

Sermon: "This New Thing Called Universalism,"
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"Are you saved?" How many of you have either found your way to this religious community from another or have remained a UU partly due to this question arising somewhere in your lifetime? I know I can raise my hand!

One of my earliest memories of exposure to Christian Fundamentalism occurred when I was in the 5th grade in Odessa, TX. I was out on the playground and one of my P.E. coaches overheard me mention something about "my church," when she asked me what church I belonged to. I told her that I attended the little Unitarian Universalist Fellowship across the street from the high school. I remember her asking me a couple of more questions about my church with judgmental, furrowed brows & I did my best to answer them with my 10-year-old comprehension of this faith, when she leaned down and said, "It sounds like you worship the devil." With my smart-alecky tone and a limited understanding of the word "worship," I answered, "Actually, I don't worship anyone" & skipped off to knock on my mother's classroom window that faced the playground. That P.E. coach lived to regret her comments! (...just barely. No! Of course I'm just kidding.)

This is the age-old question of who is in & who is out. It reminds me of a song written by one of my favorite Austin folk-singers, Kacy Crowley, in which she sings, defiantly, "I sin, I sin, I sin! But I'm in, I'm in, I'm in!" Yes it is the question of who gets into heaven, to which our Universalist forbears have, through the centuries, answered a resounding (although, at times, dissonant in terms of the estimated time of arrival) "Everyone! Everyone is in! That is, ... if there *is* a heaven, of course!" Heck, even our Unitarian side hasn't always made nice with the idea of damnation, as the Rev. Thomas Starr King once said of the Universalists & the Unitarians, respectively, "The one thinks that God is too good to damn them forever, and the other thinks they are too good to be damned forever."

The idea is not, by any means a new one. In fact, one of Christianity's early Fathers of the Church, Origen of Alexandria, as early as the year 225, wrote in his famous work, *On First Principles*, that, as God's Love was a perfect expression of love, wrath could certainly not be a possibility as a final expression of that love toward anyone. Personally, I have always found it a rather perfect expression of human arrogance to believe that humans could *surpass* a supposedly divinely pure Love in our capacity toward love and forgiveness. If the people of Grudgeville can do it, certainly *God* can forgive.

Most parents get this. Parents of violent criminals have found ways of continuing to love their children. Even some children understand this concept. My friend, Karin's six-year-old daughter, Kyla, declared recently, "I love Spencer (her teddy bear) and Daddy, and Mop (her nickname for her mother)." Her mother asked, "And Pook, right?" (her sister Kiera) "Yes!" Kyla answered. They continued, "Do you love Debby?" "Yes!" "Do you love Andy?" "Yes!" "Do you love Joe?" "...Who's Joe?" "Just seeing if you were paying attention." "I do love him, but I don't know who he is." "Because you love everyone?" "Uh-huh," she said.

For over 300 years *after* Origen's writing, early Christians were free to believe in an all-loving, all-forgiving God without consequence until 553, when an Ecumenical Council decided that such belief was heresy and a threat to the Church. The controversy, however, did not end with Origen. Instead, I guess you could argue that they *originated* with Origen!

Ok, bad joke. But, in truth, Universalist thought can be traced in this country to pre-Revolutionary times. One of my favorite stories is of the Universalist evangelist, Rev. John Murray. He was an Englishman whose ship became stranded on a New Jersey sandbar in 1770 & was cajoled into preaching universal salvation by a local farmer. He is credited for beginning the Universalist movement here in the "New World," as he covered so much ground and spoke with such extemporaneous passion the Universalist doctrine he had learned from the Rev. James Rely of London.

This loving message was considered quite dangerous to some, as loving messages almost always seem to be, and Murray narrowly escaped several lynching attempts, sustained worship services disrupted by mobs, and once scarcely dodged a large rock that flew through a church window, aimed at his head. Hardly missing a beat, Murray bent down and picked up the rock and declared before the congregation, "This argument is solid and weighty, but it is neither rational, nor convincing!" During the Revolution, Murray served as a military chaplain and, due to his Universalist theology, found himself defending the legitimacy of his ministry even among the carnage of war. General Washington, himself, had to take it upon himself to write to the brigade and say, "The Rev. Mr. John Murray is appointed Chaplain to the Rhode Island Regiments, and is to be respected as such."

Murray's charisma and travel may have earned him the recognition as the founder of American Universalism, but he was preceded by George DeBenneville who was preaching Universalism in the Philadelphia area in 1741. Caleb Rich also founded a church in Massachusetts in 1773. The famed 19th century Universalist Hosea Ballou was his protégé. Ballou is responsible for the concept of "Ultra Universalism," the idea that there is no hell at all; that humankind would receive punishment for wrongdoing in the unhappiness it brings in this life. This was quite contrary to the many other Universalists, known as the Restorationists, who believed that those who sinned would undergo a period of punishment after death before all souls were eventually restored to God. These mainstream Universalists believed that without the fear of *some* consequence, people would have no incentive for ethical behavior. They condemned Ballou, saying, "nine-tenths of Brother Ballou's society are infidels... [who] retain nothing of Christianity but the name!"

