

Nothing to Prove

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By Emily DeTar

What God Requires - Micah 6:6-8

6 “With what shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before God on high?

Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?

7 Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

8 He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you

but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

What does our faith require of us?

I had an unforgettable experience growing up, where I thought my UU faith required a lot of me. There I was, standing in front of a classroom of fourth grade Catholic students, and the priest besides me asked me to explain what Unitarian Universalism was.

There is no one to blame but myself, for I got myself into this. It was my senior project of high school, and I already I knew I wanted to become a Unitarian Universalist minister. However, My part-time UU minister didn't work the full forty hours I needed, so I took a chance on one of the only options in town: shadowing a Catholic priest. Father Andy was a much beloved priest known by many of my high school students, and he turned out to be an incredibly gracious host. It is rather unheard of for a priest to allow a young woman of another faith to shadow his work, but he didn't prevent me from seeing anything. I got to see how they concentrated holy oil, where he got the blow up machines for the church festival and fundraiser. I especially remember the day when I watched him go from a Catholic kindergarten class, and to a house to perform last rites and back. It was a tour of a lifetime, and one that continues to inspire my ministry.

But the teachable moment, where I was suddenly caught trying to explain my faith to a group of catholic students was not exactly what I had planned. I'll be honest that I don't really remember everything I said. It was something along the lines of Unitarians not believing that Jesus was God and that our churches were places where people of different beliefs came together. At 18 I definitely didn't have the elevator speech memorized. But I will never forget the pressure I felt. In that moment, I felt like I was being put on trial as the representative of our faith. I wanted to show the conservative culture of my hometown just how great my faith was. I wanted so badly to prove just how legitimate and life-changing our faith is.

Proving Unitarian Universalism to others is not what our faith required of me. Throughout the years, however, I have not found myself alone in wanting to prove or explain what our faith is to the outside world. In college I remember encountering adult members of the nearby fellowship I attended, who said they no longer volunteered to hand out food at the food pantry. People at the food pantry said Christian prayers and the members didn't know how to explain what their UU faith was and felt uncomfortable by the prayers when they couldn't really explain what we are, so they left. I found the same desire to prove our faith working at a different congregation later. I was teaching about the history of humanism in our movement, and in what ways UUism is different from humanism as it is today. A member proclaimed in the middle of this class that UUs don't believe in God here - creating a distinct belief that wasn't really in line with the church mission and especially not all church members. The person said it with such vigor, wanting to stake a certainty on the faith they belonged to. In these experiences, I related to the desire to want clearer definitions and better ways to relate to people from other faiths.

More than these experiences, I have heard of this desire to prove Unitarian Universalism from the movement itself. There seems to be this relentless push to create precise language to define who we are without really defining who we are. There is this search to ask for better ways of spreading our message without evangelizing. A desire to both make ourselves an important voice while disassociating from loud religious voices out there. It is as if the strain of our movement is to prove who we are and how worthy we are as a faith to the American religious landscape.

Yet too often, in the squabbles these between what religious language we use and how we explain ourselves to conservative voices - we miss our on what our faith actually asks us to do. What does our faith require of us?

In the passage I read, when Micah says what does the Lord require of you, he isn't just calling out a prophetic and inspiring notions of what faith is. He is responding to the lavish acts of worship he sees. All around people are competing to prove their faith, by particular sacrifices or rituals, trying to win favor with God. For many, this meant buying the finest oils, or the youngest calves, and that the rich would win more favor by

sacrificing nicer things. In response to this, no wonder Micah proclaims - What is all this? You don't need ten thousand rivers of oil! That's not how faith works! What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love with kindness, and walk humbly with your God?

So, what about us? What does *our* faith, our Unitarian Universalist faith require of us? It is not our faith that requires us to debate for hours which exact language we should use. In fact, it is our faith that for centuries has consistently made room for the diversity of belief we have so that we can authentically create meaning together. And it is not definitely our faith that says we must explain ourselves to conservative voices, or prove how different we are from traditional religion. Our faith isn't defined or regulated by anyone else's faith. Our faith just *is* our liberal heritage, our inclusive vision, and our loving message we live into. It doesn't need explanation.

What does our faith requires of us, but to love - and with love by doing justice, to love with kindness and compassion, and to love by walk humbly with each other.

There is no other faith in the world that says You are not loved because of what you believe in or how you believe in something - you are simply loved. You are more worthy of love than you can even imagine, just as you are. We proclaim that every single person is made of inherent worth and dignity. Where in that phrase does it say and you have to prove that to other people. Our faith calls for a love bigger than almost any other faith I know - it dares us to walk in this journey together across our different beliefs, not because we think alike, but because we want to love together.

When I think back to that classroom moment, I forgot this most beautiful part of my faith. I forgot it because I wasn't just trying to prove how great my faith was against such a small town backdrop. I was trying to prove who I was. I wanted to prove just how worthy I was, and I had forgotten that having inherent dignity means that I have nothing to prove.

I still often live as if I have something to prove, even if it is to myself. As you all might know, last week I went to see the Ministerial Fellowship Committee. Those are fancy words, for a committee of our denomination who decides whether or not I can become a minister. And even when I had this message in mind, seeing them I thought I had to prove myself and prove everything I have been doing for that last twelve years leading up to that very moment. It was like I was in front of that catholic classroom again, feeling the pressure.

But I knew that I had nothing to really give them as proof. All I really had to give was my love, and the love of congregations like this one that had supported me on my way. My full hearted abundant love for this faith, love for the congregations I have

worked with, and the love you give me. And once the interview was over, once I really held that love with me, that's when I realized, I had nothing to prove.

It is hard to live as if there is nothing to prove. Of the countless interviews you might have had in your lifetime, or even simply becoming a parent, or overcoming a new stage of your life, I wonder if you have ever felt like you need to prove something? We live in a society that consistently asks us to prove that we can pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. A society that consistently compares us to other people. A society that asks us to prove that we deserve things like healthcare, welfare, or basic human rights. In many ways, in everything from body image to financial stability, the world asks us to prove that we are worthy.

But our faith as Unitarian Universalists does not! We are already sacred, beautiful, worthy, and full of dignity, just as we are. Not as your perfect self, not as your proven self, with every messy incomplete part of you. We may never stop living as if we need to prove ourselves to the world. Yet, it is my vision that every single person who comes into the doors of a Unitarian Universalist community knows that they have nothing to prove. That they are loved, and valued just as they are.

For what does our faith require of us? Not to prove what our faith is, not to explain who we are, but to love each other as best as we can so that we create a community where we have nothing to prove. Where we welcome each other in just as we are! To make this possible, we must follow what Micah says. Show our love by doing justice, so that the everyone in the world may know their value. Show our love with kindness and compassion, knowing we may never get it right, but giving everyone the grace to love the best we can. Showing our love, by opening ourselves up to mystery, and walking humbly with each other.

So let's all take a deep breath, and sit in the deep assurance that there is nothing we have to prove. The world may want our next resume, that last email, that final assurance that we'll make it on time, but here we have all we need - our beautifully imperfect selves. I hope someday that Unitarian Universalists everywhere feel less that they have to show the world who we are or explain ourselves to conservative voices, but be willing to simply live. into our faith together. May we try to do what our UU faith requires and shape this world in our image of love, so that we may do justice, love with kindness, and so we may walk humbly with each other.