

Universalism: What Was/Is It?

Sermon by Rev. Hannah Petrie

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When someone asks you, what religion are you? Or what is your faith? Do you say, "I'm a Unitarian Universalist," or do you say, "I'm a Unitarian." Does it depend who you are answering to? If the person asking has probably never heard of Unitarians, what are the odds they know what a Universalist is? Why make it more complicated to explain? My more compelling question for you is, what are the odds the average UU could explain what Universalism is?

When I first entered Seminary, I actually could not answer this question myself. The most I could say was, "they merged." But as for the story of the Universalists, what they believed, and how they came to be co-opted by the Unitarians, I couldn't say. Could you? That is our goal this morning, to become better acquainted with the Universalist side of our faith. This is a history of theology sermon. Jim mentioned to me the other day, that in five years, the most new members joined Neighborhood church this year; there are 89 new members here, most of them new to UU. But even members who have been around a long time may not know their UU history, so this sermon is for all of you.

There are a few central aspects of UUism that descend directly from the Universalists, and I believe in giving credit where credit is due. In the history of religion in this country, liberal religions have often been lumped together, but this does no justice for the reality behind the story of the Unitarians and the Universalists. They had enough in common to merge finally in 1961, but the fact is they were quite different from each other in the beginning. So we're going to travel back in time today, and see what the Universalists were all about. As UU historian George Huntston Williams states, "American Universalism is a much more complex movement than American Unitarianism."

We are also going to spend some time pondering what Universalism means today in the context of UUism. The phrase, 'the more things change, the more they stay the same,' does not apply here. Universalism has changed a lot in its over-200 year history on North American soil, and as we shall see, there's a reason why the Universalists kept dodging the wooing calls of the Unitarians to join forces, so to speak. The first talk of merging actually began about a 100 years before it happened.

Of course there is a lot of ground to cover here, so I'm going to try to give you the nut-shell version of Universalist history, without mentioning too many dates or names, because I don't want this to be too lecturey. Rather, in order to really do justice to Universalism, I will be focusing more on the theological concepts that are unique to American Universalism. History is interesting, but my passion and desire today is to convey what Universalism meant in the hearts and minds of its followers.

Okay, so it's the dawn of our nation, 1790's, early 1800's. What the heck is Universalism? Like the early Unitarians, the early Universalists reacted to the judgmental and retributive God of the Calvinists, who believed in pre-destined election. That is, God decides whether a person will be saved - sent to Heaven as opposed to Hell - even before he or she is born. 'Damned if you do, damned if you don't,' does apply here. The Universalists were turned off by this. Like the Unitarians, they were some of the earliest heretics in our country's history. However, they didn't think of themselves as heretics. Rather, they felt they were offering an improved version of Calvinism. Like the Unitarians, they inserted reason, or rationale, into the old theology to make it more palatable and practical.

So the Universalists' "heresy" was this: they chose to believe in a God who was loving and benevolent, a God who ultimately wanted humanity to be united, fulfilled, and happy, both before and after death. In other words, we are all saved, even the most disreputable of characters. Since every being is held in one universal love by God, then all beings return to this love after the journey of life. We are all reunited to the One. Or, God brings us all home, and that means everybody, even Hitler, even the boogey man. Nobody is left out. So the universal in Universalism originally referred to the central belief in universal salvation, or universal love and forgiveness by God. Nobody is excluded from the Christian belief in Heaven, and Hell does not exist in the afterlife.

So it is key to understand that the Universalists in their earlier stages were Trinitarian Christians. In fact, they felt like they were the only real Christians because they believed that the message of Jesus, as well, is Universalist. That was the good news: we are all saved! So what I have just told you is the nutshell version of early Universalist theology. The first major Universalist preachers actually had several different ways of describing or explaining the concept of Universalist salvation and indeed there was much debate among early Universalist ministers and itinerant preachers. From what I understand, it was actually considered fine Saturday night entertainment for preachers to engage in preach-offs, where they actually debate their theological arguments in turn and the people decided who was the most convincing. Back before radio and television, this was the best show in town.

