"BASIC MORALITY & THE BASIS OF MORALITY"
Olympic Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
July 20, 2025
Speaker: Rev. Bruce A. Bode
Service Leader: Bob Nuffer
Musicians: Harmony Rutter, LeRoy Davidson

Sermon Title & Description: "Basic Morality & the Basis of Morality" – What is morality? How does it come about? How is it maintained? Basic questions, more pertinent than ever.

Chalice Lighting

Deep calls unto deep,
joy calls unto joy,
light calls unto light.
Let the kindling of this flame
rekindle in us the inner light
of love, of peace, and of hope. (Rev. Gordon B. McKeeman)

Introduction of Theme and Responsive Reading

This morning, I invite you to explore with me the nature and content of morality: What is morality? How does it come about? How is it maintained? I think you'll agree that it's certainly a subject related to our current national social and political conversation.

A good bit of my own consideration of this subject of morality has been influenced by the approach of Dr. Albert Schweitzer, who lived from 1875-1965. My dissertation toward a Master's degree in Theology in the mid-1970s was titled "Reverence for Life: The Religious Philosophy of Albert Schweitzer." So, I'd like to begin with a responsive reading drawn from some of Schweitzer's statements on the subject.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: The most immediate fact of human consciousness is the assertion: "I am life which wills to live, in the midst of life which wills to live."

CONGREGATION: It is as will-to-live in the midst of will-to-live that humans conceive themselves during every moment they spend meditating upon themselves and the world around them.

MINISTER: The essential nature of the will-to-live is found in this, that it is determined to live itself out.

CONGREGATION: It bears in itself the impulse to realize itself to the highest possible degree of perfection.

MINISTER: In delicate blossoms, in the manifold wondrous forms of the jellyfish, in a blade of grass, in the crystal; everywhere it strives to reach that perfection which is implicit in its own nature.

CONGREGATION: Imaginative power, determined by ideals, is at work in all that is.

MINISTER: The impulse toward perfection is innate in us – beings, as we are, endowed with freedom and capable of reflective purposive action – in such a way that we naturally aspire to raise ourselves and every portion of existence affected by our influence to the highest material and spiritual degree of value.

CONGREGATION: We do not know how this aspiration came to be in us and how it has developed itself in us.

MINISTER: It is an intrinsic part of our being.

CONGREGATION: We must follow it if we will not be untrue to the secret will-to-live which is rooted in us.

("The Essential Nature of the Will-to-Live," Albert Schweitzer, statements from: *Out of My Life and Thought* and *Civilization and Ethics*, p. 282; adjusted for gender)

Readings

I have two readings for you this morning relating to the subject of morality. The first reading, again from Albert Schweitzer, consists of statements from a magazine article Schweitzer wrote titled "The Ethics of Reverence for Life."

> As we know life in ourselves, we want to understand life in the universe, in order to enter into harmony with it. Physically we are always trying to do this. But that is not the primary matter; for the great issue is that we shall achieve a spiritual harmony….
>
> Though humans are egotists, they are never completely so. They *must* always have some interest in life about them. If for no other reason, they must do so in order to make their own lives more perfect….
>
> The important thing is that we are part of life. We are born of other lives; we possess the capacities to bring still other lives into existence.
>
> In the same way, if we look into a microscope we see cell producing cell. So nature compels us to recognize the fact of mutual dependence, each life necessarily helping the other lives which are linked to it.
>
> In the very fibers of our being, we bear within ourselves the fact of the solidarity of life. Our recognition of it expands with thought. Seeing its presence in ourselves, we realize how closely we are linked with others of our kind. We might like to stop here, but we cannot. Life demands that we see through to the solidarity of all life which we can in any degree recognize as having some similarity to the life that is in us.
>
> ("The Ethics of Reverence for Life," Christendom, Vol. I, Winter, 1936, pp. 225 and 237; adjusted for gender)

My second reading, very different in style from the first reading, is a half-humorous, half-serious poem by Robert Frost, published late in his career when he was sixty-eight years old.

The poem is about a tiny, tiny insect – a mite – that the poet encountered on a sheet of paper that he was writing on with his ink pen. It's titled "A Considerable Speck (Microscopic)."

