

## THE END OF UNITARIANISM

Rev. Jack Donovan – Unitarian Universalist Church - St. Petersburg, Florida - 7/15/18

### READINGS (texts below, after sermon)

<b><u>Gathering</u></b>	<i>The Difference Between Universalists and Unitarians</i> , Rev. Thomas Starr King <i>I spoke to the almond tree</i> , St. Francis in N. Kazantzakis' <u>Report to Greco</u>
<b><u>Invocation</u></b>	<i>The Womb of Stars</i> , Rev. Joy Atkinson, Hymnal #445
<b><u>Meditation</u></b>	<i>i thank You God for most this amazing day</i> , e. e. cummings
<b><u>Reading #1</u></b>	<i>I am the Self</i> , from the <u>Bhagavad Gita</u> , Hymnal #611
<b><u>Reading #2</u></b>	<i>In the beginning</i> , from <u>The Gospel According to John</u> , chapter 1

### SERMON

May I ask, Why are you here this morning? Why are you in church - this Unitarian Universalist church? Presuming we humans do everything for a purpose, what end do you have in mind that being here will help you attain? And what does that end have to do with the name "Unitarian"?

And if you were a stranger to this tradition, what would the word "Unitarian" on our front sign signify to you if you were going by? Would it give you an "Oh!" or "Eureka!" moment? Might you say, "Unitarian - that could be good for me" or "Unitarian? I could belong here".

In the novel *The Europeans* by Henry James (himself a Unitarian), when an American guest at a party in England introduces himself as a Unitarian minister, the English hostess responds dismissively, "Oh, something new." Did his Unitarian label help for her to know him - or for him to know himself – or for her to know herself? Does the name "Unitarian" help you identify why you are in this church this morning?

Around the time of the American Civil War, a renowned minister who had served both Universalist and Unitarian congregations was asked, "What's the difference in beliefs between Universalists and Unitarians?" He replied, "Well, the one thinks God is too good to damn them; and the other thinks they are too good to damn." Is that why you're here? By the mid-twentieth century, when a Unitarian couple was asked what Unitarians believe, one answered, "We believe God is one," and the other added, "At most." Is that why you're here?

What does the "Unitarian" part of our name signify to you and to strangers about the ends we live for or the means we live by? Our name originally arose in ancient Christianity from debates about the nature of God, of Jesus, of humankind, and about the nature of the relationships amongst them. Is the nature of divinity, or whatever may be the source of existence, important for you to understand? Some say, "Sure! What you take to be the nature of God or the Source of Existence defines where you come from, what you are, what you are for, what you have as resources, what you face as obstacles."

So then, is the nature of humanity important for you to understand? Some say, “Yes! What you think you are influences what ends you live for, what means you think you have to attain those ends, and what effort you think you can make to attain those ends.”

And is the nature of Jesus important for you to understand? Some say, “Yes! If Jesus is God self-incarnated and divinely self-sacrificed in ransom for the redemption of all sinful but believing people, then salvation depends only on believing. But if Jesus was instead a human being who exemplified the saving way of fulfilling humankind’s potentials, then salvation is human fulfillment and depends on our way of behaving.”

And lastly, is the nature of the relationship amongst divinity, humanity, and Jesus important to understand? Some would say, “Yes! If Jesus is the divine savior who lived and died for us, then, again, our salvation depends on our believing and accepting this. But if Jesus is a human exemplar, then our salvation depends on our understanding his way of behaving and making it our way.”

For the Trinitarian Church, the answers have remained pretty much the same from the year 325: a triune divinity of Father-Son-Spirit; a fallen helpless humanity; a sacrificial redemptive incarnate divinity; and an utter dependency of the human being on the uncertain grace and judgment of the divine.

That is a summary of the Nicene Creed’s Trinitarian view, established as creedal at the Church Council of Nicea, three hundred years after Jesus’s death. The creed represents the position of Athanasius, the Bishop of Alexandria at the time, backed by the power of the Roman Emperor Constantine. An early form of unitarianism was also considered at the Council of Nicea – that of the priest Arius and others, arguing that Jesus was not one with God, but was created by God for fallen humankind’s salvation.

Of course, that was not the earliest Christian belief. If we go back to the gospels and their story with a biblical scholar’s eye, we find the view of Jesus himself – Jesus, a Jewish man and a child of man - who first of all saw himself as a human being trying to fully live God’s law, the Torah - and who second of all was inspired by the devout multi-faith people of Palestine to see that the greatest law - to love God with all your heart and mind and body and soul - means to act as a caring neighbor toward all people, for all are God’s children, regardless of their beliefs or ethnicity or status.

But at Nicea, Athanasius and Constantine won the day and Arius - and, we might say, Jesus – lost. So some souls took the unitarian choice underground, though for most it died. But 1200 years later, with the invention of the printing press, the translation of the Bible into European languages, and the spreading practice of personal Bible study, the Reformation was born and the unitarian questions were resurrected – Where does the Gospel say that Jesus is God? Was not Jesus’ saving act his exemplary way of living, showing us how to use grace, the power of

life, to rightly live? Does not the human fulfillment that is human salvation depend finally on our behavior rather than only on our belief?

Despite the Reformation, in those days you could still be burnt at the stake for being an independent reader or thinker. But you had a lot more neighbors – not to mention a king or two - who were wondering the same things as you and were not inclined to do you in, or burn you at the stake. For Renaissance Europe, the holiness of Jesus' life started to make sense as the end toward which one should live.

In America, in America's increasingly democratic and individualistic pre-Revolutionary times, the idea of Jesus as savior by example rather than savior by propitiating sacrifice gained great sway. When, in the early 1800s, William Ellery Channing began preaching "Unitarian Christianity", with its great end of growing in "Likeness unto God" by Jesus' way of loving care, a large part of New England Christianity accepted the foisted name "Unitarian".