Just to give you one example, John Murray, who is popularly termed "The Father of American Universalism" explained the total salvation this way. He said that Jesus was the 2nd Adam and that when he died in atonement for humanity's sins, that meant that salvation was a done deal. So the task was to inform folks of this good news so they could relax, enjoy the gift of life, and not worry if they were going to end up in hell or not. The act of atonement was for all of God's creation.

Now it is also key to understand how this theological belief in particular differed, and still does, from the vast majority of Christian belief, whether Catholic or Protestant. The conventional idea behind the Christ, the savior, the crucifixion, atonement, etc., is that God needed to be reconciled. God was really mad. So Jesus, bless his heart, came along and died for us all, representing the ultimate sacrifice to appease an angry God. That's the conventional theology that still thrives today - unfortunately.

But the pivotal difference in Universalist belief is that it's the other way around. It is not God who needs to be reconciled, but rather humanity that needs to be reconciled. This reconciliation takes place when we practice the universal love of God that we are all held in. But Jesus still served a purpose. Jesus came to teach us about this love - this incredible, holy, dynamic love - that is possible in the sisterhood and brotherhood of humanity. We are reconciled when we see that God comes through for humanity - and presumably all life on Earth - when we treat each other with dignity, love, and respect. So - very important - universal salvation can also be thought of as worldly.

This radical theological concept of not God needing reconciliation but rather humanity was originally professed by a man named Hosea Ballou in a written work entitled, *A Treatise On Atonement*. Ballou published this in 1805, and he is equally important as the so-called father of Universalism because it was this remarkable document that stood as the major statement of Universalist theology for at least a century. It has gone through 16 editions, the most recent in 1986. In it he writes, "that the atonement by Christ was the effect and not the cause of God's love to man . . . The [contrary] belief that the great Jehovah was offended by his creatures to that degree, that nothing but the death of Christ, or the endless misery of mankind, could appease his anger, is an idea that has done more injury to the Christian religion than the writings of all its opposers, for many centuries. The error has been fatal to the life and spirit of the religion of Christ in our world . . ." In other words, Jesus came to the world to demonstrate the power of the law of love through which men and women can turn away from sin and be reconciled to God.

For this line of thinking, Universalists were labeled heretical, radical, and eventually, liberal, kind of like the Unitarians. However, I want to make it very clear how the Universalist theology was totally different from the Unitarians. You may be familiar with the saying that Universalists believed that God was too good to damn them while the Unitarians believed they were too good to be damned. I think this comes fairly close to accurate. Whereas the Unitarians threw out the trinity and embraced the ability of a person's free moral agency to do right, the Universalists maintained the trinity and believed that it was only through relationship with God that living a good life was possible. There's a lot more that could be said about the differences of early Unitarian and Universalist theologies, but it's enough to understand that there existed very little mutual admiration between the two. Some of the earliest ministers of these respective denominations actually despised each other with a passion. When Hosea Ballou moved to Boston to take up his parish in the early 19th century, big whig Unitarian pastor William Ellery Channing refused to acknowledge his existence and was a complete snob towards him.

Now one might assume that the Universalists were quite a minority, kind of like the UUs are today. But you might be surprised. In the young decades of our nation, people were hungry for a religious identity

that offered a positive and liberating outlook over the rigid and gloomy doctrines of the Calvinists or the churches of the Standing Order. It does not stretch the truth to say that Universalists represented one of the earliest voices for freedom of religious expression. In the spirit of a nation redefining its character from the Old World, Universalism was quite appealing indeed and enjoyed a fairly long golden period. The centennial celebration held in 1870 in Gloucester, Massachusetts was the largest organized religious assembly to date in the history of the country, with 12,000 people in attendance at its peak.

A few other fun facts to be proud of is that George Washington picked John Murray to be the official chaplain of the Revolutionary War, despite strong opposition from mainline Protestants. And early in the 20th century, the youth contingency of the movement was so active in their social service work that their organization was invited to visit the White House. That's exciting stuff, but the point to be made is that Universalists were incredibly patriotic. They really felt that they offered the quintessential religion of democracy and New World ideals of freedom and equality. It was a religion in which everyone was invited to participate.