A Considerable Speck
(Microscopic)

A speck that would have been beneath my sight
On any but a paper sheet so white
Set off across what I had written there.
And I had idly poised my pen in air
To stop it with a period of ink
When something strange about it made me think.
This was no dust speck by my breathing blown,
But unmistakably a living mite
With inclinations it could call its own.
It paused as with suspicion of my pen,
And then came racing wildly on again
To where my manuscript was not yet dry;
Then paused again and either drank or smelt –
With loathing, for again it turned to fly.
Plainly with an intelligence I dealt.
It seemed too tiny to have room for feet,
Yet must have had a set of them complete
To express how much it didn't want to die.
It ran with terror and with cunning crept.
It faltered: I could see it hesitate;
Then in the middle of the open sheet
Cower down in desperation to accept
Whatever I accorded it of fate.
I have none of the tenderer-than-thou
Collectivistic regimenting love
With which the modern world is being swept.
But this poor microscopic item now!
Since it was nothing I knew evil of
I let it lie there till I hope it slept.

I have a mind myself and recognize
Mind when I meet with it in any guise.
No one can know how glad I am to find
On any sheet the least display of mind.

(Robert Frost, "A Considerable Speck (Microscopic), *Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays*, pp. 324-325)

Note, here, that Frost sort of poo-poos and makes a joke out of his own sensitivity and connection to this tiny little creature that was struggling to live on his paper, saying:

> "I have none of the tenderer-than-thou
> Collectivistic regimenting love
> With which the modern world is being swept."

And yet he does feel the connection … and he lets the tiny, little creature live!

Interlude Hymn #127: "Can I See Another's Woe?"

I've asked Harmony to sing a hymn titled "Can I See Another's Woe?" It's a hymn based on a poem by the English poet William Blake titled "On Another's Sorrow."

In the hymn that Harmony will sing the shared woe is related only to humans. However, in the longer poem from which this hymn is taken, the shared sorrow is expanded beyond the human realm, as in the lines:

> And can he who smiles on all
> Hear the wren with sorrows small.
> Hear the small bird's grief & care …

If you wish to follow along with the words of the hymn, it's #127 in our *Singing the Living Tradition* hymnal.

> 1. Can I see another's woe,
> and not be in sorrow too?
> Can I see another's grief,
> and not seek for kind relief?
>
> 2. Can I see a falling tear,
> and not feel my sorrow's share?
> Can a father see his child weep,
> nor be with sorrow filled?
>
> 3. Can a mother sit and hear
> infant groan, an infant fear?
> No, no, never can it be!
> Never, never can it be!

Sermon: "BASIC MORALITY & THE BASIS OF MORALITY"

Introduction: An incident on the streets of Holland, Michigan

One of the first sermons I ever gave – this was in the spring of 1979 – was titled "The Basis of Morality."

It began with an account of an incident that occurred in the town of Holland, Michigan, when Flossie and I lived there for a couple of years in the mid-1970s. Holland, Michigan is the home of an annual Tulip Festival – similar in some ways to the Tulip Festival in Skagit Valley – and visited by hundreds of thousands of visitors each year at the beginning of May. Here's the account of the incident:

> I was walking about the town of Holland, Michigan with a good friend, enjoying the tulips and flowers of the spring season, when, as we were walking on the sidewalk along one of the busier streets, a souped-up motorcycle approached us rapidly from the front, its exhaust pipes racking, disturbing our serenity.
>
> The motorcyclist was making so much noise that my friend turned in disgust to watch as the cyclist was about to pass by. As my friend turned, she saw a squirrel in the process of attempting to cross the street. Hearing the noise of the oncoming cycle the squirrel froze in its tracks in the middle of the street, not knowing whether to go forward or backward.
>
> The motorcyclist was soon close to the squirrel, and just as he came to the squirrel he swerved – but he swerved, not to miss the squirrel, but to hit it! And he did hit it, killing it instantly. One look back and the cyclist sped on his way, having hit his mark.
>
> My friend turned back to me – I had not witnessed the event which had occurred so quickly – she turned back to me, tears flooding her face, shaking with anger, totally outranged, totally horrified, totally uncomprehending.

That was the opening to my sermon on morality and its basis in the spring of 1979.

An imagined conversation

Later in the same sermon, I imagined a conversation between the motorcyclist and my friend, a conversation that explored some of the moral questions of right and wrong, good and bad, that might arise from this incident.

