

Meet the Unitarians!

A sermon preached for All Souls UU Church, November 7, 2021

You could arrange a course in church history and theology just by the studying the names of the many denominations of Christianity. Some are named after their founders. Lutheranism, named after Martin Luther, is the best known, but there are others.

Some denominations are named after their mode of governance...the Presbyterians are governed by the Presbytery, and the Episcopalians have Episcopate...that is, bishops, who are in charge.

Many denominations are named after specific practices: the Baptists, for instance, who only baptize adults, or Quakers and Shakers who, early on, encouraged spiritual practices that resulted in ecstatic body movements.

Some denominations are named for their aspirations: the Catholics, who aspire to universality, the original meaning of that word, the Evangelicals, who aspire to bring all people to Christ, which is the meaning of their name, the Orthodox, who aspire to be absolutely correct in doctrine... The orthodox ...the word means correct belief....take doctrine very seriously.

Unitarians and Universalists got off the doctrine train a long time ago. We don't have doctrines...things that everybody has to believe to belong here. We're anti-doctrine. So it is one of the great ironies of religious history that the two faiths which merged in the 1960's to make Unitarian Universalism both have the names of important Christian... doctrines.

Unitarianism is the doctrine that God is One. Of course, Trinitarianism, the idea that God is Three, is the Orthodox doctrine of Christendom.

Universalism is the doctrine that everybody goes to heaven...Universal salvation.

Both of those doctrines were heavily discussed in the early centuries of Christianity, and both were eventually declared false doctrines, and the people who chose to believe them in spite of the teachings of the church were called "choosers", in Greek, which become English, "Heretics." We UU's are heretics and proud of it!

Unitarian Universalism's story goes back to the beginning of Christianity, and it can be told mostly in reference to two doctrines, unitarianism and Universalism, and two philosophies, Transcendentalism, and Humanism. We're going to take each of those in turn over the next few months and dig deeply into who we are...and hopefully you'll have good reminder of our history and some more tools to think about what you believe and how that fits into your life.

This morning we are going to tell our story with reference to the doctrine of Unitarianism, a persistent heresy which gained a foothold in several places in Europe after the reformation. And we will tell it in reference to the doctrine of human nature, which was the rub here in America, when the New England Puritans split into liberal and conservative camps over several things but most importantly, the nature of humans....were they depraved to the core or good enough...not perfect, of course, but generally OK? Here in America, our forebears were very much in the “good enough” camp and got stuck with the name Unitarianism by a hostile press during a knock-down drag-out fight...which we pretty much won, in the early 19th century. Are you ready? Then, back to Europe.

We start, way back, with an argument so heated it became violent, between no other than Santa Claus...I mean, St. Nicholas, who was a real Bishop in the 4th century, and his nemesis, speaking for the Unitarian side, our man, Bishop Arius. They were both delegates to the Council of Nicaea, held in the year 325...a time about as far from the life of Jesus of Nazareth as we are from our Puritan forebears. Bishop Arius believed that God was, well...God!—supreme, separated, set apart from all of creation. He disagreed heartily with the notion that Jesus had been or was God, for a reason that seemed obvious to him: Jesus had been a person, walking the earth, eating, drinking, and doing all sorts of other things completely unbecoming divinity. Arius was, in short, a Unitarian, and argued against the developing doctrine of the Trinity...that God consists of three persons, Father, Son, and Spirit. Arius argued well and he had many followers, You will remember that it was such an evenly divided debate that finally an impatient Roman Emperor Constantine, had to decree the outcome. In 325 of the Common Era, Arius’s views, which he thought of as unitarian, that is, about one god, were finally denounced by the church as heresies...as incorrect doctrines, and trinitarianism became orthodoxy. During this very heated debate, Bishop Nicholas, in many ways a generous and charitable man well suited to become Santa, but a vehement Trinitarian, punched our Bishop Arius in the nose. (don’t tell the children!).

The new Catholic Church outlawed all dissent, but in the early centuries of this era, when travel was difficult and people isolated, many heresies flourished, among them groups reading and thinking about the writings of Arius and other unitarians. However, there were no established Unitarian churches, for that was against the law. It was only after the Reformation, when Protestants and Catholics had to figure out how to get along together, that religious toleration became a concept in the western mind. To achieve that, however, there had to be two things: a sacrifice, and a King. Michael Servetus was that sacrifice.

Servetus was a Spanish Catholic who lived in the days when Jews and Moslems were being driven from Spain because they did not accept the trinitarian formula of the church creeds. Servetus was a bright and very young man who, at 19, read the Bible and realized that Trinitarian ideas about God were pretty sparse and certainly nothing Jesus and claimed about himself. Servetus thought he had discovered something wonderful. He thought that if he could just get the authorities to realize this, that he could save the Jews and Moslems from deportment, torture, and forced conversion. He was more than a little naive, but we can admire his spirit. He wrote a book entitled *On the Errors of the Trinity*. The Inquisition didn’t like it so he had to go into hiding. He sent his book to Luther and Calvin, thinking they would be

more receptive than the Inquisition had been. But Luther and Calvin were trying very hard to establish themselves as the "true" orthodox Christian church, and they would have nothing to do with it. Servetus lived most of his life in France, under an assumed name, there making several important contributions to medicine and map-making. He couldn't forget his fascination with the dangerous field of theology, however, and never lost hope that his message would be heard. He wrote to Calvin, several times, and finally went to Geneva, where he was recognized, arrested, tried and convicted of heresy, and burned at the stake. The Catholics were so annoyed to have been bested in heretic hunting that they burned Servetus in effigy.

