

NOT HELL BUT HOPE AND COURAGE

A sermon preached by the Rev. John Nichols

According to a legend that has inspired generations of Universalists, Universalism arrived in this country in 1770 in the person of John Murray who was fleeing from England and trying to begin a new life in America. Murray was a Universalist preacher who had fled England for America, because his Universalist religious beliefs were extremely unpopular in England and because while he'd been imprisoned for debt his wife and child had perished of an illness, and he was deeply depressed. Now he wanted to hide away from everyone – to sink into the new world and have nothing more to do with religion or with people

As the ship that carried him to the new world, headed for New York City, it became grounded on a sandbar near an inlet of New Jersey. Since the ship was nearly out of provisions, the Captain asked Murray to take some sailors and a sloop into shore in order to find something for everyone to eat. As Murray was scouting for provisions he discovered he had landed on the farm of Thomas Potter who was the local religious radical. Murray met Potter and after they had talked for awhile Murray discovered that Potter had built a chapel on his own land, and he was waiting for someone preaching Universalism to preach in and thus inaugurate the chapel. Would Murray be that preacher?

As the story is told in what is now Murray Grove, New Jersey, John Murray didn't want anything more to do with preaching Universalism, which had only gotten him into trouble in England. But Thomas Potter told Murray "Sir, there will be no wind to get you out of here until you have preached in this chapel. Murray reluctantly agreed with the understanding that if the wind did come up before Sunday he would sail as quickly as possible. The wind did not come up. On Sunday, Potter gathered a congregation in the meeting house. Murray preached and for the first time in his life he found an audience of farmers and tradesmen who were receptive to his ideas. The very next day the wind and tide lifted the ship off the sandbar and they left for New York City, but Murray came back over and over preaching along the way and Universalist ideas spread throughout the Northeast.

Now I will say that professional historians have shied away from parts of this story, which they considered a little too miraculous, but true Universalists have not. They have always felt that there was a certain inevitability to Universalism, and this story testifies to their faith in their own convictions.

But Murray's ideas were not popular with many people in the new world either. Murray was preaching that God loves all of God's children and will, at the end of each person's mortal life, welcome every soul into heaven. In his telling of it,

some morally impaired souls will go through what we might see as a sort of celestial boot camp, but ultimately all souls will be gathered into God. Most importantly, there is no Hell.

Why then was this idea not popular? Why is it not popular among many people now? Many people believed then and some believe now that the basis of all morality is the fear of eternal punishment. God, then, was like a playground monitor, who sees all infractions of the rules and doles out corrections accordingly. Well if the playground monitor is either blind or all forgiving then chaos reigns on the playground and the bad kids get away with everything. This could not be true.

The Universalists believed that this idea of a “playground monitor God”, in all of its implications, was a violent and terrible misunderstanding of the Judaic and Christian traditions, a misunderstanding of God and of life itself. They believed that the Creator loved all of Creation, much more than even we can appreciate; much more actually than we are able to love ourselves. Therefore if there is a heavenly clubhouse of souls, everybody gets in. There will be no waiting lists for heaven. There will be no black balls. There will be no initiation fees. A loving God unites everyone in heaven.

But this means that the clubhouse would also include the people that even we aren't so sure we want to spend in eternal life with. This includes the people who call and try to sell us something during supertime; the guy who cut you off in traffic and then made a rude gesture; the woman who dented your car in a supermarket parking lot and failed to leave a note.

There is a part of almost everyone that wants to see some sort of correction doled out to these people. But Universalists believed that God is not a judge though we may and almost certainly will judge ourselves and each other. Universalists believed that life is not a trial at which we have to prove our ultimate worthiness. The final judgment has been rendered, and it will be much more generous than human beings will ever make upon themselves or one another.

Of course we do make judgments in ordering our affairs. We make rules and there are punishments to be exacted for disobeying the rules. There are people who need to be caught and incarcerated for failing to observe the rules. But no one, no matter how despised by others, is ever discard able in God's realm.