For the conversation, I assumed that the motorcyclist felt there was nothing wrong with his actions and that my friend, after she had cooled down, was willing to engage in a conversation in which she would try to convince him that his action was wrong.

Here's how I imagined that conversation might go. My friend speaks first:

Friend: “I saw you run over that squirrel with your motorcycle back there.”

Cyclist: “Yeah, good aim, wasn’t it.”

Friend: “I think what you did was wrong.”

Cyclist: “Come again.”

Friend: “I said, I think what you did was wrong.”

Cyclist: “Wrong?”

“Friend: “Wrong!”

Cyclist: “So, you think my running over that squirrel is wrong. What is there, some kind of law against running over squirrels?”

Friend: “There ought to be.”

Cyclist: “Well, perhaps if the squirrel had been using the crosswalk I would have stopped.”

Friend: “Very funny.”

Cyclist: “You know, I probably ran over a whole bunch of ants and beetles and worms before I ran over that squirrel. Was that wrong, too? Should there be a law against running over ants and beetles and worms?”

Friend: “But you ran over the squirrel *deliberately*. You deliberately took aim and killed it.”

Cyclist: “And you don’t think I would have run over the ants and beetles and worms deliberately?”

Friend: “Okay, I see that you don’t care about squirrels and insects. Would you run over people, too, if you felt like it?”

Cyclist: “Perhaps an animal lover like you hasn’t heard about it, but there’s a law against running over people.”

Friend: “Yes, but what’s the law based on? Let’s suppose there were no law against running over people, would you then feel justified in doing so?”

Cyclist: “Please, everybody knows you can’t run over people; it’s an inborn thing.”

Friend: “Oh, is it? Perhaps, it was just taught to us. It’s people that make laws, after all. Let’s suppose there no law against running over people with your motorcycle. Why wouldn’t you feel justified in running over them?”

Cyclist: “You know, you may have a point there after all. If there were no law against running over people with motorcycles, I might just have to consider them to be fair game.”

Friend: “You know what I wish, Mr. Macho Motorcycle Man, I wish that squirrels could drive motorcycles and that you had to cross the street on all fours. It’s obvious that some ‘squirrels’ don’t live in trees.”

Issues raised

This imaginary conversation ended, as sometimes such actual conversations end, in a sarcastic impasse. But it raises a number of issues related to morality:

1) First, what is basic morality?
2) Secondly, what is the basis of basic morality?
3) And, thirdly, how much morality can be encoded into our law?

1) What is basic morality?

So, first, what is basic morality?

Well, it has to do with seeking “the good.”

And: what is “the good”?

Philosopher Alfred North Whitehead speaks of a three-fold urge in life: (i) to live, (ii) to live well, (iii) to live better.”

That’s one expression of “the good.”

And, in a similar vein, Albert Schweitzer, as in my readings, spoke of the “will-to-live,” which he saw as having three aspects:

1) First, the “will-to-survive;”
2) Secondly, the “will-to-self-development” or the “will-to-self-realization;”
3) And, thirdly, the “will-to-solidarity,” the “will-to-relatedness,” or the “will-to-love.” (Schweitzer used all three terms to describe this third aspect of the “will-to-live.”)

Where does morality come in?

All forms of being – certainly, all forms of life – exhibit the first two aspects of Whitehead’s “three-fold urge” or Schweitzer’s three-part “will-to-live.” And this instinctive

impulse/urge for survival and self-development is the ground or basis of what is called "the good;" it is the ground of morality.

But morality only comes in when this instinctive impulse is affirmed spiritually and consciously.

The moral category, thus, applies to creatures of "*self-aware* consciousness" – our human species being one example, and certain other species, perhaps, on the edge of "*self-aware* consciousness."

(An interesting sidebar question here is: When do human children become moral beings, as there's a developmental process involved in coming to "*self-aware* consciousness.")

At any rate, the urge to survive and the urge to develop are strong and instinctive drives, but in creatures like us with some freedom and with the capacity to evaluate and judge, we can decide, given the conditions of life as we experience them, that reality is deeply flawed and that life is not worth the living.

Thus, the first moral act for us, the first instance of choosing "the good," is the affirmation of the will-to-live within us.

