because we are not alone.

Love calls forth our best selves and invites us back, again and again, to attend to our personal pain. In this love, we find a sanctuary where the armor we hold up can be pierced by our pain, allowing the softness of the heart to heal us.

Love at the center is the love that will not let us go, let us down, or let us off the hook.

[This love] is the spirit that gently reminds us who we are and what we can be for each other. It guides us to say “no” to unhealthy behavior and to create good boundaries.

Love at the center is the force that overcomes fear, informing and infusing courage so that fear does not destroy us.

Love at the center is loving your neighbor as yourself—not more, not less. It is acknowledging our shared humanity and committing to live it out every day, even when it’s hard.

Sermon

Every time I give a sermon for the annual pledge drive, I am aware that some of you are with us for the first or second time. You might be looking for a community and really not looking for a sermon about funding the budget.

Well, if you are a newcomer, I have a few words, just for you. Everybody else can take a rest and not listen.

So: We are glad you are here. You are welcome to participate in UUSS without feeling the need to make a commitment of any kind. Just get to know us. By being with us today, you have an opportunity to see how an independent congregation funds its mission and embodies its values. In our pledge drive we raise money to compensate our ministers and staff members, maintain our buildings, fund our committees, and support the larger movement of Unitarian Universalism.

Unlike other types of not-for-profit organizations, our base of donors is limited to those who participate in the congregation. We don't send letters to people who've never heard of us. We provide a minimum of swag. Our members and pledging friends are the only people who support this congregation. *We're it.* And we're proud of that. One reason we support UUSS is to make sure there is a place for new people, because each one of us was new at one point. So thank you for being here.

And everybody else, you can wake up now.

Whether you participate or not, the pledge drive is an occasion to think about the role of generosity in your life. As we often say, generosity is a spiritual practice. It is a practice like hospitality and kindness. It is like respect and compassion. Doing these things can help other people, but as spiritual practices they are good for us too.

Practicing voluntary generosity takes reflection, decision, and action. For me, voluntary generosity brings a sense of connection to others and a sense of belonging to something larger than myself. It also gives me a sense of making an impact. If I have enough resources in order to share some of them, then I can make a difference. Especially when my gifts are combined with others' gifts.

In this congregation, pledging is an act of trust in one another. That's because there is no required amount for a monthly or yearly pledge. It is up to each person's conscience to make a decision based on their ability, resources, and sense of commitment. To be sure, the leadership describes our goals for the coming year. We offer charts, graphs, and pledge guidelines, and even videos on the website. Then we trust one another to be as generous as we can in making the promise which we call a pledge. In turn, when we make our pledges we are trusting the congregation to use these gifts with care and gratitude. Our trust is centered in love.

This year's pledge theme is Centered in Love and United in Action. One could say that in a busy congregation like this one it's a paradox to say we are United in Action. There are so many varieties of action at UUSS. Nobody can do them all. For example, on campus after our services there are forums, lectures, affinity group discussions, and meetings. There are conversations on the patio, in the Bookstore, and at the Connections Table. In Religious Education after church, we have provided age-appropriate sexuality education classes for children and youth known as Our Whole Lives.

On other days of the week, our Mercy Pedalers are greeting unhoused neighbors with respect and gifts of personal supplies. Several members provide accompaniment for asylum seekers and refugees; others welcome families with transgender loved ones who are fleeing hostile American states. Folks from UUSS are showing up at City Hall meetings, writing postcards to voters in other states, and serving meals at Loaves and Fishes. There are Soul Matters groups, book groups, Theology on Tap, plus people pulling weeds, digging holes, and making things tidy around here. There are committee meetings, choir practice, and Caring Committee deliveries of homemade soup. You can add your own examples.

This raises the question: How can we be united in action if we're doing so many *different* actions? The simple answer is that all our activities are the ways that we express our mission: *We come together to deepen our lives and be a force for healing in the world.* Our mission is how we put love in action.

You can't predict the ripple effects of the love we practice in a church, can't say how far it will reach and for how long. Here's an example. A year ago I was the guest preacher at a UU

congregation in a mid-sized city in the middle of the midwestern prairie. It was a homecoming for me. Forty years earlier, I had started my first job in my first career in that city, which was socially conservative and not too fun. Loneliness drove me as a 20-something to visit the UU congregation and then get acquainted with others and eventually join as a member. I made friends and found mentors there. Through my volunteer involvement I began to feel a call to the ministry. I was lacking in self-confidence about such a path, but when I talked with members about it, they were encouraging. Eight years later I began to study for the UU ministry.

Thus, a year ago, when I spoke to that congregation for the first time in decades, I began by saying, “Thank you for changing my life. And thank you for all the other lives you have touched over the years, and for all the people yet to come here whose lives you will enhance.” That’s what I said. Many of the members I had known were gone. They had moved away or died. Yet the congregation still reflected the hospitality, kindness, generosity, and concern for the common good, which had meant so much to me in my 20s. They were still centered in love. Here at USS, all your actions of care and generosity right now will enhance the lives of countless people in the years to come.

A few years after I moved away, I heard a story about a member named Diana. In addition to her work life, she served as president of the congregation and was active in local organizations. In the early 1990s, Diana ran for public office. She would have been the first woman to serve on the city council, but she was not elected. The old guard didn’t want her on the city council. To undermine her, they began a whispering campaign before the election/ saying that she was *an atheist*. The local paper reported on these rumors, of course, but every time, it added this clarification: “She is a Unitarian.” I’m sure that confused people.