You can see why the opponents of John Murray were outraged enough to want to stone him – as they tried to do in Boston when he spoke there in 1774. People who are brought up in a family that is governed by the threat or actuality of punishment – and most were in those days as many are today – tend to believe this is the way the world works. They believed then that just as a proper parent should never be entirely too loving or forgiving neither should a proper God be too loving or forgiving. They believed that parents who kept reassuring their children that

though they may be chastised they will always be loved – those parents will preside over chaotic families and immoral children. They believed it was better to withhold love from children until they merit it. They believed this loving Universalist God was dangerous radical.

The story is told that once Hosea Ballou – one of the great Universalist founders and a circuit rider who spread Universalism far and wide throughout New England – was riding from one church to another with a man who was not a Universalist himself. While they rode, they talked about religion. Ballou’s companion said, “Rev. Ballou, you realize of course that if I were a Universalist I could knock you off your horse, steal all of your money and clothing because I would believe there could be nothing to stop me, because your God does not make judgments even about robbers.

Ballou responded, “Sir, if you were a Universalist that thought would never enter your mind.” His point being that if your concern is who’s going to catch you then you might rob if you thought your theft would not be found out. But if your moral sense is formed by responding to the love with which creation has endowed you and that we are equally brothers and sisters then you probably would not be able to do something that would injure another person.

Universalist’s opponents surely wondered what would happen to society if individuals no longer feared Hell. Because they believed that men and women are as naturally inclined to disorder as sixth grade boys in an unsupervised classroom they believed that living without Hell would be a hell of a life. And they also realized at some level that Universalism had some very radical political implications.

And here they are. If all souls are entitled to God’s love then all men and women must be entitled to our ultimate respect at the least. If there is equality in salvation perhaps the Universalists meant to imply there should be equality on earth. And they surely did mean that as the demonstrated by their subsequent influence in abolitionism and woman’s suffrage.

It matters what we believe, because our cherished beliefs translate into the actions we take to put those beliefs into practice. Without cherished beliefs of any sort we might be inclined to take whatever life brings to us or to people we know. If we have no reason to believe that justice is a powerful and compelling idea, we will probably not fight against injustice unless it reaches us. . Even today when far fewer people believe in the God that motivated the early Universalists those who believe that there is something of holiness within each person – call it human dignity if you want – and if they deeply believe that, they will fight to preserve it for everyone.

How did this play out among the Universalists? They were among the first open proponents of Abolitionism. If God loved all people equally surely that included those who had been consigned to slavery. Benjamin Rush, one of the first

Universalists, promoted the abolition of slavery in 1773, then again in 1774 and the Philadelphia convention of Universalists promoted it in 1790. That's fairly early for abolitionist sentiment to be expressed publically. And they were careful to point out that their concern was for slave owners as well as for slaves – that the owners were engaged in a relationship that could not be good for either slaves or owners.

One of the most vocal early abolitionists was Universalist John Kenrick of Newton Massachusetts who in 1816 published at his own expense a book titled "The Horrors of Slavery which sold 3000 copies. He may have joined the Universalist Church of Newton and Waltham about 10 years later.

The Universalists expressed their concern for men fighting in the Civil War by sending 50 of their ministers to be chaplains in the union army. Entire Sunday school classes – and a class could be young men of 18 or 19 – followed their teachers enlisting in the armed services.

The Universalists believed that if all people were worthy of God's unconditional love then they should have a first class education. So they founded Tufts College, St Lawrence University, Lombard University in Illinois, Buchtell College, later known as the University of Akron, Smithson College in Indiana, Throop Institute, now Cal Tech and three different divinity schools. All but Tufts enrolled both men and women from the beginning.

The early history of women in the Universalist ministry began in 1810 when Maria Cook preached among Universalists in 1810. This is about the earliest instance of a woman practicing ministry although Olympia Brown and Augusta Chapin get credit for being the first ordained women in ministry This was much earlier than any denomination and made possible perhaps by the fact that Universalist congregations liked who they liked and in the early part of the Nineteenth Century they did not have to have their ministers approved at the denominational headquarters in Boston.

At about the same time Charles Spear left the Universalist ministry and went to work on prison reform. At that time the treatment of men and women in our prisons had not improved since the medieval punishments, which were meted out at the time of the Salem witch trials. Spear even organized a group called the Prisoner's Friend. Despite the prevailing sentiment that prisoners didn't deserve any friends Spear organized a group of people to visit inmates, bringing them at least the possibility of affirmation that Universalists believed they should have as God's children.

