

# *The Greatest of These Is Hope*

*A Worship Service  
by the REV. JEFF BRIERE*

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*Unitarian Universalist  
Church of Chattanooga  
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## CONNECTIONS

Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. My name is Jeff Briere, I'm the minister of this congregation. We begin each Sunday at this time with Connections. Connections is a time of community and contemplation, where we share the joys and the sorrows going on in our lives. This is not a time for announcements, political statements or expressions of personal anger, but a time of deep sharing, where we are reminded that we are all human beings and we're all in this together.

Enjoy the experience of sitting in restorative silence until you are moved to speak. Please allow a breath of silence after each person speaks, so that we may focus our attention on what has been said.

Let us pause to dwell inward. Spirit of Life, please meet us where we are, in the struggles we choose for ourselves; in the ways we move forward in our lives, and bring our world forward with us. It is right that we pause to remember those who need love and support; who are ill or in pain, either in body or in spirit; who are lonely or have been wronged. Let us open our minds and hearts to a place of quiet, to a silent prayer for the healing of pain, and the soft, gentle coming of

love. In this time of silence let our thoughts be with those who have spoken or been spoken about this morning.  
Amen and Blessed Be.

I ask you now to rise and greet your neighbors at the door. Please welcome them into the sanctuary with a hand of warmth and a smile.

*HYMN 123, Spirit of Life*

## GREETINGS

**Maddie.** I'm Maddie Kertay and I am President of the congregation. Thanks so much for joining us in worship today. We hope you find the service rewarding and that you leave here inspired and uplifted.

Please note the emergency exit over here to my right, now is the time to put your cell phone in "Worship Mode," childcare for the young and the restless is available downstairs in the nursery. After the service today, please join us for coffee and conversation in the fellowship area right back there. If you have a particular joy or sorrow or something you'd like added to the prayer of the people, please clearly write it on an index card and drop it in the basket back there. You may sign it or not, as you wish.

**A complete listing of announcements** is included with the bulletin and is available on our web site. The best way to find out what's going on around here is to sign up for a weekly e-mail. To do that, please see Chris in the office.

*PRELUDE*

*Spiritoso*

*LIGHTING THE CHALICE*

In the light of truth and the warmth of love,  
we gather to seek, to sustain, and to share.

*ZEN REALITY ⊕ THE EMPTY CUP MIND*

**Narrator.** I have two stories about Kyoshi and his students. Do you know Kyoshi?

Kyoshi was a Zen Buddhist monk, a master teacher known throughout the land for his wisdom and common-sense approach to Buddhism. He taught several students who wanted to learn his ways and his philosophy.

One day, Kyoshi and his student Kamani took a walk in the rain. As they picked their way along a muddy, rain-drenched road, they came upon a lovely woman attempting to cross a small stream. The woman wore a silk robe decorated with gold and jewels. She was very beautiful and Kamani had a hard time keeping his eyes in his head.

**Kamani.** I have never seen such a beautiful woman.

**Narrator.** Kyoshi stopped beside the woman, lifted her in his arms, and carried her across the stream. He set her gently down on the dry ridge of the road. Kamani watched the scene, bug-eyed with curiosity and excitement. You see, Zen monks in those days were not supposed to have any contact with women. Even looking at a woman was not a good idea.

**Kamani.** I cannot believe that my master—the great teacher Kyoshi—actually picked up that woman and carried her across the stream.

**Narrator.** After bowing politely to the woman, Kyoshi and Kamani continued down the muddy road. Kamani was sullen—almost angry—and he kept his mouth shut as they walked along. The rain stopped and the day turned beautiful. They traveled over the hills, down around the valleys, through a town, and under forest trees. All the time, Kamani pored over the scene with the woman at the stream.

**Kamani.** How could Kyoshi have done that? What's the matter with him? How could he break our tradition after all he has taught us?

**Narrator.** At last, after many hours had passed, Kamani exploded.

**Kamani.** Master Kyoshi, you know that we monks do not touch women! We don't talk to them or walk with them or have anything to do with them! Why, then, did you carry that woman across the stream?

**Kyoshi.** My dear young brother, you have such heavy thoughts! I left the woman alongside the road hours ago. Why are you still carrying her?

