

Sermon: "Saving Universalism"
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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Mankato
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Readings

from A Treatise on Atonement by Hosea Ballou
 (arguing against the inconsistency of the belief that God has the right to be partial)

Have we not reason to believe our Creator possessed of as much goodness as he has communicated to us? Can we rationally believe that he is wanting in those principles of goodness which he has placed in our understanding?... I am traveling through a large and extensive wood, and many miles from any inhabitants; I find ten persons who are lost; they have been out of provisions for several days; and have fatigued themselves in wandering from hill to hill, from stream to stream, striving, to the utmost of their abilities to find inhabitants; having given up all hopes of ever seeing their homes again, and having, in their minds, bid their wives and children a long farewell, they are waiting for hunger to do its last work! The moment I discover myself to them, with large supplies of wholesome and rich provisions, every eye glistens with unexpected joy.... I hasten to improve the opportunity of showing my sovereignty and goodness; I feed five of them to the full, the other five I neglect. They beg for the smallest crust, which I do not want, but to no effect. Those whom I feed solicit me, every mouthful they eat, to bestow some on their fellow sufferers, but I refuse. I tell them, however, not to construe my conduct into partiality, but to learn my power and sovereignty by it. The five whom I have fed I assist out of the wood, and leave the rest to their wants. My conduct in the above affair appears so much blacker than my paper is white, I choose rather to leave the reader to make... comments than to write my own.

"Love Casts Out Fear" by Sara Moores Campbell
 In fear, we isolate ourselves.
 In love, we connect with others.

In fear, we become immobilized.
 In love, we are empowered to act.

In fear, we judge others.
 In love, we seek justice.

In fear, we distrust.
 In love, we trust.

In fear, we seek punishment.
 In love, we seek mercy and forgiveness.

In fear, we see death.
In love, we see life.

In fear, we retreat.
In love, we reach out.
Let us respond to our times with love.
Let us reach out.

Sermon “Saving Universalism”

When the 18th century farmer Thomas Potter built a meeting house on his farm in search of a preacher who shared his religious views, his neighbors thought he had gone mad. With no children of his own to inherit his wealth, Potter decided to share his gratitude for his good fortune by establishing a house of worship for the residents of New Jersey’s Cape of Good Luck. Shortly after the meeting house was finished, the Baptists applied for its use. Potter challenged them, “If you can prove to me that God Almighty is a Baptist, you may have it.” A few weeks later, the Quakers applied and then the Presbyterians, but the solitary farmer issued the same challenge to each of them, declaring that unless they could prove to him that God was a partisan, “all should be equally welcome” in the religious house which he had built. So he waited, alone in his empty worship hall, believing that if he was patient enough, God would send a preacher who shared his inclusive message and who would help him to bring it to the world.

In many ways, it is hard for us to imagine how utterly alone Potter was in his wish to promote inclusivity and to honor diversity in God’s presence in 18th century America. In our multi-cultural, global society today, we take for granted the fact that our neighbors might be Muslim or Jewish, Hmong or Greek, religious or non-religious, married or single or divorced, with children or without, Democrat or Republican or apathetic or something else altogether. Yet, even amidst this diversity, we still live in a nation where some leaders would like to define which are true religions and which are false. We still live in a state where the legislature is so polarized, it cannot act on its agenda. We still live in a city, where the line between the have’s and have-not’s is far too wide. We still have need of the lonely farmer’s dream.

Hearing Thomas Potter’s story over two hundred years later, it is important for us to remember exactly *why* his neighbors believed that he had lost his sanity. They were not distressed that he heard a voice guiding him to undertake this project. They were not perturbed that he believed himself to be a part of God’s ultimate Divine plan. They were not alarmed that he was willing to invest his life savings in this pie-in-the-sky dream and building. Such passionate convictions and inspired visions were part of the religious landscape of their day. The challenge for us moderns is to remember that what ultimately shocked the community was the nature of Potter’s beliefs themselves – the fact that he really believed in a God who was not prejudiced toward one religious sect over the other. The fact that he believed in a vision of the truth that was available to and valid for all

people. The fact that he believed that salvation is a promise for the multitudes, not just for the chosen few. Locals held that these radical views were not to be taken lightly, and certainly not to be mistaken for anything other than the heresies that they were. Meanwhile, Thomas Potter remained resolutely unwilling to allow anyone but a preacher sympathetic to these beliefs to use his meeting house, and so his neighbors waited with him, smirking behind his back and all the while praying for his soul.