Perhaps with all of the early hostility toward Universalism, including in-fighting *amongst* Universalists, it shouldn't come as such a surprise when, over 200 years later, there continues to exist such open hostility toward the idea of an all-loving God, as witnessed in the calls to repent on billboards across the country in the May 21st Judgment Day debacle and in the reaction to Evangelical Christian, Rob Bell's, new book, "Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived."

Rev. Rob Bell, a fairly young, charismatic minister of a mega-church in Michigan that brings in a crowd of 7,000 each Sunday, speaks of the moment in 2007 when he began to consider that God so loved "every person who ever lived" that he sent his only Son to redeem them all, Christian & otherwise. At a church art show promoting peace, a church member had left a note adjacent a piece featuring a quote by Ghandi. "Reality check," it read, "he's in hell." "Really?" he recalls thinking.

Gandhi's in hell? He is? We have confirmation of this? Somebody knows this? Without a doubt? And that somebody decided to take on the responsibility of letting the rest of us know? As did Murray & his contemporaries, Bell remains unapologetically Christian & convinced of the atonement of sins in Christ's death, but wonders how a loving God could damn all but a select few who have come to accept this reality in a particular way before death. "What if the

missionary gets a flat tire?" he asks. Even with so much in common theologically with those aforementioned fellas in New England and Pennsylvania, Bell is careful to never call himself or his theology "Universalist".

The reaction to his book, even prior to its release date, has been a firestorm of Evangelical Christian bloggers and ministers, alike. Time Magazine, whose cover read in big letters, "What If Hell Doesn't Exist?," reported that, "When word of *Love Wins* reached the Internet, one conservative Evangelical pastor, John Piper, tweeted, "Farewell Rob Bell," unilaterally attempting to evict Bell from the Evangelical community. R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, says Bell's book is "theologically disastrous. Any of us should be concerned when a matter of theological importance is played with in a subversive way." [And,] In North Carolina, Chad Holtz, a young pastor was fired by his church for endorsing the book."

Although Bell doesn't call himself a Universalist, his opponents have. In their tone, Universalism sounds like, ironically, the most condemnable heresy. The way some of these blogs read, you would think that the meaning of "Universalist" was "cannibalism"! Why does this concept still cause so much of an uproar? It has something to do with the power one may wield through condemnation. But, Universalism was once one of the nation's largest faith traditions, boasting 800,000 members on the books just before the Civil War and didn't begin to see significant decline until the twentieth century, when after the world wars Mainline Protestant churches had grown more lax about individual theologies of its members. Why would a Methodist or a Lutheran seek out another, more radical faith tradition if they could remain comfortably under the radar within their own?

Now Unitarian Universalism is one of the smallest U.S. denominations with its roots in Protestant Christianity and Time Magazine (and other mainstream media sources) can sell the story "What if Hell Doesn't Exist," calling this idea "an intriguing scholarly trend," with absolutely no mention of Unitarian Universalism (or simply Universalism, for that matter!), Origen, Murray, DeBenneville, Rich, Ballou, or others! Surely our desired end is not to convert souls, but to make this world a better, more loving place- but where have we gone wrong when our enormous contributions to this nation's religious landscape can go so completely unnoticed, save for the few that have remembered our name for the purpose of condemnation? Perhaps we liberal religious folk have grown too comfortable on the fringes and have lost the fire in our bellies that led Murray to pound the pulpit with his fist and brave angry mobs only to speak the truth that we, like God, should strive to love one another? Where is that chutzpah? What part have we played the decline of the power of our own message?

Not unlike a typical Unitarian Universalist (we are culturally formed after all, are we not!?), I don't have definitive answers to these questions, only more questions. But, I do believe that the recent controversy and media attention of Bell's book calls us, as UU's, to attention and begs us to ask these questions, start these conversations, and perhaps most importantly, take some kind of action (all for which I'm sure numerous committees and sub-committees will be formed...).

Perhaps part of that is the need to bring our message of loving acceptance more front and center & dust off its many cobwebs. Your minister, the Rev. Eliza Galaher, recently reflected, "...perhaps obvious, perhaps debatable: Unitarian is the adjective, Universalist is the noun." I like that.

Perhaps it is time to stop shying away from talking about what Universalism can mean for us in the 21st century. Does that conversation stop with hell, or do we try to figure out how we might have glimpses of “heaven” here on earth? Can love *truly* win if some of its greatest champions remain silent about the merits of such a loving theology? I’d like to leave you with the words of Universalist L.B. Fisher, who said almost one hundred years ago, “Universalists are often asked to tell where they stand. The only true answer to give to this question is that we do not stand at all, we move.” I pray that we live up to his conviction!