

Sermon: Universalism: When Love Comes to Town Feb 11th 2018 Rev. Steve Wilson

When I was in college I took a class on Instructional Systems Design. Instructional System! You don't say, preparing to slide into slumber, even earlier than usual in the sermon. You would be on the right track. Mostly what we did was to design these very rote training mechanisms that you could build into a computer. It in hindsight feels like programming.

Do this, if you get it move on, if not circle back. That is a long-winded way to say that if I have done my job, by the end of the sermon you should now know how to answer the question, "How you get Universalist holy water?" Quiz or not. Today is really a sermon designed to convey historical and theological information we should know.

Because the Universalist side of our heritage is the side of our mixed family we don't talk about so much. Often it is the Unitarians who get the spotlight, and because of their self-righteousness, Unitarians are pompous blowhards who just had to have the first name in our union: today we largely ignore the Universalists.

So, whether you care about our faith's heritage, or you just want a place to go on Sundays where you don't get too much God talk, we are part Universalists and we should know a little about that. If I were not a Universalist and did not believe more in love than judgment, I might force you to take notes. If I were not a Universalist and did not believe more in love than judgment, I might whip up some fear that there will be a test upon which your eternal fate is at stake.

If I were not a Universalist and instead believed that religious insight begins with fear I might threaten you that "If I don't think you're paying attention, I promise to ban you from our fine patio lunch." But because I am a Universalist. I have faith that it is better to encourage the good in each of us than to prey on the bad in us, and in that spirit, I will make a deal with you. I promise to try to keep our little walk through history interesting and fast paced.

The Universalist side of our heritage really begins in and with the Bible. All those stories of how God hunts down the lost sheep, and all those times God reassures us of his love, were and are looked on by Universalists as evidence to justify a Universalist interpretation of God's love for us. The first name in our tradition is about openness to innovation, the Universalist side of our heritage begins with common sense.

For as long as Christianity has existed, the idea that a loving God would damn the millions and billions who have never heard of Jesus is, even as it always has been to many Christians, frankly absurd. We should know that as much as there seems to be a heavy line of judgment that runs through most Christianity, the early churches did not make damnation a doctrine without a good long struggle.

Universalism derives its name from the early theological doctrine that ultimately, God will save all people, Christian or not. During the first 500 years of Christian history some of the leading Christian thinkers were Universalists. Famous Church Fathers like Clement of Alexandria and Origin adopted this Universalist theology and a view of scripture. However, as the church got

more and more organized, and the church and the Roman Empire came into alignment with each other, orthodox opinions came to hold sway. As that happened, when Christians stopped being turned into the authorities as criminals, and got turned into the authorities as theologians, the idea that God was on all our sides, and really forgiving, not out to punish some, came to be seen as a dangerous teaching.

Where would the power of the church be if everybody is good and/or good enough to eventually make it to heaven? It would not be much, now would it? With that quietly in mind, in 544 A.D. the belief in the infallible love of God was officially made a heresy. However, (since we are doing some second U history here) you should know that had a few church council votes gone the other way, those who saw God as more soft-hearted than judgmental, then Christianity might not have had the harsh edge that came to have. And people say voting doesn't matter. It matters and mattered. Ok, enough early Christian history.

So, Universalism has roots in the Bible, common moral sense and the early church but the Universalism that we inherited is a largely homegrown. There were, to be sure, Europeans like the Brit James Rely, and a Frenchman named George De Benneville who spread their ideas to the new land, but the Universalism that this church stands in begins on the East Coast of America, and in a way, begins with something of a miracle story.

There was this man named John Murray, a Methodist lay preacher in England who because of his Universalist belief that eventually God would save all of us, had naturally been labeled a heretic. And despite his real faith in God's goodness he had bad luck. Murray's wife and children had died and his business had failed, causing him to be sent to debtor's prison, but in 1770 his brother-in-law rescued Murray from prison, and prepared to keep his mouth shut and his head down, he got on a ship set for the New World.

Murray was a man ready to put behind him the loss and persecution and that all the high religious Universalist ideas that gotten him into political and legal trouble in the first place. John Murray had obviously not heard the joke that the way to make God laugh was to tell him your plans. Murray had no idea he was about to run into Thomas Potter, or more immediately, a sand bar off the Jersey shore.