It was not fair, but her setback didn’t keep her from staying involved in activism and community service. Her commitment and courage have inspired me. Over the years, so many Unitarian Universalist examples of courage have kept me going. They remind me that our faith is centered in love.

Love brings us together to promote our values, like interdependence, compassion, equity, pluralism, and justice. Right now, these values are under attack. Environmental protection, democracy, and human rights are all in danger. Human *lives* are in danger. State and federal governments are targeting transgender loved ones and abducting immigrant neighbors. Right now, the Immigrations and Customs Enforcement agency, known as ICE, is holding 70,000 people in detention; more than half of them have no/ criminal/ conviction.¹ Since January of a year ago, nearly 40 people have died in ICE custody, in addition to the shooting deaths of two citizen protestors in Minnesota.²

After invading Venezuela, our government has attacked Iran without authorization by Congress. It has put our service members in harm’s way with no coherent goal. Antisemitic and Islamophobic attacks are on the rise, with more violence just in the past few days. Human lives are in danger. What has been taking place is ugly and unsettling. It is appalling and scary. It breaks my heart, and many have told me that it breaks yours too.

I must admit that I struggle to know what to say to you about all of this. What can I say that would be of any help? I don’t know if it’s helpful, but a few things occur to me. First, it is exactly when our values are at greatest risk/ that our values are needed the most. The stakes are high. Our actions are as important as they have ever been. This is the time to remember we are centered in love. As we heard in the reading from UU minister Abhi Janamanchi, “Love at the center/ is the love that will not let us go, let us down, or let us off the hook.”

Activists who are known for their wisdom and resilience in the midst of struggles against injustice have shared guidance so that we can sustain ourselves for the long haul. These include, first, having enough rest, nourishment, exercise, and enjoyable activities in each week. Next, we won't last if we are fueled by outrage all the time, so we can limit our exposure to social media and the 24-hour news cycle.

As I thought about these points of advice, I realized that a congregation like this one is a great place to try out these kinds of practices. Consider the next one, which is choosing to take action. Taking action to benefit the larger community will provide a sense of personal impact. This is good for us and good for the world. The results will be even better if we match this with another piece of advice: get connected. Find places to be involved, meet other people, share your gifts and your needs, and amplify your values.

Reverend Janamanchi writes: "Love includes the traditions that nourish us and the promise to honor [the people] who have gone before. Love is the bond that keeps us together in hard times and in good times. Love is the hope that despite our failings [and setbacks], we will make it through—because we are not alone."

It takes courage to stay centered in love. It always has. The founder of Universalism in America was a lay preacher from England named John Murray. In the late 1700s Massachusetts was seething with Calvinist Puritan beliefs in the literal fires of hell. Hell awaited everybody except a few people, the so-called *elect*. John Murray preached against all that. He preached the love of God for all human beings. No hell. Universal salvation. His message of love stirred a backlash—from religious leaders and elected officials, and from the followers whom they fired up with lies and fear and hatred. That sounds familiar, doesn't it?

One day, John Murray was preaching in his Boston pulpit. Someone threw a large rock through the window at his head. It missed and he picked it up. Murray said: "This argument is solid and weighty, but it is neither rational nor convincing." He went on to say: "Not all the stones in Boston, [unless] they stop my breath, shall arrest *my* testimony." Fortunately, he would live until 1815, after spreading the faith which we claim as our heritage.

It's important to remember that Murray's message of love stirred a backlash precisely because it stirred hope and courage in people. They were drawn by the belief that all of us are part of one human family—no separation, no damnation. Whoever you are, we are all kin. Circuit-riding preachers went up the Connecticut River Valley to proclaim Universalism, and crowds responded by building churches. They built schools and colleges and hospitals. They worked for prison reform and compassionate mental health care. Universalists cared for people who are suffering in *this* life. Their term for it was building a heaven on earth.

Sad to say, there are still people in this country who preach that hell is real. Too many of them are in elected office. And for some of them just having that belief is not enough. They are determined to create a *hell on earth* for people they dislike. They are creating hell for the natural environment as well.

Right now, people in places of power want to keep everyone feeling afraid and helpless and hopeless. It is disorienting. But we can *reorient* ourselves—reclaim the values that bring us together and call us forward. We can reorient ourselves to the love within each of us, the love between us, and the love at the center which will not let us go.

We can't say if this will be enough to stop the cruelty. Will our shared efforts turn things back toward human decency? All we know is that we won't succeed if we don't keep trying.

This is called acting in faith. We act in the hope that “we *will* make it through—because we are not alone.”

Love calls us to bear witness to the suffering and injustice now being perpetrated on our neighbors and our families. Love gives us the courage to bear witness to the need for compassion, respect, safety, and freedom. We can build community. We can build the peace that our world is longing for. Building heaven on earth isn’t a construction plan to finish, it is the work we continue to do, together, when we keep love at the center.

In these ugly times, our sense of common humanity calls us to resist injustice and relieve misery. To make it through, we can stay oriented to our values. We can remember that we are not alone. We might be afraid, but we are not alone.

I love you. I love this congregation because *you help me* to stay centered in love. United by our values and united in action, let us love one another so that we might all stay centered in love. Amen.

¹ Camino Montoya-Galvez, “ICE’s Detainee Population Reaches New Record High of 73,000 as Crackdown Widens,” CBS News, January 16, 2026, accessed March 15, 2026. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ices-detainee-population-record-high-of-73000/>

² “Immigration Detention on Track for Deadliest Fiscal Year Since 2004,” NPR News, March 10, 2026, accessed March 15, 2026. <https://www.npr.org/2026/03/10/g-s1-111238/immigration-detention-deaths-custody>