**Narrator.** Now for me, Kyoshi was just being kind to another person. He helped a woman cross a stream. So I think the moral of the story is that rules are rules and should be followed. But rules are not reality, just a guide to it. If they prevent you from helping someone, then it's OK to break them.

Another moral of this story is that obsessing about something in your mind is not healthy, because it prevents you from appreciating anything else. For hours after they met the woman, Kyoshi & Kamani walked through a beautiful country, but Kamani didn't see it because he was obsessed with what his master had done.

One day Kyoshi heard an impatient pounding on the temple door. He opened it and greeted a young student, dressed in a very expensive hand-made silk gown. He carried a leather-bound book and wore a

necklace of jewels.

**Student.** I have studied with great and wise masters. I consider myself quite accomplished in Zen philosophy. However, just in case there is anything more I need to know, I have come to see if you can add to my knowledge.

**Kyoshi.** Very well. Come and have tea with me, and we will discuss your studies.

**Narrator.** The two seated themselves opposite each other, and Kyoshi prepared tea. He boiled the water, cleaned the tea cups and prepared the small table on which he placed the tea. When it was ready, Kyoshi began to pour the tea carefully into the visitor's cup. When the cup was full, Kyoshi continued pouring until the tea spilled over the side of the cup and onto the young man's lap, which burned him and ruined his fine silk gown. He became angry.

**Student.** Some wise master you are! You are a fool who does not even know when a cup is full!

**Kyoshi.** Just like this cup, your mind is so full of ideas that there is no room for any more. Come to me with an empty-cup mind, and then you will learn something.

**Narrator.** Now the moral of this story is that we should keep an open mind. Never believe that you know it all or that you know best, because there is always something that you can learn. Even from a teacup.

*HYMN 95, There Is More Love Somewhere*

OFFERTORY  
*Andante*

Who knows what a “twofer” is? Ever heard of that? A “twofer”? A twofer is a special offer that a merchant makes to you. It's a contraction of “two-for-one.” Buy this thingamabob and you get two for the price of one. That's a “twofer.” We have a “twofer” for you, because today, we'll double the plate. The church will receive *two* dollars *for* every one you donate.

A generous member of this church has discovered that he has waaaay too much money in his wallet—three hundred American dollars, to be exact. And not having any more toys to buy, has decided to give it to the church. Good news, right? Yes!

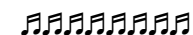
There's a catch. There's always a catch, right? Our generous member will not just make out a check to the church. Instead, he will match every dollar in the collection plate until his wallet is exhausted! So to get his 300, the congregation has to put up 300.

*Annual pledge payments are not included in the total.* And if we end up with \$311, I think we can pry another eleven dollars from his wallet. This is not a scam, nor will our generous donor give us three hundred dollars if we only raise \$295.

We'll collect the offering now, for the support and ministry of this church. If you have a check for your annual pledge, please mark it that way. Unmarked contributions will be doubled up to \$300.

As always, the Wood-Wilhoit Memorial Food Bank is happy to accept your donations of non-perishable food and household items for the Community Kitchen. The collection basket for that is by the front door. And thank you very much for your generosity.

If you wish to light a personal candle of joy or sorrow, you may step up here and I will assist you.



Eternal Spirit of life and love, we are profoundly thankful for the blessings we experience today. Would that we recognize our blessings every day and be thankful for them. Steve, please lead us in our *Hymn of Thanksgiving*. The words are in your program.

*HYMN OF THANKSGIVING*

Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day,  
For all gathered here, and those far away,  
For this time we share, with love and care,  
Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day.

*ORISON*

*Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.*

Mark Simpson tells us that his mother, Rose Simpson, fell and broke her shoulder. When she was in better health, Rose would often make coffee clean up the kitchen in this church. She is at Alexian Healthcare 726, and is scheduled for surgery this week. Visitors are welcome, he says, and if you can't get over there to see her, please remember her in your thoughts and prayers.

The remnants of Hurricane Ike right now are somewhere over Arkansas and southern Illinois. The storm is dumping a lot of water everywhere it goes, so flood alerts have been issued in many places. And if that's not enough, Ike is brushing up against some cold winds and spinning off tornadoes near Chicago.

Ever since Katrina, it seems people are much more interested in tropical storms and hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean. But storms in that area have been with us since the beginning and will be next year, too. They are one way that our land receives the water necessary for agriculture.