Thomas Potter was a wealthy farmer who lived on the New Jersey coast. Like an increasing number of Christians at the time, Potter was horrified by the Calvinist notion that God would save only a few select men and women and that all others were predestined to eternal damnation. Potter was convinced that a good God would never do such a thing, and beyond that had a vision that God would send him a preacher who would come and preach this new loving Gospel that was filling his heart. Potter went with his vision, built his own church, and settled down to wait for his promised Universalist preacher to show up.

Potter originally tried out in the pulpit his Jersey neighbors Snookie and Jon Bon Jovi, but not liking their preaching message he held out. For the next ten years Thomas Potter's neighbors mocked him, calling the empty meeting house he had built "Potter's folly." Then, in September of 1770 a ship grounded on a sand bar off the Jersey shore at a place called of all things, "Good Luck." I don't need to tell you that John Murray happened to be on board that ship. He was.

When the ship struck the sandbar the captain sent Murray to shore in search of provisions. After trudging through the wetlands, tired and dirty, Murray happened upon who else but Thomas Potter himself, who after a brief conversation was overjoyed that God had finally sent him his Universalist preacher.

Potter begged John Murray to preach in his church but Murray, not being a believer in miracles, declined. Potter wouldn't relent, and finally Murray agreed that if the wind did not change by the following Sunday and allow the ship he was on to sail, he would preach in Potter's church. Potter had faith that the wind would not change, and he spread the word throughout the area that a Universalist preacher would be in his pulpit on Sunday morning. Sure enough, the wind did not change and John Murray preached a Universalist-themed sermon that Sunday that knocked their socks off.

Potter and the ad hoc congregation asked John Murray to stay and become their preacher, but he declined. Instead Murray, having been inspired by the open ears he found and feeling called by God, caught the spirit again, and began traveling and preaching. John Murray spread Universalism up and down eastern seaboard, eventually settling in Gloucester, MA. It was there that Murray started what most believe is the first substantial organized Universalist church.

Sadly, for Murray the persecution that drove him out of England was not all behind them. When he traveled from his home church in Gloucester to frequently preach all over the East Coast, he was often pelted with well-aimed rotten eggs and even rocks. Once when addressing a group in Boston, a stone sailed through the air and almost hit him in the head. Murray picked up the stone and waved it in front of the audience, "This argument is solid and weighty but it is neither rational nor convincing."

When Murray was first preaching in early New England, everyone was taxed to support the congregational church in their area. In 1779 when Murray and a small group of enthusiastic Universalists founded the first Universalist church in Gloucester, some members refused to pay the tax, claiming that the Bill of Rights protected them from involuntary religious taxation. The court agreed, ruling that every individual could support the church of their choice. And so, the Universalists helped to establish the principle of separation of church and state.

John Murray was probably the greatest organizer of Universalism our country has ever known. He was certainly the first, but he is not singularly important. Not too far behind him in time was a New Hampshire-born native named Hosea Ballou was considered by many to be the second half of our tradition's greatest preacher. If Murray can be credited for starting many of the coastal Universalist churches on the Northeastern Seaboard, nearly a generation later, Ballou who was ordained in 1794, helped spread the doctrine of Universal salvation throughout what was the rural frontier inland of our new country. Throughout the last decade of the 1700s and first half of the 1800s Hosea preached to those hinterlands like Connecticut, Western Mass and Vermont.

One day, Hosea Ballou was riding the circuit in the New Hampshire hills arguing theology with a Baptist minister. At one point, the Baptist was distressed, looked over and said, "Brother Ballou, now if I were a Universalist and being one had no fear of the fires of hell, I could hit you

over the head, steal your horse and ride away, and I'd still go to heaven." Ballou looked over at him and said, "My friend, if you were a Universalist, that idea would never occur to you."

With two great evangelists spreading the word and having churches pop up behind them nearly everywhere they went, Universalism flourished. By the time Murray died in 1815, Universalism had grown into an organized and vital religious force in America. By 1840, the zenith of Unitarianism as well, there were 800,000 Universalists. 800,000 Universalists alone! That's literally about four times the number of Unitarian Universalists in North America right now. And since in 1840 there were just over 17 million people in the country (even with my terrible math) that means about 5% of the US population were Universalists. There are not even 2 tenths of a percent of Americans who are UUs nationwide today.

