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### **The Essence of the Christian Faith**

*Then one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, perceiving that He had answered them well, asked Him, "Which is the first commandment of all?" Jesus answered him, "The first of all the commandments is: "Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength." This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."*

Mark 12:28-31 NKJV

My choice of Bible verses for today is not coincidental. The verses we just read express decisively and clearly the essence of the teachings of Jesus, and the essence of the Unitarian concept of Christian faith which is based on the religious and moral edifications in the Gospels.

Based on the latest findings from academic research on the Bible, we can clearly see that the information about the life and ministry of Jesus as described in the Gospels is not sufficient to write an autobiography, the entire life story of Jesus. At the same time, it is becoming more and more obvious, that without the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth it would have been impossible to start and bring about the birth of the Christian religion. The birth of the Christian religion had two necessary conditions: on one hand the faith of Jesus in God, his unshakable trust in his Father. That faith radiated irresistibly from his person onto the disciples. The other condition was a set of dignified moral teachings, preserved for us in the Gospels as parables and statements, that were the continuation and the highest expressions of his victorious faith. The appeal of the faith of Jesus in God, his moral teachings, his unparalleled role modeling, and the incredible persona of Jesus that turned the disciples into apostles, and set Christianity on the path to victory with the first Easter.

It is well-known that during the more than four centuries of its existence, the Unitarian Church has emphasized the second of the two commandments of Jesus, that is the

moral commandment, the part of that teaching that guided the relationships between people. In other words, our Church has had a humanist leaning.

However, in this festive hour, I want to vigorously accentuate the following. We, Unitarians are neither merely a moralizing institution, nor an association that merely follows intellectual and philosophical principles, but, rather, ours is a Church formed around the commandments and teachings of Jesus, a Church with a noble historic past, a Church that is a spiritual community of people who pray, and are nourished by their unconditional, victorious faith in God. In our religion, too, the starting condition, the natural foundation is the following of the first of the dual commandment from Jesus: the belief in God, our good, our dear Father.

Such faith in God underpinned the moral teachings of Jesus, in essence, the unconditional command to love our brethren, our neighbors, and our fellow human beings. The Unitarian religion was a natural continuation of that faith guided by the teachings, role modeling, and moral expectations of Jesus. Therefore, the Unitarian religion is a blessed fulfillment of that dignifying conduct and noble action toward our neighbors and fellow human beings according to the second part unmistakably expressed by the dual commandment of Jesus.

According to the Unitarian faith and view of life, the two parts of that dual commandment to love God and our neighbors as ourselves are inseparable from the Unitarian faith; they are linked in an organic, unbreakable manner.

The conviction of the Unitarian believer is clear: what crucial for Christianity is not what we think about the personal characteristics of Jesus, but, rather, how well can we put into practice the guiding principle of the dual commandment to love God and our neighbors. How well can we make that into a living reality, how well can we believe in God, our Father with the trust and humbleness of a child, how well can we apply the moral teachings of Jesus and the Gospels in our everyday lives, in our workplaces, in our communities, and as part of our loyalty to our Church and to our homeland.

It is our conviction that the true importance of Jesus is not his composition of the dual commandment to love, because he didn't introduce a new concept with it. The commandment to love God and our neighbors is in the Old Testament, although there, according to the Israelite faith, the second part of the commandment primarily pertained to the members, the compatriots, of that nation.

The true greatness, the untarnishable, eternal importance of Jesus is in his actions, as he role modeled to his disciples a hitherto unknown, new conduct, a novel reflection of the Spirit anchored in his unshakable trust in God the Father. We heard from his lips the words: "You have heard that it was said to those of old....., but I say unto you". We hear a radically new teaching from him: "Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth". We hear from him such a soothing, blessed encouragement: Those who will be saved and enter the Kingdom of God are not the

ones who confess to be true according to the standards of the Pharisees -- who exclude the simple, unlearned, downtrodden, but God-fearing people.

Jesus cared about those people excluded by the Pharisees; the warm feelings from his heart were poured out for them. His sympathy and love were focused on the wretched, unrighteous people who yearned for help and love, the very people who were pronounced sinners, lost and unworthy of the Kingdom of the God by those holier-than-thou religious leaders. Jesus lifted up those people, and pronounced them blessed. This new phenomenon and state of mind emanated from his being with unquenchable warmth and directness, and manifested in his focus on the essential. His life reflected his conviction that no person is lost irredeemably, and that putting into practice the commandments of forgiveness and love can lift anyone from the depth of darkness and hopelessness, and renew their spirit.

