

**UTILITARIAN UNIVERSALISM**  
**A Sermon on the One True Church**

Sermon by Rev. Jack Donovan, February 19, 2017  
Unitarian Universalist Church of St Petersburg

**READINGS**

<b>Gathering</b>	<i>Deut 15, Luke 12, Preamble US Constitution, Gettysburg Address</i>
<b>Invocation</b>	<i>Affirmations of the UU Association of Congregations</i>
<b>Meditation</b>	<i>Unto the Church Universal, UU Hymnal Reading #474</i>
<b>Pre-Sermon</b>	<i>I Call That Mind Free, William Ellery Channing</i> <i>The Idea of Democracy, Abraham Lincoln</i>
<b>Benediction</b>	<i>So That</i>

**SERMON**

When I was growing up, the church we went to was Saint Bernard's Catholic Church. Saint Bernard and all the saints were important to us, for they had been souls readily admitted to heaven and able to help us get there, too. Across the street was First Parish Church. I didn't know what was important to them – though as a child I presumed it had something to do with being first. Even though all my best friends went to that church, they never told me anything about it except that it was Unitarian. That meant nothing to me since I didn't really even know that I was Trinitarian, and they didn't evidence any care about the difference anyway.

I grew up being told, not by my parents, but by the priests and nuns and some of the parochial school kids, that St. Bernard's was the Church Universal. But now I believe that the Church Universal was First Parish Church – a universal church – a church for anybody and everybody. Okay, who knows. As always, it depends.

Unitarian churches began calling themselves All Souls Church in 1855 when a big Unitarian Church in New York City, founded originally in 1819 as the First Congregational Church (Unitarian), took the name All Souls. This name was apparently to signify the diversity of its members, including Herman Melville, and when visited by New Yorker Transcendentalist Unitarian Walt Whitman, contained multitudes. It perhaps was influenced also by the declaration winning many adherents to Universalist churches in those days. that "All souls are saved" - universal salvation by an all-powerful God who loved all souls unconditionally.

We have evolved to a different place today. For most Unitarian Universalists, I'd say, our first concern is earthly salvation - salvation by fulfillment of humankind's awesome potentials for each stage of life, despite not infrequent regressions by our unreflective ego-driven survival instincts: earthly salvation by fulfillment of the infant in bonding and hope, fulfillment of the child in self-consciousness, fulfillment of the youth in discernment, fulfillment of the young adult in independent vocation and family, fulfillment of the mature adult in leadership for the good of the whole community, and finally fulfillment of the elder in peace and creativity for the fulfillment of the eternal spirit of life.

Each fulfillment is momentarily joyous, blissful - then we struggle progressively toward the next dimension of fulfillment. Our goal is the greatest good for all. That is why I feel we should be called Utilitarian Universalists - even Super-Utilitarians - because we believe all people can have the greatest good.

Scoffers will say there will always be winners over losers, or that we have a sinful nature which we will never transcend on our own. To that we could say with tradition and with science, the soul is like a cosmic seed, containing all the potentials one needs to grow a spirit which can bless and be blest - and that is salvation.

Deuteronomy 15 in Jewish scripture gives us just that message - the cycles of life are such that the poor, like the children, will always be with you - but if you help them with open heart and open hand, they too will grow to prosper and to bless the whole people, and so then, there will be no one among you who remains permanently poor, and all indeed will be saved.

It is to that purpose that we are the church of all souls - the church universal - the one true church for Earthkind. The populism of our times pleads for this vision - by left-behind nativists, by routed-out refugees - all souls say, we matter, we can flourish if you help us, and we can help you flourish if you let us. Belief in these voices is the mark of the One True and Universal Church.

I would say that the One True Church functions at its highest by exercising two processes: one process is internal to each church member; and one process is external to each member and the congregation.

The internal process is to develop the potential for conscience - to learn how to discern what conduct is good for life and what is not - and to learn to will and act for the good - read the signs of the times, walk in the shoes of others, then

judge for yourself what is right. On this path you will be more right and good than wrong and bad. You will be more helpful than harmful. This internal path leads toward the salvation of all souls.

But it must converge with an external path. Nobody prospers without the help of others, without a community that lives with an open hand and open heart as per Moses, without a more perfect Union as per the Preamble to our U.S. Constitution. That is democracy - to participate in one another's lives so we understand one another's needs and how together we can meet them. An open hand, an open heart, an open mind are indispensable.

All souls are seeds. If they aren't nurtured by a sustained community of others, they don't grow. If they don't grow, they bear no fruit of understanding, so no fruit of mutual care, so no fruit of love and joy and peace.

Like the mind and heart of the individual spirit bent toward salvation, the mind and heart of the community must be as informed and pure as possible in intent for the common good - not narrowed and misdirected to the benefit of only a very few. This is the democratic government of, by, and for the people that Lincoln held up for us - like the free mind, whose awareness is sacredness, whose conscience is respect, whose commitment is the good.

You know our political process does not currently meet the standards of a democracy. We have talked plenty about the influence of vast sums of corporate and private money used to determine the outcome of political campaigns and shape public policy for the narrow benefit of powerful wealthy few. This past summer, well before the fall elections, the Unitarian Universalist general assembly of congregations chose as its major focus for study over the next four years "The Corruption of Our Democracy". We knew it would be important regardless of who won the election.