What drove this success you ask? The central reforming energy that drove people to Universalism was much the same as that which caused Unitarianism to flower. It was timely and relevant. Essentially Universalism was ahead of the curve. In fact in many ways, Universalism and Unitarianism can be seen as simply the respective rural and urban liberal religious and cultural reactions to orthodoxy at a time of optimism. What appealed to so many was that rather than the hellfire and brimstone that was used to manipulate people by scaring them into conversion, we now had a religion that moved people through love and asked them to cultivate their own moral character.

Damnation may not seem like a burning issue today. People today are more likely fear divine neglect than punishment, but we need to remember the powerful impact that the imagery of hell has and still does have on people. I'm sure that some of you, like myself, were once scared to death by the possibility of damnation, and I imagine many of us, like the great showman P.T Barnum, made our first big step away from the orthodox Christian church because of this irrational doctrine. So when these Universalist (and yes even the Unitarian) forbearers of ours rejected the Calvinist idea of pre-destination (the concept that some at birth were destined for heaven, some for hell), alongside the notion that we are inherently depraved. It struck a nerve because most people didn't feel as depraved as evangelicals like Jonathan Edwards were telling us we were.

You have to remember that we had just in the last generation or two liberated ourselves from Mother England and established a growing democracy. You also have to remember that it was a time when humans are witnessing their own abilities as a species to make advances in the areas of science, industry and social welfare. That period of time was when Universalism and like it, Unitarianism, flourished with biblical scholarship and archeology coming out of Germany and even the US was opening up and reforming the way we think.

Universalists and Unita...(catching myself) alike both have a faith that focus on the good in people, on trusting humans generally as good people. It is a philosophical stance. It is not perfect. As you know, you don't even have to agree to be a member, but you should know that optimism and notion of humans progressing is built into our theology. In a time of technological and social advances, this theology fit. Universalists at their height in 1840 could claim 5 percent of the fledgling US population. Abraham Lincoln at one point had said that he would be surprised if everyone was not a Universalist by the end of the century, but by 1961 when the

Unitarians and Universalists merged, Universalism had dwindled from a mass movement of 800,000 strong in 1840 to only 50,000 members.

What happened? How had such a popular church diminished so greatly in just over a century? Why? In a way because our ideas spread better than our institutions did. By the last quarter of the 19th century, the scientific revolution, increasing levels of biblical criticism being digested into the common understanding, and essentially the secularism we see today simply made sense in a church that made hell fearful, less relevant.

Quite simply, what was once a refreshing optimistic take on God, the Christian good news and human nature had become commonplace. Throughout the 1800s, mainstream Protestant churches simply began leaving behind a belief in humanity's innate sinfulness and adopted a more liberal theology of God's love. As more and more Christians came to agree with a Universalist theology, quietly adopting our universal theology and optimistic worldview as the UU theological David Bumbaugh notes, we were being *both* vindicated and ignored. We Universalists lost our earlier monopoly on our central message. It caused, again David Bumbaugh's words, "an institutional identity crisis it would never recover from."

We Universalists first lost our identity for appearing to be right. And then for being wrong. Having now shared with so many of our mainstream Christian churches the idea that we were here to build the kingdom, we lost our unique identity. This would change for all of liberal Christianity. Then for having placed our bets that human nature was taking us on an ever upward arc. the vicious inhumanity of the First World War, the suffering caused by the Great Depression, followed by the Holocaust and World War II, eroded faith in Universalists' faith in human potential and our character.

But that is not all. There were challenges to Universalism that had nothing to do with theology. Social changes, over which they had little control, caused the nation's population to move from the country to the city. Small town and rural churches closed as older members died and younger members moved to cities in search of broader opportunities. Finding little to justify their continued existence as distinct entities, Universalist churches, shrunk, or merged with Unitarian churches or Congregational churches, depending on the theology of the community. Some simply went out of business.

That is not entirely true. There was a strain of Universalists that had a different more radical vision. Some saw the Universalist message as needing to broaden itself out beyond its own Christian heritage. One of those was Kenneth Patton who not only wrote our chalice words today, but more importantly, established an innovative church in Boston on Charles Street designed to do no less than create a religion appropriate for the whole world.