So what happened? Why did they start losing their numbers in the 20th century? The popular explanation is that the belief in universal salvation became not so unusual in other protestant churches. When the ministers cooled it with the hell and brimstone threats, there was less reason to find a more affirming alternative. Another explanation that compliments this one is World War II. After the evil of Hitler, people were less willing to believe that everyone including Hitler is going to be saved. You've probably heard that many if not most Universalist churches were in rural areas. The folks who wanted a stronger brand of dogma in these rural areas likely converted to something like the Baptists. In other words, as Universalism grew more and more liberal as it aged, the folks who thought of themselves as more conservative Christians headed in that direction.

There were a few important people in the 20th century who, after WWII, tried to pump new life into the denomination, and changed the face of Universalism significantly. People like Robert Cummins and Ken Patton offered a radical switch from the more conservative and traditionally Christian bent of Universalism. The new focus was on what you may be more familiar with in our denomination today, the focus on universal world religion, or a religion for one world, drawing on all sources of religious faith, knowledge, and practice. A minister in Detroit named Tracy Pullman summarized this new liberal direction in a 1946 sermon by calling for a religion that is "greater than Christianity because it is an evolutionary religion, because it is universal rather than partial, because it is one with the spirit of science and is primarily interested in bringing out that which is God-like in man."

That should be starting to sound familiar. These are the same kind of beliefs that I think can easily be found in UUism today, our respect for and value of all world religions. Now what's interesting, is that these are really modern expressions of Universal salvation. Because it is very similar in meaning to the idea that nobody is left out. Let me repeat that. The idea that nobody is left out. To me, that could explain UUism in a nutshell, that we strive to not judge anyone to the point that they are not welcome in our circle of worship. Rather, we go to lengths to make the point that all are welcome, that difference is embraced and that we are all universally loved. We have the Universalists to thank for this cardinal characteristic of Unitarian Universalism.

Because let's face it; the Unitarians were a lot more, shall we say, snooty. I don't like to emphasize the fairly well known fact that Universalists were, on the whole, less educated, less well to do, and were mostly farmers. When this distinction is made I think it runs the danger of belittling the integrity of Universalism in a denomination that values education so highly. A case in point was a High School Senior bridging ceremony that took place in a UU church just a few weeks ago. Part of the ceremony was that each youth stated which college or university they were about to attend, and what they planned to study – as if there could be no such thing as a UU that doesn't go to college. The truth is, we UUs today can be very judgmental, even when we are trying hard not to be. But the non-judgmentalism, which is still one of our most distinguishing features as a denomination, came more from the Universalists than the Unitarians, who viewed the Universalists quite critically indeed.

Their main point of criticism was that compared to them, the Universalists were not well organized on national and local levels. Of course this is true, because by the time of the merger in 1961, the

Universalists were basically falling apart and were kind of broke. If this was the case, why didn't they agree to merge sooner? What made them try to hold on? It was the fear that what made them distinct would be swallowed up by, at that point, the burgeoning-in-comparison Unitarian denomination. It was the fear that the merger would represent more of a take-over than a collaborative effort. Well, I'm afraid these fears were realized to a large extent. Many of you may have heard this Universalist history today only for the first time. There is a ton of scholarly historical research that has yet to be done for lack of interest. The Universalists did get swallowed up by the Unitarians. But we keep the spirit of Universalism alive by understanding how it has influenced our own theology and our own religious beliefs.

So I want to conclude today by telling you what I believe. And that is, I believe this. I believe in Universal salvation. Now I know that in UUism today, there is a great spirit of humanism, and perhaps not a lot of interest in what happens after we die. What do you believe? Isn't that great about UUism, that we can each live in peace with our beliefs about what happens after we die?

But I don't believe in universal salvation so much for what I think happens once my body ceases to live. I believe in it for what it symbolizes in this life. To me, universal salvation is a great metaphor for what is truly precious in life, and it represents my deepest, most prized belief: that not only are we never ultimately separated from God, but never are we ultimately separated from each other. Humanity's reconciliation to God can only happen through our reconciliation to each other, in this life, on this Earth. All enemies shall reconcile, all lost love shall reunite.

Make it so.