The Universalist General Reform Association was established in 1847, but efforts to eliminate Capital Punishment began much earlier in Massachusetts in 1820. By 1856 three states, Michigan, Rhode Island and Wisconsin had abolished

the death penalty. Universalists believed that every child of God was entitled to the full length of his or her years and the possibility of reform.

Some Universalists founded the American Peace Society to express their opposition to war of any kind. Others worked passionately in the cause of temperance. They believed that too many fathers spent their earnings in the local tavern and came home useless as parents and mates and also as wage earners with the result that alcohol use could be seen as a direct cause of poverty.

In 1870 the Women's Centenary Association was founded to raise money for the 100th anniversary of Universalism in America. When that anniversary had successfully come and gone there was thought of abandoning the group, but the women wanted to keep going. As one historian put it, the men generously offered to manage their money for them and the women graciously declined the offer. They would raise their own money, thank you, and they would manage it. They later became the Association of Universalist women, "said to be the first continent wide women's association in America.

The Universalists also founded Hopedale, a community not far from here which was to be an exercise in what they called "Practical Christianity. The community was organized in 1847 as a utopian farming community and it closed in 1851 due to lack of funds, because their major backer pulled out.

The Universalists, unlike the Unitarians to the same degree, remembered what their founders taught and many lived by what they remembered. This quotation from John Murray was particularly important to them.

"You may 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. Do not push them deeper into despair, but preach kindness and the everlasting love of God."

Anyone reading Universalist history can see that they had a great deal of energy and conviction going for them in the first half of the Nineteenth Century. In 1843, 5000 people attended the United States Convention of Universalists in Akron Ohio. In order to get there many had to cross the Allegheny Mountains in horse drawn wagons or riding horseback or walking. Because there was no way to house that many, travelers were asked to bring their own food and bedding.

The Akron church was too small to hold this large number and so they took out the windows of the church and erected a huge tent outside of it. Speakers stood by the open windows as they attempted to address at the same time the gathering inside and that outside, many of whom had to stand throughout the entire proceedings. By way of contrast some UUA General Assemblies have drawn less

than the 5000 who came to Akron, and the longest walk contemporary UUs have to make was getting from the airplane to the baggage area.

However by the end of the Nineteenth Century the Universalist movement was running out of steam. Partially this was because many people were no longer afraid that Hell would be their ultimate destination, and they saw that as Universalism's only message. Partly this decline was because the Universalists had such a fear of leadership that they cast themselves as indifferent to growth, and partly it was because The Universalists lost their evangelistic zeal and began to turn inward rather than to worry about what they might still have to give the world.

I am often asked what was the difference between the Unitarians and the Universalists, and I frequently quote the Reverend Thomas Starr King as part of my answer. Starr King had been both a Unitarian and a Universalist minister and in answering the same question said, "The Universalists thought God was too good to damn men and women and the Unitarians thought men and women were too good to be damned."

The Unitarians were upper middle class folk who, for the most part, thought very highly of each other and of themselves. The Universalists were working class men and women who were convinced that God was not just an intellectual principle –which many Unitarians did believe – but a source of love accessible to everyone. The enormous class difference between the two religious groups kept them apart, sometimes bitterly so, until 1961.

Today, we celebrate the Universalists who were for many years the ground troops of liberal religion. They promoted and defended the notion of a loving God when everyone else spoke of God in terms of judgment and fear. They fought for the freedom and dignity of all men and women when many Americans thought it was their right and duty to own slaves. They upheld the rights of men and women to have a say and a vote in the matters that most concern them. They argued that isolating prisoners from any possibility of humane treatment and friendships is both unacceptable and self defeating. They established colleges and universities so that their sons and daughters, and the children of other working families, could get a good education.

If the Unitarian reformers of another generation frequently had to buck the opposition of their well- heeled and comfortable fellow Unitarians, the Universalist Congregations were often united in promoting what they deeply believed. They had both the courage and the energy of their convictions and at the mid-point of the Nineteenth Century they were the sixth largest denomination in the country. Now their heritage is ours to learn from, uphold and defend.