We are always stretching aren't we? What does it mean to be heretical in a world in which heresy has become the standard of faith? If that feeling of not knowing how we fit with other churches, or where we stand in relation to the Christian story has crossed your mind, you're not the first. It is, after all, the question we ask too. What really is our mission? For one, passing on a few truths, the first being that, as Clinton Lee Scott says, "a vast encompassing universalism has ever been the condition of the world" ...and religious truth. So Universalism is the way the

world is moving, but as UU leader Clarence Skinner correctly said, “The hope for peace on earth depends upon our outgrowing smaller attachments; our religion must take the form of a larger loyalty. It is universalism or perish.”

We see and sense its segments, but the wholeness is too large for our small minds. Like the pioneers, who, confronted with the immense wilderness, cleared a meager plot for a homestead, so we fence in only as much of life as fits our powers. This Universalist instinct we hold is apparent everywhere from the internet to our relationship with other the religions. The Universalist instinct is to always draw the circle wider. Is not gathering things within our understanding almost the definition of progress?

In the broadest sense Universalism is the crest of the ever-expanding religious wave that wants to take people in. Think about it. In the Noah story, God expands his covenant beyond Noah’s family to the whole human race after the flood. In Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan the hated foreigner is brought into the circle. And the Apostle Paul wrote: "In Christ there is neither black nor white, male nor female, neither Greek, nor gentile nor Jew, but all are one." In the third century of the Common Era (CE), Origin, an early revered church father, adopted a soteriology of Universal salvation. In the time following the reformation, Francis David put down religious divisions and the wars they brought and said simply, “We need not think alike to love alike.” All of these acts are acts of expansion.

During the second Iraq War, I was the minister of the Rutland Universalist Unitarian Church, and we put up a monument marking the passing each month of all the lives taken in the war. Right alongside the wall we marked for each known American soldier who died, we honored the invisible Iraqis lost by adding to a rather ominous and always growing pile of slate. When we behave like that, we step into that heritage of an ever-expanding circle. Thus, it should be no surprise that the most enduring symbol for Universalism is the circle with an off-centered cross in it. The circle represents an openness of the spirit, including and embracing all peoples and the position of the cross represents the importance of our Christian heritage. Yet being off-centered, it tells the world that Universalism is open to all religious traditions and truths.

We know better than any other groups that we don’t know it all. We know that we cannot see the borders of what we speak. Scott says, “Tribe and family, nation and neighborhood, political party and denomination, and every other unit is but a fragment of the whole. And part of our truth is that truth is a way, and not a thing. As Hosea Ballou said, "If we agree in brotherly love, there is no disagreement that can do us injury, but if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good." Does that sound like a 225-year-old idea to you?

In a world of increasing divisions, the Universalist impulse to include everyone in the human family is imperative. The Universalist impulse stands in prophetic judgment over divisions of class and speaks the religious word to those powers and principalities which would increase segregation, the gap between the haves and have-nots, and the divisions of race. Contemporary Universalism is the belief in the wholeness of the universe. Universalism today rests on the belief that all human beings and every living being is connected in a sacred and indivisible unity. Whether or not we trust God’s love, Universalism today rests on the belief that our salvation as a people and a planet can come about only when love is put into action. It is the belief in a free and

responsible search for truth and meaning. I believe that becoming truth is impossible to grasp. So, does winning essentially mean we lose? If Universalism loses market share when its chief ideas get incorporated, does it really lose? No! Does that mean that our movement is a failure? No!

Universalism died because it was like the crest of a wave that was eventually absorbed by it. So, even if it only really sparkled and foamed and led the way until others caught up, does that mean it's a failure? Seriously, it is pretty hard if not silly, to keep fighting for ideas that have become acceptable isn't it? And, small in numbers or not, I am still proud to be of it. We have always been the first conduit to bring secular truth to the religious world. And I believe we now must see our role as bringing spiritual truth to a secular world.

Small as we may be, may we never fail to be the crest of the wave of love that draws a circle and invites people in. May we also continually put ourselves out of business. Amen.

So, let's see if I have done my job. "How you get Universalist holy water?" You burn the hell out of it.

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