

Sermon for Worship Service on Universalism is Dead, Long Live Universalism?

Hearing our National news these days seems like we are in a perpetual election cycle with the beginning of 2011 marking the beginning of the 2012 Presidential Campaign. Our political leaders on all sides seem less concerned with governing the country and more concerned about winning the next election. And the emotional tone of political discourse seems to be ever increasing in harshness and bitterness. I feel sad about this since the emphasis on winning the election at all costs makes reasoned debate seem impossible with people emphasizing the divisions between them and demonizing each other. The political left demonizes those who disagree with them as uncaring and stupid. The political right demonizes those who disagree with them as unpatriotic and immoral. I don't believe any of these characterizations to be true.

I heard it said that expectations are just premeditated resentments therefore I treat life with high hopes and low expectations. My hopes for our political leaders are they will seek to bring more cooperation, more compassion, and more caring attitudes into the public debate. My expectations or perhaps I should say my fears are the political, social, and cultural divisions in our country deepen resulting in greater animosity between groups and the continued suffering of the most vulnerable in our society. Social divisions have existed throughout history and it can be easy to romanticize the past but there does seem to have been more attempts in the past during times of hardship for people to pull together and help each other. Yet this does not seem to be happening at present in our country.

Our country is struggling economically right now causing very real hardship and uncertainty for many. Our government at all levels is looking to cut programs many of which will have a massive negative impact on the most vulnerable in our society. The long term unemployed have been used as a political tool by politicians, legal and undocumented Latino immigrants have been targeted by discriminatory laws and open prejudice, and Muslims have experienced vandalism of many mosques and increasing threats of violence. As our country changes the dominant white culture in the U.S. has become more distrusting of those who seem different from us and there is less help for the least fortunate in our society.

In the reading we heard earlier, Robert Bellah was discussing the decline of community in the United States due to the emphasis on the individual. He says “**our capacity to**

Sermon for Worship Service on Universalism is Dead, Long Live Universalism?

imagine a social fabric that would hold individuals together is vanishing?”¹ He blames economic individualism in partnership with religious individualism as the culprit for destroying much of our sense of community. He said this at the 1998 Unitarian Universalist General Assembly and knew his audience. Our Unitarian tradition puts great emphasis on the individual religious experience and such thinking continues to strongly influence us. While I really value Bellah’s critique regarding religious individualism in our movement I think he is only dealing with half of our tradition, the Unitarians. Like many he seems to have forgotten about the Universalist side of the movement. You know that part of our name where people’s eyes start to glaze over when you tell them what religion you are – **“I’m a Unitarian Universa- oh nevermind.”** Most people stop even pretending to listen when I get to the Universalist part.

I believe Universalism is an important part of our tradition because, while the thinking is still liberal, the center is **not** grounded in religious individualism. This helps balance the emphasis on the individual in Unitarian thinking. Opinions regarding the importance of our Universalist beliefs vary widely. Some people dismiss it as irrelevant and answering a question no-one has been asking for a hundred years. This does not sound very promising. Others in our movement see Universalism as a vibrant path forward for our movement in dealing with the uncertainties of the 21st century. At the risk of appearing completely spineless on the matter, I agree with both perspectives. Let me try to explain.

Regarding why Universalism is answering a question that no-one has been asking for 100 years we actually have to go back over 200 years. At the end of the late 18th century the dominant Christian view was that due to sin all people were destined to hell in the afterlife and only because of the death of Jesus would a small elect few be saved and go to heaven. This is a difficult perspective for many of us to accept today but was the dominant Christian thinking at the time. Universalism disagreed with this and asserted that all people would be saved eventually and no-one would suffer endless punishment in hell. This idea is known as Universal Salvation and its main proponent was Hosea Ballou, who we heard about in the earlier words for all ages and was one of the most profound thinkers of the Universalist movement in the 19th century. Many of the historic leaders in our movement particularly on the Unitarian side were brilliant thinkers but a bit stuffy and elitist. Not Hosea Ballou, he was from a farming background, had little formal

Sermon for Worship Service on Universalism is Dead, Long Live Universalism?

education and is described as “rustic” in both dress and diction. I suspect “rustic” was not a compliment.

In his early days Ballou was a circuit riding preacher who had no church of his own but rode around preaching in small towns and debating other preachers. There is a story that shows the type of character Ballou was and his – I’ll call them – persuasive tactics. A farmer was upset and confided to Ballou that his son was a terror who got drunk in the village every night causing lots of trouble. The farmer feared his son would go to hell. **“All right,”** said Ballou seriously. **“We’ll find a place on the path where your son will be coming home, and we’ll build a big fire, and when he comes, we’ll grab him and throw him into the fire.”** Remember this is one of the most influential thinkers in our movement. The farmer was shocked stating: **“That’s my son and I love him!”** Ballou replied, **“If you, a human and imperfect father, love your son so much that you wouldn’t throw him in the fire, then how can you possibly believe that God, the perfect father, would do so!”**² I really think Ballou would be an interesting person to hang out with but just don’t get too close to the fire.