Unfortunately, they often bring too much water too quickly, blow down houses and sweep people out to sea in a rip tide. In Saturday's paper, I saw a photograph that aptly presented the danger of hurricanes. It was an aerial shot of several beach front houses in Galveston. As the storm waters came ashore, topping the sea wall, one of the houses was on fire.

That really stuck me. In the midst of all that rain and water, a house was on fire, probably because the wind had damaged something electrical or burst a gas line.

Four million people are without electricity. Officials estimate that nearly 37,000 people may need rescue in the aftermath of the storm: stranded motorists, thrill-seekers and those who would not leave their homes.

They certainly deserve our prayers. And their innocent children, who know nothing of hurricanes deserve our prayers. All the people in Galveston and Houston deserve our prayers, regardless of their foolhardy nature, regardless of where they built their homes, regardless of their driving plans, regardless of their leaving town or staying home. Regardless.

They are people in distress, not different from French families in a drought or Indian families in a monsoon flood or Chinese families in an earthquake. People in distress are people in distress, regardless of how they got there.

So let us pray this morning for all those in distress around the earth, especially those in the path of Hurricane Ike and those who suffer the fallout of war.

*Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.*

RESPONSE

When our heart is in a holy place  
When our heart is in a holy place  
We are blessed with love and amazing grace  
When our heart is in a holy place

*SERMON: The Greatest of These Is Hope*

Awhile ago, a friend asked me to preach on one of the abiding virtues of human existence. He meant moral and philosophical traits, such as perseverance, wisdom, honesty, kindness, gratitude, justice, courage, moderation, tact, loyalty and all those qualities we admire in people of distinction. The possession of such virtues confers upon a person owning them a moral excellence that is recognized as desirable and beneficial in every culture around the world. I believe my friend wanted to hear my Unitarian Universalist take on that.

In truth, it is exceedingly difficult for me to preach on such broad topics. If you have heard me preach several times, you know I tend to focus on specific events, conditions or people and draw from them some ideas about life and how to live it. Thus, along the way, I may explore something of one or another virtue, but I don't address the virtue in and of itself.

Today, I'll depart from my usual routine and tackle one of the three virtues mentioned by Paul in his first letter to the church in Corinth. The Corinthians were wrangling over theology, methods and church administration, and Paul suggested that the congregation would be healthier if they acquired the virtue of *agape*, a Greek word that is translated most often as love—Brotherly love, divine love, selfless love, erotic love and your everyday, garden-variety love.

At one point, Paul writes about the imperfect existence in which we live and the perfect existence he sees in the future. You may

recognize his words, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. Now, we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

Not to put myself on a plane with Paul, I think the greatest of these is hope. I think that if I didn't have hope, I'd be a sad specimen of humanity; floating along like a cork in the river.

Hope is the way I live my life, the way I live day-to-day. With hope I awake and fall asleep. I really don't have another choice, because I cannot bend reality to my liking. I can't wave my magic wand and discover the lucky numbers so that I will hit the lottery; I must hope for it. Actually, I do not play the lottery; I use that only as an example.

I don't have a magic incantation that will bring my family and me good health and good fortune; I must hope for it. I cannot cast a spell that makes the leaders of this country do the right thing; I must hope they will.

I am not really in control here, am I? I am not even in control of this church. Or my family. The only thing I am in control of is me, and so I hope that everyone else is guided by wisdom, courage and ethical behavior. I hope everyone else has as much hope as I do.

I don't have any grand philosophy about hope; I don't bring you the wisdom of the ancients this morning. I bring you my own tale of hope and why I think it's important in my life. If I had to guess, I'd say my ethos of hope comes from being oppressed. Not oppressed in the sense that The Soviet Union oppressed the citizens of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Not oppressed in the Jim Crow sense.

But oppressed. I've told this story before, of how as a child, I

attended a grade school that was far from my home. To all the other kids at that school, I was an outsider. And not being much of a physical specimen, I was a target for bullies and any smug kid who wanted to inflate his own stature by beating me up.

And that followed me to high school as well. So if I think about it, from an early age, I was not part of the in crowd. I'm sure that experience led me to Unitarian Universalism. Here I am, right where I began. Not part of the in crowd.

I remember hoping that Mike Fisher and Mike Breen would forget their playground promise to catch me after school and beat the hell out of me. God forgive me, I often prayed with all my heart that they would die. A grisly death. But they didn't die—at least not when I knew them. They were healthy little Irish Catholic brats and I was a half-French Canadian Catholic weenie.

