

**Universalist Spirit**  
***A Sermon Preached to the***  
***All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church, via zoom***  
***by Christine Robinson on November 21, 2021***

This sermon is the second in a set of four sermons about the foundational thought systems of our faith; two heresies and two philosophies. The two heresies are Unitarianism and Universalism, the two philosophies, which we will get to early next year, are Transcendentalism and Humanism. In the first of the series, we heard about Unitarianism's heretical faith in the fundamental worth, dignity basic potential for goodness of every human being...a heresy because it contradicts the doctrine of Original Sin. The Unitarians believed that people...you....are good enough, with some education, some nurture, and a little help from your friends, to make good decisions, to live your life well and...especially, to decide what you believe.

This sermon will be about the Universalists and their spirited defense of the heresy of Universal Salvation; the belief that God's love is so great that all persons will be saved. That contradicts official Christian teachings about heaven and hell.

In 1962, when the Unitarians and Universalists merged to form a denomination with the jaw-breaking name of the Unitarian-Universalist Association, the Universalists were -- as denominations go -- a small and new religious faith. However, the theological position of universalism (with a small "u"), is very old. Universalists claim that the Bible is a universalist document that it assumes the eventual salvation of all humanity. Universalists have their share of passages to prove their contention, but because the Bible is a very complex library of books, the orthodox have their passages about hell and damnation to quote as well. In one gospel Jesus says "No one comes to the Father but by me." Jesus told stories about sinners going to Hell...you'll be interested to know that almost all of those sinners were rich people who had neglected poor. But that's s sermon for another day! Anyway, there just seems to be something in the human heart which wants to divide humanity into the good ones and the bad ones, my kind and others, and to think that God will naturally do the same. And so when official Christian doctrine was settled, there was heaven and hell. The Protestants kept the scheme and even extended it; Most people were going to Hell and there wasn't much anyone could do about it.

The early Christians sided with the Universalists, by and large. Universal salvation was taught by four of the six theological schools set up by the early Christian church. Clement of Alexandria asked, "How is he Lord and Savior if not Lord and Savior over all?" But as doctrines were settled on, the early Universalists lost out to proponents of heaven and hell and the splitting of humanity into the saved and the damned. And for centuries, of course, it was dangerous to be a heretic, so there was never a Universalist Church in Europe, and not many Universalist writings. Although Unitarianism has is Martyr in Michael Servetus, and its royal champion in King John Sigismund of

Transylvania, Universalism did not prosper within Christianity until Europeans began to colonize what would become America.

Those who believed in universal salvation did so because their metaphor, their way of explaining and understanding God, was God as a God of Love or God as a loving parent. They hung on to this way of thinking about God mostly because they had had an experience which they thought of as an experience of God's love...a mystical experience. One 18<sup>th</sup> century English heretic, George DeBenneville, had become so sick he had been left for dead...he had actually been put in a coffin, but he was really in a coma, and when he awakened from his coma he told of having had such a powerful experience of the loving reception of sinners by God that he began to preach Universalism. He was very nearly beheaded for his trouble in England, and came to the here where he could believe what his heart told him was true.

DeBenneville joined others, mostly Baptists and Dunkers, who thought of God as a loving parent. Just as loving human parents usually find it within their powers to forgive their children, surely God, who must be an even better parent than we, must always forgive as well. What loving parent would cast his or her children into everlasting torment? asked these Universalists.

Before we go into more history, we're going to have a little fun with this basic conundrum about God...a god concerned giving everyone their due or a good, more like a parent, who loves us no matter what? We're going to listen to a rollicking song by UU Troubadour, Peter Mayer, Played by Tom O'Connor, called "When I Died" It is the tale of a believer in Heaven and Hell, and what he discovered when he died.

(Music)

In the early years of the 19th century, many Universalist churches were formed, and they joined into a loose confederation, the Universalist Church of America. They considered themselves Christians, much to the scandal of their neighbors, who could not imagine a Christianity or even a moral life without belief in hell. The Universalists took the same organizational principles as had obtained in the Puritan and Baptist churches which they largely came from, that is, a radical congregational autonomy and membership which did not rely on subscription to specific doctrine. In this, but in little else, they resembled the Unitarians, the denomination formed in 1825 by the splitting of the New England Puritan churches into the liberals and the orthodox.

The fear and bigotry that the Universalists had to contend with in their neighbors is a little hard to understand today. The Universalist's belief that there was no everlasting punishment seemed to their neighbors not only heretical, but as necessarily leading to immorality. This was the rationale for a Common Law requirement that anyone testifying before a court had to swear that they believed in a supreme being and a system of rewards and punishments in a future life. Many Universalists could not do this, and therefore were barred from serving on juries or in any other court function. In

state after state, this theological requirement had to be challenged in the courts; a job that was not finished, if you can believe it, until the mid 1960's.

The Universalists also had to fight to be recognized as a church...important because, in those days in New England, everyone paid a church tax, and that money was divvied up by the Recognized Churches. In most towns in New England, the Unitarian church was the largest of the recognized churches, and the Unitarians, I'm sorry to say, had not yet reached enlightened conclusions about the separation of church and state, or even of playing fair with their neighbors. They put many roadblocks in the way of recognizing new denominations in order to keep their share of the tax-pie. It is to the continued pressure placed by the Universalists and other small denominations on this system of church-taxes that we owe the religious freedoms Americans take for granted today.