Ballou’s premise for Universal Salvation was that our human failings were finite therefore it is unjust for an all-powerful God to condemn us to **infinite** punishment. He actually holds God to a moral standard. Ballou’s God was about love not punishment. Salvation of all people was a radical idea because it opposed the idea of only a few people being saved from God’s punishment, all would be saved which has a profoundly egalitarian emphasis. This gave all humanity a common destiny as opposed to the separation of a small elect to heaven and a majority damned to misery in hell. We all have equal worth.

To religious liberals like ourselves the notions of heaven and hell seem like obscure remnants from the past with little significance for us today. Who cares about heaven and hell when we have the uncertainty and problems of this world to deal with? A reasonable question hence the earlier opinion that Universalism is answering a question that no one has been asking for 100 years. Certainly most religious liberals stopped thinking in terms of literal Heaven and Hell well over 100 years ago. Ballou’s view of an after death salvation is not the important part of Universalism for me but the consequences of his thinking do seem important and relevant. Ideas of heaven and hell were how 19th Century Universalists made meaning of their lives and deaths. Through this framework

Sermon for Worship Service on Universalism is Dead, Long Live Universalism?

the Universalists found a common human destiny therefore a religious belief in the equality for all people. This message had great appeal especially to the less wealthy and less powerful, who flocked to the Universalist movement. In 1840, Universalism was the fifth largest religious group in the country with about 700,000 members.³ For comparison, today Unitarian Universalism has just over 210,000 members and the U.S. population is 20 times larger than 1840.

The message of radical equality of all people has given the Universalist movement a strong religious motivation for social justice work. Universalists were at the forefront of movements to abolish slavery, promote equality of women, establishing public education, and working to change prisons from places of punishment to places for reforming criminals. This last example of reforming criminals emphasizes the Universalist religious beliefs in moving from divine punishment to forgiveness and potential for human redemption. Humanitarian concerns were foremost amongst Universalists such as Clara Barton who was the founder of the American Red Cross. Universalist members were primarily in rural communities and relatively poor financially. They rarely saw a conflict of interest between their religious principles of caring for others and their economic self-interest. This is in contrast to the Unitarians of the 19th Century, who were primarily wealthy and amongst the elite of society. Some Unitarians took a strong abolitionist stance against slavery but many Unitarians accepted slavery because much of their money was made as a result of it. For many Unitarians, their economic self-interests conflicted with their religious principles and guess which lost?

While the 19th century Universalist movement was still a bible-based Christianity, their uniqueness was the love for all humanity at the center of their beliefs. This was not an individualistic religion which put humanity at the center of religion, they put love of humanity at the center. An important difference. The idea of Universal Salvation may seem harmless to us today but was seen as extremely threatening by the mainline Christians. Universal Salvation was an old idea but had been declared a heresy by the Christian Church about 1500 years ago. The reason Universal Salvation was so threatening is Christians worried that people would have no motivation to behave morally without the threat of punishment and Hell – which is a reasonable argument given the context.

Sermon for Worship Service on Universalism is Dead, Long Live Universalism?

This argument was brought up frequently in debates between Universalists and others. A Baptist preacher once asked Hosea Ballou “**Brother Ballou, if I were a Universalist and feared not the fires of hell, I could hit you over the head, steal your horse and saddle, and ride away, and I’d still go to heaven.**” Hosea Ballou replied, “**If you were a Universalist, such an idea would never occur to you.**”⁴ Ballou and the Universalists believed that by embracing God’s love for us we would have a greater capacity for loving others and it was through the power of love that immoral behavior would be overcome. The Universalists noted that the threat of punishment and going to hell had not stopped people behaving badly throughout history. They have a very good point there.

While Ballou’s religious ideas had a profound impact on Universalism in the 19th century his personality also left an indelible mark on the character of our movement. While he often disagreed with others, he also tolerated a range of differing opinions. A great example of this occurred when Ballou was preaching at a church of another prominent Universalist leader. The wife of the church’s regular minister so strongly disagreed with Ballou’s sermon that she sent a message to the choir master expressing her displeasure. Ballou finished his sermon and was about to announce the hymn, when the choir master rose and announced to the congregation: “**I wish to give notice that the doctrine which has been preached here today is not the doctrine that is usually preached in this house.**” Ballou listened politely to the announcement and then said simply, “**The audience will please take notice of what our brother has said.**” He then proceeded to the hymn. So if any of you are unhappy with this sermon then please just let Susan your music director know and she’ll announce it when I’m finished. I do not guarantee such a dignified response as Ballou’s.