Sometimes they forgot and I would have a carefree half-hour ride home on the city bus. Sometimes they were waylaid by the one of the nuns for some infraction and sometimes they were distracted by Becky O'Connor, who was real cute. This was in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I think. But they usually remembered that I would be at the bus stop and they usually came around to punch my arm or ridicule me.

And all I had was hope. And all I have now is hope. Today I don't hope they die a grisly death. That is certainly an unproductive hope, although I understand that mortal revenge is an easy fantasy for a 14-year-old boy. What I hope is that they outgrew their need to inflate themselves at another's expense; that they learned and earned some self-esteem sometime.

So I think hope became my anchor early on. Hope is what made me get up in the morning and go to school.

But not always. Sometimes the bogeymen would appear so horrible in my fertile adolescent imagination that I lost hope and caved in to

fear. More than once I feigned sickness to stay home Friday, hoping that by Monday they would forget about me. See? Even though I caved in to fear, I still had hope for Monday.

Hope is a very old concept. I know this because the root of the word goes all the way back to a language spoken by people who lived in Georgia seven thousand years ago. I mean Georgia the country, not that place where bulldogs live.

In the area east of Romania, around the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea and the Aral Sea, the language spoken about 7000 years ago is the parent language of every language from India to Ireland. They all have many words traceable to that proto-language. Sanskrit, Greek, Anatolian, Persian, Armenian, Albanian, Italian, Germanic, Celtic and Slavic and all the languages in those families all have a common ancestor.

So if you can trace a word all the way back to its root in that proto-language, that tells me that the concept the word expresses is important for human life.

Our word hope comes directly from Old English, *hopian*, related to the German *hoffen*, to hope. And there is another word that English speakers once used regularly, but is obsolete now. It's a French word, introduced to English after the Norman conquest in 1066. *Esperance*, French for hope. We adopted many French words and still use them today, but *esperance* fell out of favor before 1800. Today we use the simple Germanic-rooted hope.

Esperance comes from Latin, *sperare*, to hope. *Sperare* comes from a word in that proto-language which means to thrive, to prosper. Indeed, our words prosper, speed and despair also come from that 7000-year-old root.

OK, so why the etymology lesson? Well, I like words. So there. But beyond that, it seems to me that if some vocalization, some part of an

ancient word stays with us today, then it must refer to something very important to human life on this planet. It was important to the people who first spoke it, to the Greeks and Romans, to the French and to the English and to us. Hope is too important to our lives to risk losing the word for it through 7000 years.

The etymology lesson is not over. According to several dictionaries, an archaic meaning for hope is a feeling of trust. And that's the way I feel hope. That's not the way I felt hope when I hoped that Mike Fisher and Mike Breen would die, but it's the hope I feel now.

I trust that things will turn out well, or at least the way that is best for all concerned. I may not be able to understand why certain things happen or see the big picture; so I hope—I trust that all is going as well as can be expected.

That is not to say I do nothing to advocate for my preferred outcome. I am not fatalistic, believing that everything that happens is foreordained and we can do nothing to change history. Fatalism is a philosophical doctrine emphasizing the subjugation of all events or actions to fate or inevitable predetermination.

No, I am not a fatalist. And I am not Robert of Sunnybrook Farm, always looking for the positive angle. I work in what ways I can to bring about the changes I want to see in this world. I believe we are obliged to make the world a better place, so I cannot accept that the world is gonna be what it's gonna be regardless of my actions.

I am realistic. I know everything's not gonna go my way. But I can not despair. I've never met anyone who was really, truly given to despair. I've met a few people who flirt with despair; people who expect the worst of every day, people who are so beat up by living every day that they expect nothing less than to be knocked around tomorrow.

I won't say that such people ought to know better or do better or feel

any other way than the way they feel. Life in 2008 can be complex, scary, unpredictable, confusing, overwhelming, tiring, unjust, competitive, vicious and dangerous. And then there's inflation, gas prices, war, meth, blood diamonds, cigarettes, cancer and flu epidemics. And then there's pornography, TV commercials, supermarket tabloids and gangsta rap. And then there's madmen, bozos, loonies and killers. And then there's hurricanes and avalanches and floods and drought. And then there's your funny uncle, Osama Bin Laden, Britney Spears and Karl Rove. And in some places, you can carry a gun into a bar or a restaurant. Or a school. Or a church.

