

**A Kingdom of Ends**  
**Toward a Society in Which All People Flourish**  
**By**  
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Unitarianism is defined by its belief that Jesus was only human. It has a humanistic Christology. This is why it has historically deemphasized the miraculous and supernatural stories ascribed to him. If Unitarians believed in God, it was the one God Jesus that believed in, but they did not believe in a triune Godhead that included Christ. Those who officially founded Unitarianism in Eastern Europe were and remain Christians, even though they don't believe in the Trinity. To them, Jesus should be revered for his humanitarian teachings, which still have practical meaning for us today.

One of the things Jesus is said to have spoken often about is establishing the Kingdom of Heaven here on Earth. Unlike popular Christianity, which considers him a deity who died for our sins so we can be forgiven and given entrance to a heavenly kingdom after we die, Jesus talked about creating abundant life right here, right now, for everyone on Earth, ever broadening our communities by embracing those who have been diminished, demeaned, and demonized—the outcast, the sinner, the foreigner, the immigrant, the stranger, the nonbeliever, women, children, and even those who may have helped uphold unjust and oppressive systems in order to get by in life. For Jesus, to err was human, and so was forgiveness. Forgiveness wasn't a golden ticket to a heavenly theme park, but an ordinary human power to help establish a more peaceful and just society amongst ourselves. “The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed, nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.”<sup>1</sup>

I imagine statements like these were as astonishing to those who first heard them 2,000 years ago as they are to those who grasp their meaning today, 2,000 years later. Today most consider the Kingdom of God an ethereal place of riches, peace, and beauty that we can only enjoy in the afterlife—a kind of reward for all the misery we endure in this life. Back then, those Jesus was speaking to didn't believe in an afterlife and placed all their hope in believing the Kingdom of God would be established on Earth so they could be relieved of their suffering and oppression in the present. But they weren't hoping for an egalitarian society in which everyone is included and gets along, but for a society in which they were on top, in which the God of Abraham and King David would miraculously defeat the Roman Empire and reestablish Israel to the mythical glory depicted in the Hebrew scriptures.

Then Jesus comes along and implies that it's neither a better place in the afterlife, nor a place that God will suddenly establish with miraculous signs and wonders, or with the triumphant sounds of angelic bugles, but a place that is already right here, right now, among us, even though most of us don't recognize it. “behold, the kingdom of God is in the

midst of you.” I take this to mean, this is it! If we want to experience the best kind of world imaginable, it’s not up to God, it’s up to us, it is only “in the midst of you,” among you, that it can emerge.

American Unitarians may or may not consider ourselves Christians, but we still believe Jesus was a human being, and we still embrace his humanitarian theology, that whatever we believe about God, whether we are Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Rastafarian, or a Moony, it is up to us to incarnate our most sacred values here on Earth by working to make the world a more just, peaceful, and beautiful place for everyone—everyone!

That sounds simple enough, but how do we build such a community, which has been longed for and dreamt of since the dawn of human history, yet has also evaded human society ever since? I would answer by suggesting we can do so by listening to what Jesus tried to say two millennium ago: stop expecting miracles and divine intervention and stop waiting until it’s too late. Heaven on Earth won’t fall from the sky on the wings of angels, nor be granted to us after we’re dead. If we want it, we have to embrace the humanistic ethic at the heart of Jesus’ teachings, and that is also at the heart of all religions and all moral beliefs. Whatever our theology, whether we are believers or atheists, or call it God or simply our greatest values, it cannot magically present itself. All beliefs are incarnated through human behavior, be they our most lofty aspirations or our most dismal. “The kingdom of God is in the midst of you.”

I think Jesus also correctly understood the formula for establishing such a society is, as summarized in his brief statements, to “love one another,” and, “love your neighbor as yourself.” But as emotionally intelligent beings, we have to admit that we can’t maintain positive feelings about everyone all of the time. If such a society must be based upon our random and spontaneous sentiments and emotions, we can forget about it. But love isn’t an emotion; it’s not a feeling. Did you know psychologists don’t list love as a primary emotion, nor even as a secondary one?

Love, rather, is behavioral. It’s something we can do with no feeling at all, and for people we don’t even know or will never meet, simply by working to create a world that promises the welfare of all people and the flourishing of every person. Erich Fromm said, “...the way [one] looks at [one’s] neighbor or talks to a child, the way [one] eats, walks, or shakes hands, or the way in which a group behaves toward minorities is more expressive of faith and love than any stated belief.”<sup>2</sup> Fromm also said, “Love is an activity<sup>3</sup> ... characterized by its lack of exclusiveness ... If I truly love one person, I love all persons, I love the world, I love life.”<sup>4</sup> That’s why the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth can’t just belong to one chosen people at the expense of everyone else. It can’t belong to just one country, either. It can’t be exclusively about making America great again, or returning any nation to some previously imagine state of glory. The Kingdom of Heaven on Earth must be about creating an abundant life for all the children of the world.