I feel this story is very telling about Ballou’s character. He was opinionated but was very tolerant of differing opinions which is still a major characteristic of our movement today. He exemplifies the phrase “**We do not need to think alike to love alike.**” Religion was about high ideals not his own ego. He engaged his own responsible and tolerant search for meaning, an approach our religious movement still values. Such tolerance of others seems sadly lacking in our country today as fear and anger seem dominant. Our political, social, and cultural divides today seem great and the tone of public debate in our society seems insulting and destructive with little tolerance of differing opinions. The dehumanizing of immigrants, lack of compassion for those in economic hardship, violent threats against

Sermon for Worship Service on Universalism is Dead, Long Live Universalism?

Muslims, desecration of places of worship, and physical attacks on those who think differently are all acts driven by fear and uncertainty. As people of faith what should our religious response be?

The Muslim scriptures the Quran says **“Since good and evil cannot be equal, repel evil with something better – and lo! between he and yourself was animosity may then become thought of as close to you and a true friend.”** [Quran 41:34] For Universalists that which repelled evil was the power of loving kindness towards all people. Ideas of universal love can seem naïve and pointless in difficult times but the Universalist idea of love was not an easy, passive, feel-good-about-ourselves idea. The Universalist idea of love was a passionate challenge to care for all others and engage in the society for the cause of greater equality and justice. Our Universalist ancestors actively worked for the changes they wished to see in society. This work was driven by a radical view of human equality and the faith in a loving presence in the universe which they called God.

The idea that a loving presence cares for us, all of us, helps many to get through times of uncertainty and provides strength to seek the change we want for our society. Sometimes that loving presence is family, other times a friend, often it is a religious community, and sometimes a presence that we just can't explain. Universalists placed that loving presence and love for all humanity at the center of their beliefs. That was an act of faith and hope. It is also a challenge to us. This calls us to actively reach out as allies and supporters to those most vulnerable, those targeted by discrimination and threats in our society – the unemployed, the poor, immigrants, Muslims and all those facing discrimination are especially in need of our support at this time.

But our Universalist values challenge us to reach out in love to all including those who disagree with us and even those who perpetrate hatred, discrimination, and bigotry. Can we rise up to that challenge by loving others, not just those who are easy to love, but those where it is difficult? Can we reach out in loving kindness to those who disagree with us on fairer treatment of immigrants, or respect for Muslims or marriage equality for gays and lesbians, or disagree with us politically, or who disagree with us on other issues we care about?

Sermon for Worship Service on Universalism is Dead, Long Live Universalism?

I say this is the great challenge issued to us from our Universalist tradition which calls us to show love towards all. Can we reach out in love to those who show us no love in return, who disagree with us, who ridicule us, and even threaten us? Jesus said **“Love your enemies.”** That is the Universalist notion of love which is so challenging and may be the salvation for our society. **“We need not think alike, to love alike.”** If we truly believe that and embrace its meaning then through our love and caring we may be able to bring our hopes and our expectations for our world closer to a reality, as we make our world a little better today than it was yesterday – and a little better tomorrow than it is today. This could be transformational for us, our religion, our country, and even our world. To finish I would like to offer a personal meditation in the spirit of the earlier Universalist meditation I offered.

Breathing in: There is a Love
Breathing out: Holding all

Hold all who disagree with me,
In this Love.

Hold all who promote bigotry,
In this Love.

Hold all who thwart justice
In this Love.

Hold all who discriminate,
In this Love.

Hold all who would ridicule me,
In this Love.

Hold all who would threaten me,
In this Love.

There is a love
Holding all.

Hold all people and places
in the embrace of love's presence, mystery, and transforming
power. Amen

¹ Bellah, Robert N. *Unitarian Universalism in Societal Perspective* Lecture given at the UUA General Assembly on June 27, 1998 http://www.robertbellah.com/lectures_7.htm (accessed February 18th, 2011)

² Reich, David and Stowell, Linda. *Of Sand Bars and Circuit Riders* <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/2745.shtml> (accessed February 18th, 2011)

³ Bumbaugh, David E. *Unitarian Universalism: a narrative history* (Chicago, IL: Meadville Lombard Press, 2000) p.161

⁴ Reich, David and Stowell, Linda. *Of Sand Bars and Circuit Riders* <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/2745.shtml> (accessed February 18th, 2011)