What is given as natural impulse, urge, and inclination becomes deepened through a mental and spiritual act. "Natural fact" is raised to the level of "spiritual fact."

The difficulty in affirming one's will-to-live

And sometimes that's hard enough to do – to affirm your own life … to value it and reverence it … and not to negate it, diminish it, waste it, loathe it, or even, in extremity, to take it.

(I don't have time to go into the reasons why one might diminish one's own life – questions related to what is commonly called "self-esteem.")

The basic statement of morality – affirming others

But the next step is where matters get more even difficult and complex.

And this has to do with the affirmation of "the good" not just for ourselves and our kin but in the expansion of the circle of "the good" to include others – "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

This basic statement of morality assumes that you have affirmed life for yourself … and it assumes that you would like others to respect your life … and, then, it calls upon you to respect *others* in the same way you wish your life to be respected, regarded, and treated.

This is what is "good." This is basic morality.

2) What is the basis of morality?

But, now, secondly, how does this basic morality come about? How does the desire, the call, to treat others as you would be treated – how does this come about? My answer, in a word, is "empathy," the capacity to *feel with* another:

… the capacity to look into the eyes of another creature and to see in those eyes the reflection of one's self;
… the capacity to note in others their desire for life, their fear of pain, their dread of extinction;
… the capacity to see and feel beyond one's differences to a similar life that connects and unites us.
(Note from brain science: "The neural basis for empathy may be a system of mirror neurons." *Oxford Dictionary*)

That's empathy … and from that empathy there emerges the desire to enable other life to survive and to develop its being in the same way that we would like to survive and develop – "Do unto others…."

The George Floyd video

As an example of empathy pushing through boundaries at the human level – boundaries, in this case, related to racial difference – many of you will recall the social protests five years ago in the summer of 2020 in relation to the death of George Floyd on May 25 of that year.

These protests were triggered by a video showing Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin pressing his knee and body weight into the neck of George Floyd for 9 minutes and 29 seconds, while, with his final words, this large man – he was 6 feet, 6 inches tall – called out for his mother.

Shortly thereafter, *60 Minutes* did a segment of their weekly Sunday evening program on this in which CBS correspondent Bill Whitaker interviewed Sherrilyn Ifill, the president of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund.

Bill Whitaker asked: "Why was *this* incident such a spark?"

Sherrilyn Ifill responded: "I've been doing this work for a very long time, and I've seen a lot of terrible videos … and, umm … and this one actually struck me differently also."

Bill Whitaker: "What was different about it?"

Sherrilyn Ifill, looked away pondering her response, then turned back to Bill Whitaker and answered simply: "It was long … and to see someone's life taken from them with that kind of excruciating deliberation … the officer looking out at us like that."

Throughout our country, and even throughout the world, people seeing that video of a white man's knee seemingly casually, nonchalantly, brazenly, on the neck of a black man pleading for his life – it broke through!

It broke through barriers of difference to a deeper, underlying oneness and unity … an example of empathy, the capacity to *feel with* another and to give them the same rights as we desire for ourselves.

3) How much morality can be encoded in law?

But now, thirdly, this brings us to an even more complex and difficult question: How much of basic morality can we create in our societies and encode into law? And how far can law reach?

Through empathy – and through reflection on feelings of empathy – the circle of the self expands beyond the individual, family, clan, tribe, race, class, nation, and religion to take in other families, clans, tribes, races, classes, nations, and religions … indeed, to take in all humanity.

But it doesn't stop there, as my readings from Schweitzer indicate. The circle of empathy may extend beyond the human realm to include all creatures, great and small (which was the point of my reading "The Considerable Speck" by Robert Frost).

Life feeding on life

But now we're really in the moral and ethical soup, because, as we know all too well, life feeds on life.

Imagine for a day that it would be possible to preserve all living things … that all living forms would flourish … that no living forms would be destroyed.

It's impossible, of course. The thought cannot even really be finished … for in the only reality we know, life and death, creation and destruction, are component parts of one larger whole.

Still, we often wish it might be otherwise. As the poet Kahlil Gibran has put it:

> "Would that you could live on the fragrance of the earth, and like an air plant be sustained by the light. ("On Eating and Drinking," *The Prophet*)

But that is not our world. And ethics to be ethical, and morality to be moral, must be in conversation with actual reality and with what is actually possible.