While both Unitarians and Universalists were fairly liberal denominations based in individual freedom to believe as conscience dictates, they appealed to different segments of the population. The Unitarians tended to be the elite persons of New England; they were often professionals, wealthy, and privileged. The Universalists appealed to the working class. They developed congregations in mill towns, farming communities, and on the frontier. The two groups sparred across the gulf that divided them for nearly two centuries. Perhaps you have heard the very old joke of a Universalist minister who served a Unitarian church in California during the Civil War, Thomas Starr King. He opined that the Universalists believed that God was too good to damn people to eternal hell, while the Unitarians believed that they were too good to BE damned.

Really, maybe our second miracle is that we overcame all that bad history and ended up together.

The Unitarians and the Universalists came at their faith from two different directions. The Universalists began with spiritual experiences; the strangely warmed heart, the life-changing and unforgettable experiences some people have of God's love, even near-death experiences which left them believing that only goodness awaited them in the next world, and they read their bibles with their "God is Love" glasses on. There is a deep mystical, spiritual streak in Universalism.

The Unitarians, you will remember, had split from their Puritan churches exactly because they wanted a church that would accept their more rationally-based faith and their belief that they were, in modern parlance, "born ok the first time." They were, in other words, almost anti-mystics....rationalists.

That's a pretty broad brush. Ralph Waldo Emerson, an early Unitarian, was about as mystical as they come. Clara Barton, of civil war nursing fame, was a Universalist apparently without a mystical bone in her body. But Mysticism, that intuitive knowing which gives the heart "reasons of which reason knows nothing," as Pascal said,

mysticism is “in the bricks” of Universalism, whereas Unitarian bricks are made mostly of reason, science, and logic.

Universalism was, for a time, by far the more popular faith, with churches dotting the frontier, the South, and the mid-West. By the end of the Civil War, they boasted eight hundred thousand members and were the sixth largest denomination in the country. This phenomenal growth was due to many things:

- the appeal of their message to the many who had heard nothing about God but the terrors he inflicted on almost everyone after their death,
- the Universalists’ ability to come to quickly terms with Darwinism and modern Biblical scholarship,
- and the stands the denomination and individuals within it took during the social reforms of the nineteenth century.

During this heyday of Universalism, The Universalists were the first denomination to ordain women to the ministry...a milestone particularly dear to my heart...and it should be to yours as well, as one of those early Universalist women ministers found herself in Colorado Springs in the 1870s and formed the liberal congregation which was the precursor to...All Souls Unitarian Church, a liberal light in its community ever since!

But after the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Universalism popularity began to dwindle. The mainline denominations began to quit preaching hellfire and damnation; in part the Universalists attributed their decline to the fact that they had “won” their theological war with orthodoxy. (Unfortunately, they were wrong about that and hellfire preaching surged again in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century)

The Unitarians were never so large, and both denominations were feeling the pinch of their small size in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, when bigger was always assumed to be better. The Unitarians and Universalists joined during the rash of denominational mergers which created, among others, the United Methodists, the United Church of Christ, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The Unitarians and the Universalists, so different in so many ways, were the only two denominations which didn’t rely on doctrine or creed to determine membership, and could cope with each other’s theological freedom.

It did not, at first, seem a match made in heaven. At the time of merger, the majority of Unitarians were Humanists while most Universalists were, except for their one heresy, liberal Christians. The Unitarians were at that time experimenting with an extremely...perhaps even excessively rational style of faith, while the Universalists practiced a much more spiritual, feeling-oriented style. They loved the old words of the Bible, the old hymns of the church, and the comfort of prayer. The Unitarians were serving the emerging knowledge class in growing cities while the Universalists were mostly rural people. The Unitarians reacted to the merger by saying, “Welcome!

Come on in and be just like us! “ and swallowed the smaller Universalists without missing a beat. For a while the denomination was divided between the clueless Unitarians and the resentful, nearly invisible Universalists.

But a deeper force of health and wholeness was working away. We understand, 60-ish years after the merger, that religion must be a matter of both head and heart, reason and spirit, logic and enthusiasm, new insights and old truths. We understand, now, that people come to their beliefs in part through reason and logic and in part through the power of their own experiences, some of which lead them into the places of the heart where reason cannot go. Now we want our faith to reach into the lives of people who live in small towns, and those who may work with their hands but want to do their religion with their minds. Now, we are Unitarian Universalists, a people of faith, proud of our open minds and our loving hearts, more willing to be a people of spirit as well as a people of mind, as we do good work with our helping hands.

We are a non-doctrinal faith named by two doctrines, and we can smile at that irony because we have redefined both doctrines to suit our heretical, wholistic faith. We let the “unitarian” remind us that we are come from one source and are united in fundamental ways. We let the “universal” remind us that we are all in this together, and that that “together” is larger than anything we can ever completely understand.

In this world of the 10,000 things, it is easy to forget these fundamental truths and to live as if we are separate, different, and divided, but this is an illusion of worldliness, not the ultimate Truth of our lives.

The Truth is that we are one beyond all the things that seem to divide us; that we come from a unity and we universally return to that unity.

- We are One with people everywhere, including the homeless around us and the transgender folks in our midst, and the refugees at our borders.
- We are one with the life of this planet, and its fate is our fate. One with the universal energies which have brought life into being and seem to sustain it, One right down to the very hydrogen atoms, which make up our bodies, our world, and the stars too numerous to count.
- We come from one unity, we return to one universal. We are Unitarian Universalists, a people of reason and a people of spirit....a people of faith.