This is so because the loving behavior, the love expressed as an activity, is rooted in the humanistic ethic which emphasizes human welfare and individual unfolding. “Materially,” Fromm said, “it is based on the principle that what is ‘good’ is what is good for [humanity] and ‘evil’ what is detrimental to [humanity].”<sup>5</sup> As you heard me often repeat, “*the sole criterion of ethical value*,” according to his explanation of the humanistic ethic is “[*human*] *welfare*”<sup>6</sup> and “the unfolding and growth of every person is the aim of all social and political activities.”<sup>7</sup> It is in terms of this ethic that Fromm also defines love as “*the sense of responsibility, care, respect, knowledge of any other human being, the wish to further [that person’s] life*.”<sup>8</sup> For love is “the active concern for the life and the growth of that which we love.”<sup>9</sup>

Fromm, one of the most influential thinkers in my life, wasn’t the only person to interpret love through this humanistic ethic. As I have already argued, there’s good reason to believe Jesus thought the same thing, though he may have said it differently. It has also long been the Unitarian idea of love, rooted in its humanistic Christology, dating at least as far back as 16<sup>th</sup> century Eastern Europe, but, in my interpretation of our history, all the way back to the first Christians. American Unitarianism emerged somewhat independently of our Eastern European counterparts, out of the Enlightenment values rediscovered during the Renaissance rooted in the classics of Greek Antiquity. In America, our religion was originally called Arminianism, based upon the belief in human goodness, contrary to the doctrine of Original Sin. As I explain in *The Gadfly Papers*:

the disbelief in human depravity, was expressed by the Unitarian minister John Haynes Holmes, whom, again, as an early advocate of the Social Gospel, believed religion should concentrate on human welfare and agency, not upon “the supernatural and the miraculous.” In the early 1900s, Universalist minister Clarence Skinner, one of Holmes’ younger associates, also began emphasizing the Social Gospel and, with it, a positive view of human nature. Skinner penned a Declaration of Social Principles and Social Program adopted by the Universalist General Convention in 1917 that explicitly rejected the idea of “inherent depravity,” claiming instead, “that mankind is led into sin by evil surroundings, by the evils of unjust social and economic systems.” It went on to call for the basic right to own land, equal rights for women, freedom of speech, some form of social security for everyone, and a global government guaranteeing these same rights for everyone, everywhere.<sup>10</sup>

That’s starting to sound a lot like what the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth should look like, and it’s based on the humanistic ethic’s understanding of love as lacking exclusivity, or, conversely, as the inclusion of all humankind. And this doesn’t merely mean every person is accepted regardless of their arbitrary identity features, like gender, color, religion, politics, sexuality, and whether or not they’re a Seahawks fan, all of which are important, except, perhaps, the part about being a Seahawks fan. It also means a society in which every person, every human being, has what they need to live a dignified and happy life, including access to healthy food, clean air and water, adequate housing, quality education, affordable healthcare, and public safety and security. A society in which this isn’t so, in which these

basic necessities are treated as privileges reserved only for those who can afford them or are considered more deserving than others, is an inhuman society because it does not practice the humanistic ethic requiring that “[human] welfare” and “the unfolding and growth of every person is the aim of all social and political activities.”

To establish such a society, there is another mindset we must adopt, the moral belief that no person should be used for another’s gain. In his book, *The Sane Society*, Fromm says that when this kind of human solidarity breaks down or is absent, “a living human being, ceases to be an end in [oneself], and becomes the means for the economic interests of another [person], or [oneself], or of an impersonal giant, the economic machine.”<sup>11</sup> But Fromm wasn’t the first to put the matter in these terms. He attributes it, he says, to “Kant, who, with regard to the idea that man should be an end in himself and never a means only, was perhaps the most influential ethical thinker of the Enlightenment period.”<sup>12</sup>

Even if you’re not into philosophy, you’ve probably heard of Immanuel Kant’s *categorical imperative*, which was at the heart of his moral philosophy, and is his term for a moral duty that is binding in all circumstances. Here, Kant sounds a bit like the crusty trail boss in the movie, *City Slickers*. When defining the meaning of life, he holds up his index finger and says, “One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that and everything else don’t mean [diddly squat].” In the movie, the wise old cowboy says figuring out what the one thing is, is up to each one of us, but for Kant it’s the same for all of us. Humanities professor, A.C. Grayling says, “The most famous formulation of the categorical imperative is: ‘Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.’ Kant thinks of the moral community of persons as a ‘kingdom of ends’, a mutual association of free beings, in which every individual seeks to realize freely chosen goals compatible with the freedom of everyone else to do likewise.”<sup>13</sup>

That’s what the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth looks like. It is a Kingdom of Ends, in which individual autonomy reigns supreme and is respected by all, meaning we don’t base our freedoms on the subjugation of others. It is a humanistic principle that was first articulated in the Age of Antiquity, rediscovered during the Renaissance, and became a vision for society that flourished, for a time, during the Enlightenment. And this is why this *categorical principle*, this “one thing,” should be our priority as Unitarian Universalists, because ours is an Enlightenment religion that was born in the U.S. in devotion to this very principle, though it has even more ancient roots in antiquity and in the humanistic teachings of a man named Jesus. This imperative is why we’re all here today, because it epitomizes the purpose of our religion and our own vision for what our society must become, as articulated these days in the one principle, the first of seven, that we can all manage to remember, *The worth and dignity of every person*.

## A Kingdom of Ends

<sup>1</sup> Luke 17:20-21

<sup>2</sup> Fromm, Erich, *Psychoanalysis & Religion*, Vail-Ballou Press, Inc., Binghamton, NY, 1950, 1978, p. 63.

<sup>3</sup> Fromm, Erich, *The Art of Loving*, Bantam Books, Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1956, 1963, p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>5</sup> Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, Henry Holt & Company, Inc., New York, NY, 1947, p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>8</sup> *Fromm, Erich. The Art of Loving (p. 37). Open Road Media. Kindle Edition*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> Eklof, Todd, *The Gadfly Papers*, Oakleaf Press, 2019, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> Fromm, Erich, *The Sane Society*, Henry Holt & Company, New York, NY, 1955, p. 93.

<sup>12</sup> Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, *ibid.*, p.123.

<sup>13</sup> Grayling, A.C., *The History of Philosophy*, Penguin Press, New York, NY, 2019, p. 265.