The absolute ethic of non-killing and non-destroying is unworkable and even undercuts itself, given the realities of our world.

The ethic of compassion

Thus, there must be, within the larger unity of life, a hierarchy and a scale of value … so that the ethical principle is not non-killing as such, but rather the principle that one should not take life wantonly, casually, unthinkingly, or unnecessarily.

Or, to again quote the poet Kahlil Gibran: "… since you must kill to eat, and rob the newly born of its mother's milk to quench your thirst, let it then be an act of worship…."

… which is, indeed, the way of many indigenous peoples in which the killing of life is generally accompanied by a ritual of some kind … the recognition that a sacrifice is being made, that guilt needs to be expiated, and that gratitude needs to be expressed.

Thus, in these rituals, it is understood that the power by which I take this life is the same power by which my own life will one day be taken.

> "By the same power that slays you, I too am slain; and I too shall be consumed.
> For the law that delivered you into my hand shall deliver me into a mightier hand."
> (Kahlil Gibran, "On Eating and Drinking," *The Prophet*)

Indeed, in the end, the morality that emerges from empathy and our reflection on empathy leads to humility and compassion. An inward, spiritual connection is made with life in all its beauty and terror, in all its triumph and tragedy, in all its complexity.

Law and morality in society

Let me return, finally, to the current struggle and conflict our society is engaged in relation to justice and equality at the *human* level.

Law is not morality, but law attempts – or should attempt – to hold up before us the basic moral code of "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

And with regard to human equality and human justice, there is the temptation on the part of all of us *to cheat*, that is, to regard ourselves and our wants and our needs a little – or a lot – above the wants and needs of others.

Furthermore, the capacity for empathy is not present or developed in all humans to the same degree.

In some persons the capacity for empathy is well-hidden, driven underground by the harshness of life; and, in others, it's as if the "empathy gene" is missing altogether.

Thus, because of our human propensity to think better of ourselves than others, and because empathy is sometimes in short supply or lacking altogether, the law is needed … and ever-improving law is needed … and ever-improving enforcement of ever-improving law is needed … in order to maintain and build a society and a world of greater human equality and larger human justice.

And, finally, religion and philosophy and psychology are needed – and ever-evolving religion and philosophy and psychology are needed – to engage the foundation of law, which is morality … and to engage and promote empathy, which, I am arguing, is the generator of morality, the catalyst for empathy.

Religion and philosophy and psychology and the arts and humanities in general are needed to assist us in opening the heart, in stirring the soul, and in pointing the way to greater humility and compassion. So may it be.

Closing Hymn #318: "We Would Be One"

1. We would be one as now we join in singing
our hymn of love, to pledge ourselves anew
to that high cause of greater understanding
of who we are, and what in us is true.
We would be one in living for each other
to show to all a new community.

2. We would be one in building for tomorrow
a nobler world than we have known today.
We would be one in searching for that meaning
which bends our hearts and points us on our way.
As one, we pledge ourselves to greater service,
with love and justice, strive to make us free.

(Samuel Anthony Wright, words; Jean Sibelius, music)

Closing Words

Our Closing Words of Benediction are from the Rev. Dr. Kendyl R. Gibbons:

There is, finally, only one thing required of us: that is, to take life whole, the sunlight and shadows together; to live the life that is given us with courage and humor and truth.

We have such a little moment out of the vastness of time for all our wondering and loving. Therefore, let there be no half-heartedness; rather, let the soul be ardent in its pain, in its yearning, and in its praise.

Then shall peace enfold our days, and glory shall not fade from our lives.

Extinguishing of Chalice

We extinguish this flame,
But not the Light of Truth,
The Warmth of Community,
The Fire of Commitment, or
The Power of Transformation;
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the service led by the Rev. Bruce A. Bode at the Olympic Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Sequim/Port Angeles, WA on Sunday, July 20, 2025. Rev. Bode is minister emeritus at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship (QUUF) in Port Townsend, Washington, from which he retired in 2018 as the senior minister after serving the congregation for fourteen years (2004-2018).

Before coming to Port Townsend, Rev. Bode was the interim minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Houston, Texas (2002-2004) and the Hope Unitarian Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma (2001-2002). Prior to that, he served for twenty-two years (1978-2001) as an associate minister at the Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, a large, independent, religiously liberal congregation.