Much to Calvin's surprise, there was a public outcry against the burning of Servetus. Public sentiment was maturing. Although people still believed that their brand of faith was RIGHT and others were WRONG, they were increasingly unwilling to kill over the matter. Freedom of conscience made a perceptible gain through the martyrdom of Servetus. His ideas popped up again as well...causing groups of thoughtful people to return to their Bibles and find a simpler, more human faith, but his major contribution to the history of Unitarianism is the revulsion which attended his death. Our passionate valuing of freedom of conscience and the right of individuals to believe what seems right to them is in part the gift of Michael Servetus, the heretic.

In the meantime, the Unitarian Heresy sprang up with a vengeance in Hungary, and when it was repressed, many Unitarians moved to what is now Rumania but was then Transylvania, and there they found the favor of a young king, John Sigismund, our only claim to royalty. King John not only championed the Unitarians, he declared religious toleration in his kingdom...the first European monarch to do so, in 1568. There is still a thriving minority of Hungarian Unitarians in Rumania.

Here in the US, we Unitarian Universalists are the direct religious descendants of the liberal wing of the New England Puritans. Their churches are our churches; in Plymouth, Massachusetts, indeed, all through New England, in the old town centers, the tallest steeple and the oldest church is likely to be Unitarian Universalist. In New England, the Unitarians ruled the roost for most of a century, from the late 1700's through the end of the Civil War, and they still preside over many town greens.

How did we get from the straight-laced Puritans to present day Unitarian Universalism? The answer lies in the flow of time, of course, but also in the very structure and practice of the Puritan faith. For although in some ways modern Unitarian Universalism has moved far from its roots, in other ways we are faithful children of the founders.

You no doubt learned in school that Puritanism was embraced by those who wished to purify the practices of The Church of England. This movement was largely fueled by lay people who read the Bible for themselves (notice a trend here?) and judged the practices of the English Church in its light. They found these practices wanting, as there is little in the Bible that resembles the pomp of any sort of High Church or the complexity of doctrine or dogma which

the Christian church had developed over the years. Already, however, even before a Protestant foot was set in the New World, you can see several of the characteristics of today's Unitarianism; individuals taking for themselves the right to discern religious truth, a high value placed on simplicity.

Although other religious groups came to the New World, notably Anglicans, Catholics, and Jews as well as Baptists, Quakers and other sects, it has been estimated that at the time of the American revolution, 75% of Americans were directly affected by or involved in the Puritan faith.

Through most of the years that the Puritans were sovereign in New England, there were two groups, The Old Puritans and the group that thought of itself as Liberal Christians. The old Puritans were trinitarians, whereas the Liberals had leaned into the more rationalistic explanations of God which thought of God as one being...they were unitarian. And while the Old Puritans understood God first and foremost as a Judge, who loved righteousness and condemned sinners, the Liberal Christians saw God as a loving parent who had a benevolent concern for all Humanity. But here was what, in the end, they tangled on the most...the theology of human nature.

The Old Puritans believed that human nature was in itself depraved, corrupted by Adam's sin, where the liberals saw humans as having the capacity for righteousness and love as well as sin, and that we could learn and grow, repent and reform, by virtue of the goodness inside of us. In other words, we were far from perfect (anybody could see that by looking around) but...good enough.

The two groups coexisted, with people of both faiths worshiping side by side in the same parish churches, for longer than one might expect possible, but that harmony was finally strained to the breaking point. By 1805 battle lines had been drawn, and the congregation of each of the parish churches that the old Puritans had built, had to, peacefully or in desperate struggle, decide for itself which religious faction would reign. Many of the battles over who had the right to vote and who got the property when a split was inevitable had to be fought out in court. Most of the judges were of the liberal party, and so it was charged that the liberals did too well in the settlements. In the fray which engulfed the whole society of Boston and its environs, the media began to call the Liberals "Unitarians", and we've been stuck with that name ever since.

But in all other ways, the liberals were victorious. In 1825, the American Unitarian Association was set up, and included as its core, nearly 3/4 of the parish churches in the towns of New England along with a sprinkling of congregations as far south as Maryland. The remaining Puritan churches began to call themselves Congregational churches, and that denomination, now called The United Church of Christ, also exists to this day. We're now the best of friends. (We are good at forgiving our enemies....)

So here we are, a non-doctrinal faith, named by a heretical doctrine that doesn't even describe us. Sigh.

In spite of our name, the number of Gods, if any, is not even our deepest heresy. Our deepest heresy is that we believe in heresy...which as you will remember, means, "choosing." And that heresy is based on a deeper belief, which we mostly share, a belief about people. We believe that individual people with their own hearts and minds, are good enough, usually, more or less as they are, to live well, develop in a healthy way, make good choices, be spiritual, loving, just and wise. That's good enough in spite of our failings and mistakes...we all have some of each...but good enough to improve, to repent, to reform. Good enough, especially if well nurtured and well educated, which is one reason so many of the social institutions we rely on today, from public schools to social work to public libraries to the humane society, were founded by Unitarians in the early 19th century. They believed, as liberals tend to believe today, that most social ills can be cured by education and opportunity. It was this impulse and thinking that eventually evolved into Humanism, but that is a story for another morning.

Instead of doctrines that everyone must say they adhere to, Unitarian Universalists cohere around several sets of values, which come to us from several places. It's a little like a four legged stool....each leg is important, but what you mostly notice is the seat which sits atop the legs. Two legs are the philosophies of Humanism and Transcendentalism..we'll get to them next Winter. Two are Unitarianism, and universalism, which we'll talk about in a couple of weeks. From the Unitarian side, we get idea that humans are good enough, smart enough, perceptive enough, and strong enough to be trusted to understand the world, interpret the still small voice, to grow in love and spirit, and to articulate what they believe, on their own. As to the Oneness of God? That's optional.