We understand that the teachings of Jesus spoke to people who lived two thousand years ago, under the circumstances of the world of their time, therefore, most of those teachings can not be applied to our lives literally. On the other hand, we do hold it true that the dignifying, radically new mindset emanating from his teachings, stood the test of time, and binding for all Unitarians who call themselves disciples of Jesus.

David Ferenc, as an enlightened, faithful, loyal disciple of Jesus, formulated a thesis deemed unacceptable to his contemporaries: Jesus is to be followed, but not worshipped. His expression of faith could only be accomplished if our worldly thoughts and piety, our Mary and Martha, our trust in God and our love of our neighbors unite in an unbreakable, blessed manner.

Our Church has been acting in the spirit of the ideals of Jesus and David Ferenc through the storms of past centuries when, amidst life and death struggles, it sought to fulfill its unique, noble, and uplifting calling. Our Church has always linked the clarity of sound mind, an unclouded understanding, to the light of faith. Our Church has guided our faithful in their religious life and their general demeanor using the factual observations from life, weighing our abilities and possibilities and following the approach of being clever and docile, with honest interest and focus on people who seek help, support, tenderness, and love. Throughout its history, our Church has maintained a close connection to the pulsing of everyday life; it has been the genuine proponent of clean and noble ideals, and of progressive thoughts that serve the cause of general human development and growth, be it mental, spiritual, or financial, and it will continue to do so. Our Church has been emphasizing the second part of the dual commandment of Jesus, but it has and will continue to focus on loving God, in addition to serving the people.

I took on the task of guarding this heritage of the Gospels and our Church three months ago when the Synod of Szekelyudvarhely elected me the 28<sup>th</sup> bishop of our Church. The biblical blessing from the lips of our Church deans made that election official a few minutes ago. I hereby promise and pledge that until my last breath I will strive to be

worthy of the trust you have placed in me by honoring the progressive Church tradition. With a devoted spirit I will rely on the inexhaustible spring of the living water, serving the interests of born-again believers, and I will look toward developing the present and the approaching future of our faith by relying on my unconditional belief in God, on all my bodily and spiritual strength, on my full capabilities, on my enthusiasm, on my mindset of self-sacrificing loyalty, and on brotherly and neighborly love.

For me as well as for you the dual commandment of Jesus determines the path to follow, the path of the Gospels. We hear the words of the scripture: "Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life". Let us all then be advocates with flaming soul for the truths of our blessed religion; let us all proclaim and carry out the moral law of the Gospels built on the faith that "God is one", and on the command of unconditional love. Let us love our fellow human beings regardless of race or denomination, just as we would love ourselves. Let us conscientiously carry in us the spirit of peacefulness; let us be the kind of people who are renowned for manifesting peacefulness and satisfying the desires of God. Let us pray and work for a better and a more blessed human existence on our planet.

Our role models stand right in front of us: Jesus of Nazarene and his excellent student, David Ferenc.

With our spiritual eyes, we see a long line of our bishops who proclaimed and practiced with dedication the dual commandment of Jesus. They are our own spiritual guides and role models of faith and love. I want to welcome all meeting participants and all Church members of our homeland while recalling with gratitude the memory of our greatest role models, and everyone who has lived for that sacred cause, the cause of the Gospels. At the same time I'm looking forward, with a saintly hope, to a more peaceful and blessed world. I welcome our guests, and friends, and ask our God of providence to bless and sanctify our meeting and all the honest and devotional prayers and supplications that arose from the reverence of this day.

May all those be blessed who have ever prayed in this ancient land, and all those who will be praying here in the future. May all those be blessed who hold our beliefs within or outside of our borders. May our Churches be blessed; may they remain to be a place from Sunday to Sunday where psalms praise our God, and the words of the Gospels remind us all about our sacred calling. May our ministers be blessed, so they can continue to proclaim -- in good times and in bad -- the pure Gospels of Jesus. May God pour out His blessings onto our worldly leaders and onto our Church workers who tirelessly labor, serve dutifully, and pray with a devoted spirit. May God pour out His blessing onto the service of our beloved Church as it proclaims the faith-inspiring, loving, peaceful, message of the Gospels, so our service may wipe away tears, offer condolences to our brethren who crave love and compassion with every strand of their nerves as they stand by caskets. So that our Church can bring about pure happiness and bless it all. So that our Church can lift everyone again and again from the low points of our lives, to rejuvenate us, and make us joyful.

Let us praise Him, and give thanks to His sacred name now and forever. Amen