One foggy September morning, Potter's preacher did come, in the person of John Murray who had landed on the Cape of Good Luck by sheer accident. With Murray's first sermon delivered in Potter's overflowing meeting house, American Universalism was born. The controversy spread like wildfire. Universalist preachers traveled the countryside, braving death threats and stones thrown at their heads through church windows, in order to bring the glad message of God's love for all people. Opponents warned that the belief in universal salvation and redemption would quickly destroy the moral soul of our nation – that without the knowledge and threat of hell, no one would strive to be good. Others argued the Calvinistic belief that God had already determined the saved and the unsaved among us, before we were even born.

One story passed down to us recounts a conversation between John Murray and a Calvinist minister from Philadelphia. The minister proudly announced to Murray that he walked nine miles every Sunday to preach. "How many in your congregation?" inquired Murray politely. "About one hundred," the minister replied. "Of that hundred, how many do you suppose are elected to everlasting life?" Murray pursued. "I cannot tell," the man confessed. Murray encouraged him to take a guess – fifty? "Oh no," came the reply, "not twenty." "Ten perhaps?" "There may be ten," admitted the preacher. "Can the lost do anything which will help their situation?" asked Murray. "Certainly not. Every sermon they hear will sink them deeper in damnation." "So," concluded Murray, with just a hint of sarcasm, "you walk nine miles every Sunday to sink ninety persons out of a hundred into never-ending misery?"

By the middle of the next century, Universalism was one of the fastest growing and largest denominations in America, numbering over 600,000 active adherents (3 times the membership that North American Unitarian Universalism can claim today). Yet even those of us who are its heirs know precious little about it. Why? The easy answer praises the success of those early Universalists. After three generations of inspired Universalist preaching, other denominations such as the more liberal Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists gradually began to adopt a more open view of God and a less judgmental view of the universe's methods of salvation, so that formally being a Universalist was not as distinctive as it once was. However, we can still witness today that not everyone has changed. Many families, friendships, and communities in the year 2004 remain divided over the question of who among them is saved and who is practicing the right religion to guarantee a place in eternity.

A more subtle explanation infers that the fears of the Universalists regarding the

1961 merger with the Unitarians have been realized, and that the more intellectual and verbose Unitarians have overwhelmed their Universalist brothers and sisters with their own version of history. As a result, a linguistic laziness has set in – after all, how many of us have abbreviated Unitarian Universalist to simply “Unitarian,” if only for convenience’s sake? The most complex explanation reflects the more contemporary realities of religion. Despite a vocal conservative faction, many people today see heaven and hell as metaphorical or symbolic ideas, rather than an expression of the concrete realities that await us when we die. In such an age the classic Universalist appeal of “soft seats and no hell” appears to have lost its compelling power. Or so it might seem.

As someone who was raised by two bona fide Universalist preachers and teachers, I believe it would be both a tragic and dangerous mistake to allow our Universalist roots to die or slip silently away from our theological grasp. I am not just talking about what we would lose in forgetting the legacies of the likes of Olympia Brown, the first woman ordained in the U. S. in 1865, or Clara Barton, the founder of the Red Cross, or Kenneth Patton, who pioneered the experiment of one universal religion for one world. Something even more foundational and important to our everyday faith and lives is at stake, something that is captured in the astute words of the agnostic Robert Ingersoll close to a century ago when he observed: “The Unitarian Church has done more than any other church – and maybe more than all other churches – to substitute character for creed. I want to thank the Unitarian Church for what it has done. [But] I want to thank the Universalist Church too. They at least believe in a God who is a gentleman... they believe, at least, in a heavenly father who will leave the latch string out until the last child gets home.”

