

The Work of Love
Rev. Ann Kadlecek
First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
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Sermon and Readings from Mia Mingus¹

Sermon Part 1

What does love ask of us?

Everything we do as a community – or as people - is, at our best, an answer to this question. How do we interact with each other, our families and friends, the stranger in the grocery store? How do we spend our time and money? What risks do we take? What needs do we prioritize? How do we respond to each new danger in the forest? How do we treat ourselves, the earth, the future?

What love asks of us is a big question – it covers a lot of ground, and the answers can, too. And they can change over time.

What I have to offer in the next 15 minutes or so, is not an all-encompassing answer. It is ... an invitation into one way of thinking about one piece of the question.

Just one word, in fact – a word that has only begun to show up in the language of this faith in the past decade or so. It's in the 8th Principle, which this congregation has adopted, and it's in the new Article II of our association's bylaws, including in the section that was our chalice lighting. And sometimes this word trips us up. It can mean one thing to a person using it and another to a person hearing it; it can evoke strong emotions; and it turns out that ... sometimes ... we aren't quite sure what to do with it.

That word is accountability.

I invite you to notice if that word “accountability” evoked a reaction in you. It wouldn't be surprising if it did, and if that initial reaction, without conscious thought, was negative.

Think about where you've heard this word recently. Perhaps in the context of certain public officials; or people who commit war crimes; or on a smaller scale, anyone who has hurt you, or a person or community you love. If someone abuses their power or hurts people in other ways we want justice. We want them to be held accountable.

In the wider culture, what we really mean is ... we want consequences. And, in our culture, “consequences” mostly means punishment. Because punishment is our go-to response as a society when people do things that are judged to be wrong.

That response has been around for a long time, with a strong thread in our Christian roots. Our Christian forebearers were committed to reward and punishment in an afterlife – heaven or hell – as a way of guiding human action in this life. This is why the Universalist idea that there is no

¹ <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2019/05/05/dreaming-accountability-dreaming-a-returning-to-ourselves-and-each-other/>

hell was so disturbing (still is, for some) – a functioning society has long been understood to require systems of reward and punishment.

And while you may have a more nuanced view, or an entirely different way of approaching wrongdoing, that idea is baked into our world. Whatever our intent, accountability is associated with punishment, guilt, shame, exposure, judgment, submission to another's authority, even a diminishment of our worth. And mostly, it's something we want for someone else; or someone else wants it for us.

With that gut understanding of the word, it makes sense that it feels pretty uncomfortable, even scary, when it's directed at us.

But what if we look at it differently? What if it wasn't scary?

That's the question disability and transformative justice advocate Mia Mingus poses in this reading.

First Passage from Mia Mingus

Sermon Part 2

Accountability as something we seek out for ourselves. Something we practice, and hold sacred – as the work of love.

This accountability is not something we try to force on someone else - it's a spiritual practice of choosing to stay in relationship, and learn and grow. There is consent and commitment here.

Accountability as a chosen spiritual practice is unusual in our culture, and in this faith. Some faith traditions tend to at least some elements of the practice – like acknowledging harm, making amends. The Jewish high holy days come to mind. But, at first glance anyway, our tradition doesn't offer collective practices or even language to help us make this choice. This was glaringly apparent when we went on a hunt for hymns for today's service. Our hymnal has lots of songs about human goodness, doing good in the world, celebrating what is good, persisting in the face of what is not good, or pushing back on injustice from a moral highground ... but very little that even acknowledges that we all screw up sometimes, and nothing that celebrates a sacred practice of accountability for our actions and inactions.

But one of the wonderful things about Unitarian Universalist theology is that it evolves. When something is found to be missing, it tends to emerge organically. Not always quickly or efficiently, and not without conflict, but we are capable of learning and growing.

And I think that's what's happening with this word – accountability. It was about 10, maybe 15, years ago that I first started to hear it regularly in Unitarian Universalist spaces that focused on anti-racism, anti-oppression and multi-cultural work, including religious education. It then showed up in the 8th principle, where it inspired some conversation. And now, it's in Article II of our association's bylaws.

It's working its way into this faith. And this makes sense.

Because I don't think it's possible to be people who take covenant seriously without also taking accountability seriously as ... the work of love. People of covenant make commitments to each other that are impossible for humans to always get right. We all mess up, and cause harm – to

ourselves, those we love, our communities, the wider world. A covenantal faith community needs to deal with that reality - without punishment or denial or shame – by helping us choose to practice accountability together.

We're not going to get good at this overnight. But we might begin by shifting our framing of accountability, as Mingus suggests - coming to see it as a sacred opportunity to practice liberation and love and being the souls we want to be. Perhaps intentionally moving ourselves toward opportunities to practice our own accountability, instead of trying to impose it on someone else.

In a personal practice of accountability, there is a theological (and practical) question that comes up – accountability to what? A set of values? Other people? A community? The self we aspire to be? Justice? Something we call God or love or infinite wisdom or the language of your preference? Perhaps some or all of those?

