

HAVE WE REACHED THE END OF UNIVERSALISM?

Rev. Jack Donovan – Unitarian Universalist Church - St. Petersburg, Florida - 7/29/18

READINGS (texts printed below, after sermon)

<u>Gathering</u>	<i>Brief Notices</i>
<u>Invocation</u>	from <i>Hope and Love</i> by Universalist minister John Murry (c. 1790)
<u>Reading #1</u>	<i>Just the Way You Are - Life</i> of Universalist minister Hosea Ballou (c. 1815)
<u>Reading #2</u>	<i>A Circumscribed Universalism Is Unthinkable</i> , UCA leader Robt. Cummins (1943)
<u>Benediction</u>	<i>The Pasture</i> by Robert Frost

SERMON

There was a time in the morning of America when many people felt, and believed, that their immortal souls were in peril of perdition. This earthly life was perilous enough to warrant anxiety. Half the Mayflower Pilgrims died the first year. Their cemeteries, though spreading across the land, were for three centuries filled with tiny graves affording no epitaph but a name, if there'd been time for naming.

Even upon arrival they found a seacoast of native villages decimated and abandoned, with often 90% of the population gone to germs imported by early European fishermen and traders. And decimation continued as colonialists swept inland over the native villages of forest and plain.

Despair was so rampant on the native islands of the Caribbean that it was not uncommon for whole villages of indigenous people to commit suicide together rather than face Conquistador slavery. And the European and American slave ships from Africa had to take obsessive measures to keep their captives from leaping to the bottom of the sea for freedom.

If life was so desperate, the afterlife with its stern divine judgments could be even more so. Uncertainty here breeds anxiety, fear, extremism. In evolving New England culture, fear of damnation of the immortal soul split communities and caused neighbor to burn neighbor at the stake. Jonathan Edwards spewed forth a tidal wave of fear, preaching "sinners in the hands of an angry God."

I wish it were different among other peoples. But dominance behavior and its associated dehumanization and cruelty appears to be one of the universal potentials of humankind.

There was, on the other hand, also a positive response in the abused and usurped American colonies. Clusters of resistance to oppression arose in those who saw humankind, by the spirit of Nature and Nature's God, endowed with a spirit of unalienable rights. That spirit dwelled in possibilities, as a descendent of those pilgrim revolutionaries would later say. Many were drawn to that spirit as expressed by a widowed grieving English Universalist immigrant named

John Murry, who settled north of Boston not far from the town which had executed women as witches a generation or two before.

The Gospel According to John Murry, reaching back to founding Church theologian Origen and Christianity in its first two hundred years, was, “Fear not – you have plenty of strength from providential God. Be not anxious. For does not our heavenly Father care even for the flight of sparrows and the leaves of grass? How much more so for us, his children? This is the certainty of universal salvation: All will be saved in the end, for we can see that God is for all and is in all. So love one another as God loves you. And you need not wait to go to heaven. You can start heaven here now.”

Thus was expressed the gospel of the Father of American Universalism. This was hope, to counter a despairing theology – based on the truths of kindness and of everlasting love, and evidenced by the spirit that grows from the potentials of the freely loved soul.

And in material prosperity America did grow, and hope had its day. But the wealth got stored up predominantly in exclusive citadels of power and in their close buttressing encampments. In the wider circles of America, struggling against the onslaught of war, disease, and oppression, many souls were impoverished, and hope was replaced again with despair, and doubt replaced any sense of certainty about salvation.

Biblical proofs, too, were preponderantly contrary to the vision of a sure heaven for all. And human experience itself seemed to side with the Catholic Augustine and the Protestant Calvin in seeing humanity as hopelessly depraved. In time, scholarship, too, and endless wars, and even science eroded the Universalist faith still further.

Perhaps the final nail in the cross of Universalism came in mid-20th Century when the director of the Atomic Bomb project, Robert Oppenheimer, watched the mushroom cloud in awe and the words of the Bhagavad Gita filled his mind: “I am become Death, destroyer of worlds.” And perhaps the final nail in the coffin of Universalism came when Jean Paul Sartre echoed 16th Century Jean Calvin, saying, “I see now. Hell is other people.”

Universalism – the idea that all were loved by an all-powerful God and would receive ultimate salvation – had become known as wishful thinking.

And yet, there seemed to be a kind of progress in the world. Perhaps - said the spreaders of the social and liberation gospels in the 20th Century - Perhaps the realm of heaven can be here on earth. Perhaps we can live it. Universalism transitioned from a hope reliant on God to a hope reliant on people as the children and heirs of God.

At mid-20th Century, nothing seemed more implausible and nothing seemed more necessary. A new hope developed - that out of the ashes of vast tragedy healing of the human psyche would arise by necessity. “Look at us. What is a person? What is closer to the divine heart and mind? What is more worthy of saving for its own sake, for earth’s, and for God’s?!”

The Universalist idea of divinely ordained salvation for all souls transitioned into the idea of worthiness – of the sacredness of the potential of life, especially that life which influences all other life – the human. We find this idea reflected now in our contemporary UU affirmation of the worth and dignity of every person – the sacredness of every soul – immortal or mortal - that might be developed and fulfilled, as the Universalists had long said, in happiness and holiness.

