

Big Love

Rev. Paul Daniel, February 5, 2012.

Now is the time, not tomorrow, to reclaim our voice of public witness as we have repeatedly done in our history. We must shake off our lethargy; shed our fears and speak out and stand up for the “Good News” of Unitarianism/Universalism.

Make no mistake about this, we are in a religious war with a coalition of right wing conservative fundamentalist religious and political zealots.

Once again we are in a time of great tension and religious conflict in American history, over fundamental values, principles and their expression in the political arena.

Some have labeled this the “Cultural Wars”. We religious progressives are under attack by those who find our values and faith an anathema; due to our support for such things as gay marriage, an unrestricted right to vote, the right to choose, sex education in schools not limited to abstinence only; the right of women to pursue non-biblical roles and a host of other issues.

Fundamentalist Christians would be happy to go back 200 years to the beginning of the American republic, where the fear of hell controlled our baser instincts and women knew their place, to return to ‘real’ American values expressed by the Calvinists, like Jonathan Edwards.

Early Universalists stood up against him and others fundamentalists for religious freedom.

Then as now the battle was for the hearts and souls of America.

Without action of public witness our Universalist values can have no import in the world.

We need to demonstrate Universalisms all inclusive “Big Love” and the blessing of our faith where salvation is open to all, no one is depraved and all are holy at birth.

Centuries ago we brought our unique brand of heresy to American shores in the 1700’s in the person of John Murray, whose ship grounded off Barnegat bay in NJ.

Soon after, we began to move away from and raise our voice in opposition to the Calvinists doctrine of a depraved and damned humanity. We brought a new optimistic Christianity rooted in salvation open to all in to contend with the dour Puritans and their grim doctrines of damnation and hell. Our all embracing faith in love propelled us to become, by the 1840s, the sixth largest faith in the country.

These very differencing perspectives were expressed most passionately by two of the greatest preachers of that day, Jonathan Edwards, the puritan and Hosea Ballot, the Universalist.

Edwards was a charismatic leader in the Baptist tradition who in Scott Alexander's words, "often brought his congregations to fearful wailing as he described the misery and damnation that they deserved, and would receive in hell, at the hands of their angry God.

Sometimes in the pulpit he would rip off his robes and tear his linen shirt to shreds in self-abasing frenzy and disgust. Listen and be warned yea...

"Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. The world of misery, the lake of burning brimstone, is extended abroad under you...Hell's gaping mouth [is] wide open, and you have nothing to stand upon or take hold of..."

"It is only the power and mere pleasure of God that holds you up..."

"The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you."

"You have offended him...O Sinner! You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe...and burn it asunder."

"You have nothing to lay hold of to save yourself. There is nothing that you have ever done, nothing that you can do, to induce God to spare you one moment."

Whew, that's exhausting!

On another equally happy occasion, Edwards told the brow-beaten folks in the pews that whenever God catches the scent of humanity the human smell is so foul and putrid it causes God to "flair his nostrils in disgust!" Cheerful stuff this 18th Century Puritanism!

But this was the substance and soul of the predominant Calvinistic theology of the day that we broke from: God was a distant, angry, and stern judge...humanity a fallen and sinful beast...and most men, women and children were doomed to a hell of eternal damnation and misery for all their weakness and wickedness."

Compared to Calvinism, Universalism was a pleasant walk in the sun dappled park, a fresh breeze of love at your back... offering God's love, reconciliation and hope.

Our God is not an angry vengeful, destructive OT God, but rather one of goodness, mercy and loving compassion. Think what some of our neighbors say about sin and damnation and then compare that to our belief that we are all children of God and all of us will be saved, regardless of our social or economic status or the nature of our sin.

Our Universalists core belief is that God is so good, that God's love for humanity is so great, that every person will, in the end, be saved.

There is no such thing as hell for us; save what we create for ourselves in the here and now. God will always welcome us back into right relationship.

As one early Universalist put it: *"The last sinner will be dragged kicking and cursing into heaven."*

This hopeful message was preached by the greatest Universalist theologian and preacher of the day Rev. Hosea Ballou; Edwards theological opposite. Ballou preached that at death our carnal nature also dies and only our spiritual souls remain and it is inclined towards goodness and right, and therefore unavoidably drawn toward heaven and health by God's all-powerful and encompassing love.

His gospel of universal salvation was welcome relief to the oppressed Calvinists who were told their children were doomed to eternal damnation.

Ballou said ... *"look on the child of your love, and say if you believe it probable that these connections were originally doomed by the decree of heaven to everlasting wretchedness. Try to derive consolation from that belief?"*

Ballou's and my response to Calvin can be summed up in one word...poppycock!

Early American Universalists preached a gospel of inclusion, reconciliation, hope, and of the inherent worth and dignity of everyone.

With damnation and judgment residing at the core of most Christians faiths of the time, is it any wonder that the "Good News" of Universalism was considered heretical yet a welcome respite? For us, all of humanity is holy whether we are attractive or unattractive, heavy or thin, smart or limited intellectually, rich or poor...the homeless, helpless and hurting it matters not, for we share a common humanity worthy of love. Grace and goodness are for all, not just an elect few.

We are a faith that embodies a "Big Love", an all inclusive and affirming faith in human kind. We embody that love and compassion each time we offer our hand in comfort and support to friend and stranger alike.

All humanity is welcome in the safe haven of our church and all God's children have a place in heaven and in UUMAN. No exceptions!

Our task is to nurture everyone's journey to become our best selves no matter how broken any of us are. It is not easy to be a UU, for we offer no easy answers to the violence and evil that pervades our world. As a faith we strive together to find a path to goodness and then bring that into the world. We must not shirk our responsibility to bring hope to the entire web of existence. That is our mission; our reason for being.

Today, our faith in humanity flies in the face of the Religious Right as it did in Colonial times. Our Universalist God condemns or judges no one. When our right wing neighbors condemn us or don't let their children play with ours, we must not shrink from the task to stand up for real goodness and mercy.

They have the arrogance of the self-assured who claim they are saved while we are damned...We utterly reject that theology offering instead hope and universal salvation.

If Jesus came back, he would be cleaning out the temples again for such arrogance and perversion of his message of love. The Universalist, John Murray said it well:

"You possess only a small light, but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. Give them not hell, but hope and courage."

Let our generous truth, our all embracing love inspires and empower us to become Universalist evangelists with a ready answer of love and salvation for those who would condemn us. Sharing the Good News of Unitarianism feels wonderful; and besides turnaround is fair play and far better than your silence.

Living our faith with courage is even better.

Try it. You might like it. Raise up your voice, be not afraid!