“Accountability to what” is a personal question, because – in this framing - accountability is a personal choice. But it's also a community question. Within any group of freely-associating people, there is something to which every member is expected to commit. Sometimes it's obvious what that is. If you join a group that's focused on an environmental issue, there's a clear assumption that you are committed to that issue. If you're a bird in a forest with nets, you're expected to commit to doing your part to lift that net. Sometimes, in churches, it's not so obvious. Sometimes, different people bring different assumptions about what everyone here should be committed to, and can grow disappointed when it turns out not to be the case.

Our commitments matter. The pre-eminent 20th century Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams said that we become human by making commitments. And in this covenantal faith, the commitments we choose are part of our theology, and the basis for our accountability.²

So the question of accountability to what ... is worthy of some ongoing reflection and conversation. But we don't have to wait until we've got it all worked out. I think there are a few commitments that we can expect here – a commitment to the well-being of this community, a commitment to relationships with each other, and a commitment to living our values – here and in the world.

And every time we do something that falls short in one of those commitments – and we all do - we have an opportunity to practice accountability.

Different people describe that practice a little differently, and there are plenty of detailed books and blogs if you want to go deeper, but there are essentially three steps: acknowledgement, repair and change.

Here's an example that might be relatable to many of us. Suppose, we promised to do something by a particular deadline that mattered to other people, but we missed the deadline.

The first step would be to acknowledge the harm – ideally as soon as we noticed. We might apologize – preferably without a lot of excuses.

Then, second step, we do what we can to repair, or at least limit, the damage. Not all harm can be repaired, but in this case we might perhaps ... offer a realistic timetable for getting this thing done so people at least aren't left wondering.

² James Luther Adams, *From Cage to Covenant*, in *Prophethood of All Believers*, 137-8.

And third, the step that most often gets omitted, we would change something so we're less likely to do this again. Take on less in the future, try a new way of keeping track of our schedule and commitments, get support in breaking big tasks down into smaller pieces so we stay on schedule – some good faith effort to change our impact on those around us.

This example might seem too small to matter. But this kind of accountability builds relationships and communities where we can trust each other. And this is justice work. When we as a community practice personal accountability in the small things, we're building our capacity for accountability in the big things - tending to our part of the collective gaping wound. And in so doing, together, we're helping to change the world. Not through punishment, or blame or shame, but through the spiritual discipline of love.

Accountability takes practice. But being in community with other humans gives us plenty of opportunities.

Here's more from Mia Mingus:

Second Passage from Mia Mingus

Sermon Part 3

Can we get to a place where we look for opportunities to practice accountability - each day, each week, each year? What if we were to start small, with those closest to us, and just practice?

It's a personal practice, but we don't have to do it alone. Here in community, we can, if we choose, support each other. We might foster a collective expectation of personal accountability (normalize it) and help one another notice opportunities to practice. Life experience has given most of us some clarity about ways in which other people can hurt us, but often less clarity about the ways in which we can hurt others. Sometimes, we need help noticing.

This community can help by being a place where – when someone is doing harm - it is normal and kind to tell them – rather than complaining to people who are not the person who needs to know. The community is not holding us accountable (we do that for ourselves), and no one is blaming and shaming. This is helping us - kindly - to see our impact more clearly, inviting us into the practice, and celebrating our achievements.

Helping each other in this way also takes practice. But we can learn by paying attention to those among us who already serve the community in this way, and – practice.

Can we get to a place where we – kindly and clearly - tell each other what we see, and welcome this kind of help from each other? Where we listen eagerly when someone tells us of hurt we caused, take it seriously without feeling threatened, and maybe even change? Where we don't inflict accountability on each other or attempt to force someone else to change, but (as we're able) invite one another into a sacred practice?

I think we can.

Three caveats:

First, this doesn't mean that the community is responsible for individual accountability. Each of us is responsible for our own. As much as we can, the goal is to be accountable, whether anyone

says anything to us or not, as soon as we become aware of our impact – rather than imagining that the silence of others means that nothing is wrong, or that it will be forgotten in time.

Second, while the process may be straightforward, the practice is not. We're all looking at human interactions and impacts through our own lenses. We will disagree about when and how we fall short in our commitment, and our sharing with each other will be imperfect, and sometimes not as kind as it could have been. But a deepening practice of accountability can help us through.

And finally, if you have a sense that something's missing from this sermon ... I agree. Because sometimes we're in relationship, or in community, with someone who chooses not to practice accountability. Or is unable to do so. What do we do with that? It can't be that we just allow them to harm a person or community until they choose differently. We'll get to what might happen the next time I'm in the pulpit, which is two weeks from today. So hold that thought.

For today, it's enough (I think) to try reframing accountability as a personal spiritual practice full of opportunity – for ourselves, for our community, for our world.

As long as we talk about accountability as something we inflict on each other, it will be scary, punitive and rare. But if we can seek it out for ourselves, help each other, and embrace the practice as something love asks of us - then there is hope.

What if accountability wasn't scary? what if it was the work of love?

May we make it so.

Amen.