

1/9/11 Sermon

“Not Hell, But Hope (Universalism)”

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I bring you good news for our time, the gospel of our liberal religion that proclaims that salvation is yours from birth and there is no hell to punish you – no fear that in the Rapture you will be left behind. There are no special elect of God chosen to go to heaven while you are condemned to burn in the hell fires of damnation. This message is quite a bit different one than our neighbors down the street offer. When our brethren interpret sacred texts, they come up with a very different understanding of God and salvation.

The origins of Universalism are at the core of this issue. While the early Christian church believed in universal love and salvation, that dramatically changed in the Third Century with the adoption of the Nicene Creed, which codified the Trinity as doctrine and the idea of universal salvation for all time became a heresy. This creed laid the groundwork for centuries of persecution of Unitarian Universalists.

Can you imagine what it would have been like for many of you to grow up in your church of origin without the fear of punishment and Hell? That is our good news. It began to spread in the colonies in the mid-1700s. It seemed to blossom spontaneously and simultaneously in the South, mid-Atlantic and New England. In places like Philadelphia, many Baptists became Universalists – one among them Dr. Benjamin Rush, who signed the Declaration of Independence.

In New England, preachers were starting to reject the Calvinist doctrine of eternal damnation. Much of this heresy can be traced to immigrant preacher John Murray who, after serving a sentence in debtor’s prison, left England vowing never to preach again. But, Divine Providence, according to Murray, had other plans and his ship ran aground on a sand bar in Barnegat Bay, New Jersey in 1770. There in a chapel smaller than our narthex, Murray began the Universalist movement in America. Fortunately, or not, he had landed on the farm of Thomas Potter, a follower of Universalist thought for 20 years. He had had a vision/premonition of a new message of hope coming to America and had built a chapel in anticipation of a sermon being preached there. Murray reluctantly agreed, but only if his ship was not freed from the sand bar. When the appointed time came, the ship was still there, the sermon was preached, and Universalism began in America.

Two hundred and twenty years after that momentous event, I stood peering in the window of that chapel, on land called Murray Grove – a UU conference center – then run by my former wife. I felt a thrill being at the very spot John Murray walked and began our faith that I now try to live by.

Shortly after Murray's initial sermon, he accepted the call to the Independent Christian church in Gloucester, Mass., that became the mother church of American Universalism. Murray married Judith Sargent, an essayist, poet and playwright whose family founded the Gloucester church. Here the ex-Calvinist Murray preached his message that "*every individual shall in due time be separated from sin.*" Together, the couple was a force to be reckoned with, and they were instrument in the battle to separate church and state. As leaders of the church, they refused to pay taxes to Gloucester's First Parish and helped set the legal precedent that established the right to freely worship and, in a voluntary and not mandatory way, financially support the parish. Murray also broke with history by inviting freed slaves to become members of the congregation – a first for any church in America!

It seems from our earliest days, we Unitarian Universalists were making trouble, challenging the status quo and expanding the boundaries of freedom and justice. A hundred years later, in 1863, Universalism became the first denomination to ordain women to the ministry. Olympia Brown was encouraged by the great Universalist Hosea Ballou II to offer up her voice to bring a message of hope to the expanding Midwest and Canada migration. These people were following the advice of the Universalist and newspaperman Horace Greeley, to "go west, young man."

Many did, including Thomas Starr King who left the comfort and safety of his New England parish to become an itinerant preacher up and down the state of California. His work and ministry was credited with saving the state for the Union during the Civil War. As the minister of our church in San Francisco, which I attended while in seminary, he preached a message of freedom for all and to abolish the inhumanity of slavery. For his efforts, he was honored by the state of California by having his statue displayed in statuary Hall in the Capital Dome. (Recently, that statue was replaced by Ronald Reagan's.)

Early Universalists, unlike the urbane and urban Unitarians, were mostly rough-hewn circuit riders with little formal education. They worked the frontiers, where they challenged the theology that Calvinist hellfire-and-brimstone preachers were spreading across the continent, in tent meetings and revivals.

In fact, writes David Reich, "In the 19th Century, Universalists took such pride in their ministers' humble backgrounds that it was an article of faith among them that the best way to ruin a good minister was to send him or her to theological school. These circuit riders, with their talent for improvisation and quick wit and their radical democratic bent, were quintessentially American and their lives were the stuff and which good stories were made."

There is a story that Richard Eddy, author of "*Universalism in America*," tells: Hosea Ballou, a major Universalist theologian of early 19th Century, was ordained as a young man at the first New England General convention. The manner of his ordination showed how little Universalists cared for standardized forms and rituals. The Rev. Elhanan Winchester was delivering a sermon to the convention delegates. At the end, he called Ballou up to the podium, never having warned the young man he was a candidate for ordination. Winchester, holding his Bible up and pressing it firmly to Ballou's chest, said, "Brother Ballou, I press your heart to the written Jehovah!" Then he declared Ballou ordained (as in the Baptist way). According to one account, the spontaneous gesture had a "sudden and powerful" effect on the crowd. That impact grew until Universalisms in the 19th Century became the sixth largest denomination in the country.

Ballou continued in that spontaneous tradition (so when I go off on a tangent, remember I am just being an enthusiastic Universalist, preaching from my heart and the fires of our traditions). It was said that Ballou, while riding the circuit with a Baptist preacher, the Baptist looked at Ballou and said, "If I feared not the fires of hell, I could hit you over the head, steal your horse and saddle and ride away – and still go to heaven." Ballou replied without blinking an eye, "If you were a Universalist, the idea would never occur to you."

Another example of Universalist wit happened when a rock was thrown through a window during one of John Murray's sermons. He picked up the stone and said, "This argument may be substantial and weighty, but it is not convincing."

That is part of what preaching is all about – bringing the message, not of Hell, but of Hope to a people in need of salvation – free of the fears of damnation, that offered Love Universal – a love that resides at the spiritual heart of our faith.

Blessed be.