I am not sure the word “universalism” signals this to us these days, much less to strangers. It is confusing. You heard, in the reading from Universalist president Robert Cummins in 1943, the view that “universalism” means including every domain of understanding. And this view was echoed by Rev. Forrest Church in the 1989 book A Chosen Faith, defining “universalism” as recognizing the many windows of partial perception and perspective through which the light of truth will shine.

Clever – but does the word “universalism,” or these definitions of it, guide or call hopefully to souls in need and searching for a community devoted to their sacredness? Did it illuminate a road for you to this door, that long and winding road? Again, it comes to this - why are you here today? For what need? To what end? Does our denominational name remind us or clue the unknowing world about what we are and are devoted to becoming? Universalism, plain and simple, is about salvation, as Hosea Ballou told the woman cleaning her floor. Salvation – and who gets it.

Today, the great devastations of war against neighbors far and near and seemingly against earth itself batter the hopes of fulfilling life’s wonderful potentials. Our position on earth is blessed and bountiful, but threatened. We have this message of hope and we have each other’s covenantal support to back it up – and we offer them to our hearts and our world. We know that all souls have vast, seemingly limitless, potentials. Some are potentials for competing and surviving; some are potentials for cooperating and thriving. And from this understanding of life and living emerges our hope and our way.

But there are no guarantees - not even any immediate likelihoods. The world is full of tragedy and lives cut cruelly short. Universalism as part of our name seems to have come to a dead end. It is an important historical marker – but is that enough? Can it remind us and stir an unknowing world to see and find hope in the human potentials for creating heaven on earth or, at least, in our hearts and hearths?

Say the up-dated Unitarian idea is that all Reality derives from one singular powerful and creative Source, by whatever name – one singular powerful and creative Source. Then perhaps the up-dated Universal idea requires of us a Morality that deems every soul’s seemingly unlimited potentials from that Source – unlimited potentials for comprehending, caring, and communing - to be absolutely worthy of the full devotion needed to fulfill them.

Is there any necessity or any justification that any sacred soul should be lost? Is there any necessity or justification that any soul should not be seen as sacred and deserving to be nurtured to happiness and holiness?

No, this is not the current reality. It is a wish, a prayer, a greater hope. But it could be a reality that we create here on earth – and all along, in the doing, finally, continually, taste the sweetness of life.

Is it not time for our Universalism to be about healing absurdist tragedy and finding heaven with other people? – and maybe with a significant name that says so?

I for one believe and say, Yes. How about you?

If you have answers, or questions, about reaching the end of Universalism, please join me at the front here after the Postlude, as soon as all the seekers of coffee or sunlight have had a chance to exit. I'm eager to hear your thoughts.

Thank you.

READINGS

Gathering *Brief Notices*

Universalist Church Sign: Today's Sermon: "There Is No Hell"

Baptist Sign Across the Street: Today's Sermon: "The Hell There Isn't"

Believer to Non-Believer: "Think there's no hell? Come hear our preacher."

Invocation from *Hope and Love* by Universalist minister John Murry (c. 1790)

Shall we ask ourselves this morning,
are we not called to the highways and byways of our country?
*Yes, to give the people, blanketed with a decaying and crumbling vision,
something of a new vision.*

The light we possess may seem small –
but if we uncover it, what illumination for our people's hearts and minds.
So may we give them, then, not hell, but hope, and courage –
not despairing theology - but truths of kindness and everlasting love.

Reading #1 *Just the Way You Are - Life* of Universalist minister Hosea Ballou (c. 1815)

In a small Massachusetts town to which Reverend Ballou had been asked to come and preach, he chatted with his hostess while she cleaned her kitchen for the Sabbath. Mop in hand, and with a disbelieving shake of her head, she said "Father Ballou, do you really believe that *all* people will be saved *just as they are*?"

"Dear woman," he replied. "What is that in your hands?"

"Why, my mop!" she said.

"Are you going to mop the floor just as it is?" he asked.

"Well, of course, I mop it to clean it!"

"Ah," said Ballou. "You do not require it to be made clean before you consent to mop it up. Likewise God saves souls to purify them; that's what salvation is. *God does not require people to be pure first in order that he will save them.*"

Reading #2 *"Circumscribed Universalism Is Unthinkable"*, UCA leader Robt. Cummins (1943)

Universalism cannot be limited either to Protestantism or to Christianity, not without denying its very name. Ours is a world fellowship, not just a Christian sect. For so long as Universalism *is* universalism and not partialism, the fellowship bearing its name must succeed in making it unmistakably clear that *all* are welcome: theist and humanist, unitarian and trinitarian, colored and colorless. A circumscribed Universalism is unthinkable.

Benediction *The Pasture* by Robert Frost

I'm going out to clean the pasture spring,
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away,
And wait to watch the water clear, I may.
I shan't be gone long, -- you come, too.

I'm going out to fetch the little calf
That's standing by the mother -- it's so young
It totters when she licks it with her tongue.
I shan't be gone long, -- you come, too.