The pure fact of the matter is that it remains a radical – and radically important - statement of faith and principle to affirm that each and every human being on this earth is born with equal access to all that is holy and to all that saves and redeems us, time and time again, from our own moral lapses and human shortcomings. Without this affirmation, our first principle of the inherent worth and dignity of every person becomes mere hypocrisy. Without this faith, it would have been impossible for us to have achieved our long history of social change - in the abolition of slavery, in prison reform, in the care for the mentally ill, in the fight for civil rights for all people, regardless of race, sexual orientation or ability - all of which has been fueled in part by Universalist belief in the dignity of humanity and the charge to become agents of the universe’s love and care. Without this compassionate gospel, too many people would continue to see religion as an institution of threat and fear, rather than as a connecting agent with the original blessing of life.

The revolution of Universalist faith and thought arose out of an ever widening image of God and God’s embrace of the world. And it was a revolution, for an interesting pattern began to come clear. The wider and deeper, the more understanding and merciful God became in the eyes of the people, the more humanity gained its autonomy back. Instead of claiming, as Murray’s Baptist colleague did, that no one could do anything to

further along either their own or anyone else's salvation, Universalists began to invite people to practice the discipline of "being good for nothing." At the time this was not seen as preaching a gospel of duty. Instead it was the rallying cry of a gospel of liberation – the human soul could evolve, repent, and even learn to love of its own free will! Even in the 20th century, as the more traditional God-centered Universalism made room for the ethical Universalism of its agnostic and humanist members, the foundation of this gospel did not change. Theists and non-theists alike anticipated the vision of those who, like Martin Luther King, Jr., would come to believe that the moral arc of the universe in the nature of its very design would bend toward justice.

But what did the Universalists have to teach about those who refuse to embrace the vision of love and justice? What about those who refuse to be rescued or converted from the evil and ignorance of the world? The 19th century Universalist preacher Hosea Ballou was asked by a debate opponent, "What would you do with a man who died reeking of sin and crime?" Ballou did not hesitate to respond: "I think it would be a good idea to bury him." It is tempting to hear his answer as mere proof of the preacher's wit, but an important theological stance lies beneath his words, one that is still relevant in a world yet filled with torture and brutality, murder and abuse. The Universalist message taught that the death of an unrepentant man or woman was not an event to gloat over or to use to fuel some personal sense of moral superiority. According to the Universalist gospel, such a death was a tragedy to be mourned and not a reason to act with any less consideration or compassion for the human potential that might have been, even if that promise never came to flower. For one thing, none of us can ever know the real price that we each pay for our deeds in this world. For another, if we truly embrace a universal connection among humanity, then even the vilest person deserves to be buried with some kind of acknowledgement of the mystery of life and death. The Universalists have always understood that love and respect are best taught by example, even if they are not always returned in kind. Their practice has echoed the sentiments of one of their earliest converts, Dr. Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, who once reflected that his beliefs in "universal salvation and final restitution... have bound me to the whole human race."

Admittedly, feeling bound to the whole human race is not always easy. The Universalists understood that we are always tempted to set limits, most of them arbitrary, to keep certain kinds of people in and to keep other kinds of heretics out. We all must come to terms with the reality that not everyone will see the world or care about it in all of its facets in the exact same way that we do. They knew this and they were not naïve enough to expect everyone to embrace their gospel. But they gave us a challenge that is still worthy of our efforts today. What is the true source of our will towards the good? Does it lie in the promise of a heavenly or an earthly reward, or does it arise out of an experience of love and acceptance that will not let us go? The Universalists had a suspicion that the call to goodness could ultimately not live on fear or righteousness alone. They trusted love and compassion to be a more eloquent message of hope, and then challenged us to become the best messengers we could be.

Whether in Thomas Potter's time or in our own, it is still rare to find preachers of the full Universalist gospel. Where do you stand? How wide would you cast your own circle of inclusion? How big a meeting house would you build and how open would its doors be? Would you stake your faith on the premise that somewhere out in the universe there exists a kind of noble vision that is in process, whose end includes us all? Perhaps you have some Universalist blood within you after all. I know that I do, and it is high time to acknowledge it. For I believe in the power of love to effect deeper conversions to life than fear. I believe that we must approach one another with more compassion and humility than judgment, knowing that failure and the need for forgiveness come to us all. I believe that we are all children of the earth, who share the same destiny no matter our culture or language or creed, and that ultimately we will return to that same mystery from which we come. Yet, I know that my living does not always embody a witness to these beliefs, and that is why we need Universalism no less today than we did a century ago. We must save Universalism from oblivion, so that we can continue to save ourselves.