After hearing all that, do you feel hopeless? I hope not. But I can't blame you if you do.

It's easy to believe the world's goin' to hell in a handbasket; easy to feel hopeless when you read the headlines. The important thing to remember is that what makes the headlines in the newspaper is what's different. News is what's different. For thousands of years, decent parents have raised decent children, so that's not news. A scared young mother abandons her child or leaves a baby in a hot car—that's news.

Admirable people outnumber the scum a thousand to one. Joyful events outnumber the pits a hundred thousand to one. Good deeds occur a million times more often than burglaries. Airplanes land safely three million times more often than they don't. It's supposed to be this way. It's not news when things turn out right.

Life in 2008 can be amazing, joyful, surprising, inventive, wistful, invigorating, loving, fragrant, just, simple, friendly, relaxing, learning, fun, civil, and a blast. And then there's Girl Scouts and cookies, peanut butter and chocolate, ice cream and Vidalia onions. And there's parks and lakes, snow and rain, mountains and deserts, the sun and the moon.

And then there's your friends and family, your favorite chair and the book you're reading now. There's Shakespeare and Cervantes, Shelley and Keats, Debussy, Beethoven and Cage. There's Calder, Pollock, Rubens, Picasso and Michelangelo. And Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young.

There's coffee. And beer.

There's so much in life to make me hopeful. I hope, I trust, that we will arrive at the place we should and be the people we should and that all things considered, life is good.

Do you know Pascal's Wager? He was a French philosopher and mathematician. Shortly after his death in 1662, Blaise Pascal's thoughts about Christianity were published under the title, *Pensées*, or *Thoughts*. He wrote that although one cannot prove the existence of God by reason alone, it is best to live with the belief that God exists. If you live as though God exists, you stand to gain everything, and you risk nothing. When you die and discover that God is a fiction, you lose nothing. Alternately, when you die and find God sitting in his divine Lay-Z-Boy with your report card, you'll know you got straight A's and will pass to the next grade.

Drawing on my logical Unitarian heritage, and twisting Pascal's Wager a bit, I propose Briere's Gambit: Although I cannot shape the world to my preferences, it is best to be hopeful that things will turn out for the best. The alternative, despair, leads me to frustration and madness. If I remain hopeful and things turns out right, or if life takes a left turn, I am no worse off than I am right now. But if I despair and things turn out better than imagined, or not as bad as I feared, I will be pleasantly surprised, but I will have wasted a lot of time and effort feeling bad. And if I despair and it turns out just as bad as I feared, then I will have wasted a lot of time in despair. And where's the profit in that when I could have been working to make things right?

I know that Emily Dickinson is an acquired likeness, sorta like single-malt Scotch. But I think she had something to say about hope that expresses it well.

Hope is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul,  
And sings the tune—without the words,  
And never stops at all,

And sweetest in the gale is heard;  
And sore must be the storm  
That could abash the little bird  
That kept so many warm.

I've heard it in the chillest land,  
And on the strangest sea;  
Yet, never, in extremity,  
It asked a crumb of me.

*RESPONSE: We Begin Again with Hope*

If you have ever participated in a high church liturgy on a solemn Sunday morning, you will understand what I mean by a *Choir Response* or an *Organ Response*. It's a short composition that underscores the point of the service and it comes right after the sermon.

Today, we'll try a "Congregational Response." I have a few phrases and statements and the choir will lead you in singing a few notes in a response. Please join us when you feel comfortable.

Here's the Response:

*We forgive ourselves and each other.  
We begin again with hope.*

Listen to the choir and join them when you feel comfortable with the melody.

For giving up, when a single voice would have rallied us

For each time our fears told us expect the worst of each other

For each time we have spoken in anger  
because we thought we were powerless

For each time our fears excluded us from our community

For the selfishness that sets us apart and alone

For fearing to invest in a better life for all

For losing sight of what we can be

For all that and more,  
for everything that fuels an illusion of despair

*EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE*

We extinguish this flame,  
but not the light of its truth  
the warmth of this community  
nor the fire of our commitment.  
These we carry in our hearts  
and share with all the world.

*POSTLUDE*

*Vivace*