And wasn't it last April that our congregation voted to endorse working to overturn the power of corporations and other non-human entities to buy elections and elected officials with vast amounts of campaign money.

If we are to grow a free and open society, we need free and open minds and hearts to empower it. If we are to have free and open minds and hearts, we need a free and open society to empower them. The feedback loop between our spiritual moral conscience and our public societal democracy is essential and must not remain subverted or diverted.

What can we do? Until we gather in full discussion (which we really must do),

let me offer a few ideas: Educate ourselves and others on the range of issues we consider crucial in our time; train and discipline ourselves in the exercise of the civic skills of how to be involved, how to use influence and how to use power for good; identify civic actions, with understanding that we will differ as to values, stands, energy, time, and goals.

I think we should start soon with the UU General Assembly Congregational Study/Action Issue on the corruption of our democracy – maybe a summer of books discussions, then the fall for following the study guide. And each of us can support other organizations already engaged with changing policy on issues of concern to you – like the key issues of the League of Women Voters, of American Promise and its ordinance on SuperPAC funding at the City Council, Awake Pinellas with its coalition building efforts including Black Lives Matter, not to mention many specific issues.

But there is one preliminary step I think we must initiate first as a congregation before we can make a revered contribution. We need to make sure we are not living in a bubble. “Living in a bubble” is a much used phrase these days. But it has always been the case that we all live in some perceptual box or framework or bubble. That’s the unavoidable human condition. But we need to make sure ours is not too small a bubble to let us have a worthy purpose and a worthwhile path to get there.

What is our bubble? I saw an article two weeks ago in a liberal magazine for religious news and commentary. It had a chart entitled “Aging White Church”. Average age per religious group : Jewish 51, Mainline Protestant 53, Evangelical Protestant 54, Catholic 54, Unitarian Universalist 55. This points to our bubble, as I see it, and I believe that bubble is why the UU denomination hasn’t grown in modern times.

But the bubble isn’t that we are aging or older. It is that our way of doing religion attracts only people who have moved well beyond childhood’s authoritarian and black and white thinking to more mature relativistic, independent, consciously interdependent, and even creative thinking.

In itself that is a good thing. But we haven’t realized that we also need to reach out to those who are at what developmental psychologists might call earlier stages of faith development, more literal, more black and white, more adhering to unquestioned authorities. Many of their literal truths are true; many of their authorities are right, and most of all, their telling of their experience will expand our wisdom. But we know, I believe, from experience, psychology, and neuroscience, that they and we all can grow more fulfilled and

we all can help others grow more fulfilled.

Progression into more expansive dimensions of understanding and caring is a potential that is innate in humankind and needs to be fostered in family, friendship, and community. We need to let everyone know that that is our fundamental belief and we work to promote it, to help each other grow in understanding, caring, and community. Reaching out from that position, we have a big enough bubble to include the world.

Final thought: As we heard in our Reading for Meditation, *Unto the Church Universal*, in this increasingly global community we have not only a great potential, but a great need - a potential and a need to transcend our divisions of sect, class, race and nation. Our "all souls" tradition has done well regarding transcending sect, finding ways to incorporate the blessings of all religions into our own. And we have also done well transcending nationality divisions.

But class and race remain a divide we have not bridged – not because we have not tried – but, I think, because we have not thought to tell the divided that we can help each other grow, in faith and spirit, in understanding and caring, in fulfillment of the potentials that are within all people and peoples. I for one am going to try it: *Come, let us teach one another and fulfill the potential of all souls.*

Now, for the strength and wisdom to do so, let's rise and sing as we are able – hymn #123, Spirit of Life.

## **READINGS**

### **Thoughts for Gathering**

"If only you obey this commandment, there will be no poor among you: do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward the needy; open your hand to meet the need, whatever it may be. Give liberally and be ungrudging, so the Being of beings will bless you in all you do. And since there will always be some poor among you, always keep your hand and heart open." (*from Deuteronomy 15*)

"When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, "It is going to rain"; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, "There will be scorching heat"; and it happens.

You know how to interpret the appearance of earth & sky,  
but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?  
And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?" (*Luke 12: 54-57*)

"We the People of the United States,  
in Order to form a more perfect Union,  
establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility,  
provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare,  
and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity,  
do ordain and establish this Constitution  
for the United States of America. (*Preamble, U.S. Constitution*)

"We here highly resolve ... that this nation, under God,  
shall have a new birth of freedom —  
and that government of the people, by the people, for the people,  
shall not perish from the earth." (*Gettysburg Address*)

**Invocation** (responsive) *Affirmations of the UU Association of Congregations*

**LEADER:** For ourselves & for our world, we covenant to affirm & promote:

**LEADER** (altos & sopranos): The inherent worth & dignity of every person;

**MINISTER** (tenors & bass): Justice, equity & compassion in human relations;

**LEADER:** Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;

**MINISTER:** A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;

**LEADER:** The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;

**MINISTER:** The goal of world community with peace, liberty, & justice for all;

**LEADER** (All): Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

**Meditation** UU Hymnal Reading #474 *Unto the Church Universal*

**Pre-Sermon Readings**

*I Call That Mind Free, William Ellery Channing*

*The Idea of Democracy, Abraham Lincoln*

**Benediction**

So that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not  
perish from the earth, so that we will secure the blessings of liberty and union  
to ourselves and our posterity, may we always keep our hands and hearts and  
minds open and judge for ourselves what is right.