Following Rev. Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson and others began drawing Hinduism, Native American religions, philosophy and naturalism into the teaching sources of Unitarianism. Many had come to think of God and Nature as one, with the fulfillment of human potential achieved through godly generous caring for all life. By the 1900s, most Unitarians accepted science, reason, intuition and the arts, along with the world's religious traditions, as resources for growing in understanding about life and how to live.

As the influences of science and of the women's movement grew, the numeric metaphors used to define existence's creative source came to include Singularity, Duality, Trinity, and Multiplicity. The idea of a divine multiplicity was drawn from the Hindu God Brahman's many divine manifestations, from the Jewish image of God in every person, and from Emerson's call to experience every creature and element of nature as "a part or parcel of God."

It seems clear that for many decades and now into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the end of Unitarianism has not been the goal of establishing the unitary nature of God. So what is the end of Unitarianism? For me, I would say it is to experience and appreciate and abet the power of life – grace, if you will - as it brings and nurtures the potentials within everyone for understanding, caring, and community. The power – the grace - of life persisting to seep up and in wherever it can so we will have the power to make life good for the world.

As I see it, that is the end of Unitarianism to which we've come so far. I joined this religious tradition because, from the day I accidentally first experienced a UU Sunday service, I felt it added something important and true to my life that was missing. It was an awareness that growth in understanding, caring, community, helpfulness, and happiness are possible and good and something that this community would help me with. That hour added great value to my life and it hasn't ended. It called to me then, and I am still blossoming – "lifted from the No of all Nothing to the Yes which is natural which is infinite. And now the ears of my ears are awake and the eyes of my eyes are opened (at least more often). And in the womb of the stars I am embraced as the Self that is in all."

Why are you here? Are you here for a reason related to the word Unitarian? If not what is the likelihood that others will understand what we can offer them?

The label “Unitarian” no longer seems to me to communicate much, unless one already knows the story – which is much richer than I’ve had time to share this morning. I’d like our name to communicate that we offer what is essential for opening the soul to the power for making life good, for nurturing that little seed of the infinite potentials of our beings and letting the nurturance of life help us grow those potentials into all the stages of fulfillment that come blossoming and bearing fruit at our growing ends.

We could say that Unitarianism as a label has come to its end. I would change that label to something that lets the unknowing world know that flowing grace is rubbing on its soul of embodied grace, trying to make a spark, waiting to enter, wanting to bring in its power to grow the human spirit.

What is that new name? Emerson, I believe it was, long ago said, “Soul and only soul.” Could that be it somehow? What is the growing end of Unitarianism? That could be the clue to how we best name ourselves. What can we name the tradition that works to prove that we all are too good to waste?

If you’d like to share your ideas on the end of Unitarianism, I’ll meet you right here, after the service and after we’ve greeted those heading in for refreshments or heading out to the refulgent summer air.

Thank you.

## **READINGS**

**Gathering Thoughts #1** *The Difference Between Universalists & Unitarians*, Thomas Starr King

*The difference between Unitarians and Universalists? The one thinks God is too good to damn them. The other thinks they are too good to be damned.*

**Gathering Thoughts #2** *The almond tree*, St. Francis in N. Kazantzakis’ Report to Greco

*It was winter. I said to the almond tree, “Friend, speak to me of God, and it blossomed.”*

**Invocation** *The Womb of Stars*, Rev. Joy Atkinson, Hymnal #445 – responsive

The womb of stars embraces us; remnants of their fiery furnaces pulse through our veins.  
*We are of the stars, the dust of the explosions cast across space.*

We are of the earth: we breathe and live in the breath of ancient plants and beasts.  
*Their cells nourish the soil; we build our communities on their harvest gifts.*  
Our fingers trace the curves carved in clay and stone by forebears unknown to us.  
*We are a part of the great circle of humanity gathered around the fire. The hearth, the altar.*  
We gather anew this day to celebrate our common heritage.  
*May we recall in gratitude all that has given us birth.*

**Meditation**    *i thank You God for most this amazing day, e. e. cummings, Hymnal #504*

i thank You God for most this amazing  
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees  
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything  
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,  
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth  
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay  
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing  
breathing any—lifted from the no  
of all nothing—human merely being  
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and  
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

**Reading #1**    *I am the Self, from the Bhagavad Gita, Hymnal #611*

I am the Self that dwells in the heart of every mortal creature;  
I am the beginning, the life span, and the end of all.  
I am the radiant sun among the light-givers.  
I am the mind.  
I am consciousness in the living.

I am death that snatches all;  
I , also, am the source of all that shall be born.  
I am time without end;  
I am the sustain: my face is everywhere.  
I am the beginning, the middle, and the end in creation;  
I am the knowledge of things spiritual.  
I am glory, prosperity, eloquence, memory, intelligence, steadfastness, and forgiveness.

I am the divine seed of all lives.  
In this world nothing animate or inanimate exists without me.

I am the strength of the strong.  
I am the purity of the good.  
I am the knowledge of the knower.  
There is no limit to my divine manifestations.  
Whatever in this world is powerful, beautiful, or glorious,  
that you may know to have come forth from a fraction of my power and glory.

**Reading #2**     *From the beginning*, from The Gospel According to John, chapter 1

From the beginning was the expression of divine being,  
and the expression of divine being was divine being.  
All things come into being from it and without it nothing comes into being  
What has come into being through divine being is life, and life is the light of all people.  
To all who accept the light, and trust it, is given power to become children of the divine,  
born not of the human body or will, but of divine being itself.  
And from its fullness all receive its power, grace upon grace.