

**Universalism with a small u ©**  
**A sermon by Rev. Roberta Finkelstein**  
**First Unitarian Church of Wilmington, DE**  
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What's in a name? This month I have been preaching about our very long, many-syllabled name: Unitarian Universalism. A couple weeks ago I talked about unitarianism with a small u. That is, the idea of unitarianism before it was an official religion. The oneness of God. The unity of all creation. An approach to faith development that incorporated what Earl Morse Wilbur called the trinity of liberal religion: the use of reason, freedom to choose, and broad tolerance.

This morning we take up the second half of our name. Universalism with a small u. What is it? A big heart filled with love of God and neighbor; an awakened mind pushed beyond the boundaries of class, ethnicity and race; hands quickened to the work of justice by the deeply held conviction that every human being is created with inherent worth; and a face turned to a troubled world infused with hope. Universalism brings all of this to our liberal religious movement. Our opening words by Clinton Lee Scott tell the story of that broad and generous approach to life. Scott sought to arouse in people a spiritual humility that would lead to a broad and generous vision, an awareness that the sun does not rise and set merely on our little slice of the earth. He wrote of an awareness that laborers in the fields had as much need for blessing as the well-educated white collar class that frequented the Unitarian churches; an acknowledgment that poverty and inequality and violence make a claim on our religious energy. But his final words are words of hope. The sun, having seen the world as it is, arrives unsullied, harbinger of a new day.

Universalism, like Unitarianism, is both a modern movement and an ancient

heresy. The underlying theological assumption that has always driven it is this: God's power and goodness salvage all souls. God is too good to create any creature and then condemn that creature to eternal damnation. Standing within the providence of that good God, the only response we can offer is to do likewise - to love our fellow humans, to work to eliminate the various hells on earth that we have created, and to accept with good grace our own salvation. The language of our first Principle - that beloved affirmation about the inherent worth and dignity of every person - came to us directly out of the historical creeds of the Universalist Church of America. But before we consider the contemporary expression of universalism, let's go back in time to the earliest sources of this theology.

The first universalist-with-a-small-u, by which I mean somebody whose theology was universalist, rather than anybody who belonged to a formal religious movement, was one of the early fathers of the Christian church. Known as Origen, he was born sometime between 182 and 185 CE. Like the early anti-trinitarians, Origen was convinced that the truth of Christianity was found in the Gospels rather than the derivative teachings of the church. Origen rejected a literal reading or factual interpretation of scripture; he read the biblical texts as metaphor and understood the power of metaphor to communicate that which was otherwise incomprehensible and ineffable. He developed a theory that all souls were actually created at the beginning of time as spirits who were finite, rational and self-determining. Some of these spirits fell away from God, becoming demons, angels, and humans. This happened because God respected the autonomy of these created creatures, and refused to impose salvation on them against their wills. The world as we know it was created later as - well, sort of an educational lab if you will, where these fallen souls could work out their fallenness and return to their original state of grace. Redemption, according to Origen, meant the restoration of all of these spirits to the original state of harmony and unity from which they had chosen to

turn.

As you can imagine, Origen was not popular with those who were pushing the Christian movement towards an idea of salvation based on accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior, with no other redemptive option since the power of the church was based on the claim that it held the only key to salvation. The idea that anybody and everybody was already saved didn't leave them anything to hold over their flocks. Arguments ensued. The idea of universal salvation continued to float around the edges of Christianity for several centuries. It was mostly expressed in underground movements, and repeatedly repressed. The final death blow to this idea came at the Council of Constantinople in 381 CE when it was officially declared heresy and eliminated from the face of the earth. Or at least that is what the powers-that-be thought. They had good reason to conclude that they had totally banished universalism from the minds and hearts of Christians. Underground it went!

But as we know from studying our history, you can burn a heretic but you cannot kill an idea. The idea of universal salvation was thoroughly repressed, but it did not die. It quietly moved forward through time. Move forward more than a millennium and it pops up again, as pesky as ever. We find it next expressed in 18th century England.

I would like to impart the essence of that universalism-with-a-small-u through the experiences of two people: George DeBenneville and Thomas Potter. DeBenneville was born in England in 1702, to French Huguenot parents who had fled France to escape religious persecution. A sensitive child, he was tortured by visions, by dreams of burning in hell. You can probably well imagine the vividness of the preaching he was exposed to - preaching whose sole purpose was to convince people of their wickedness and degeneracy; an essential first step in convincing them to accept the salvation of Christ. But one day DeBenneville had

another dream - a dream in which he saw Jesus leading him from the flames forever. This dream, for DeBenneville, turned Christian teachings upside down! He became convinced that human beings are not craven and sin-filled, but simply imperfect. We are what we are. God knows this, and God, in His infinite love and wisdom, has a plan for redeeming us. Our response to this reality should not be one of fear or self-loathing or other-loathing, but love in return. Love of self, love of neighbor, love of God.

DeBenneville became a universalist-with-a-small-u, there being no established church that offered a conduit for these beliefs. He returned to France to preach this new and dangerous Gospel, and was arrested and condemned to death. He had already been led to the guillotine and was contemplating his eminent demise when a reprieve was rushed to the platform. This dramatic experience of deliverance only confirmed his sense of being in the hands of an active and loving providence. Eventually DeBenneville made his way to America, where he continued to preach his mystical, visionary brand of universalism, taking advantage of the radical freedom of the American frontier.

In America, universalism-with-a-small-u became Universalism with a capital U. One person we can thank for that is Thomas Potter. Potter was another man driven by mystic visions. A farmer in what we now call the pine flats of New Jersey, he had become convinced of the rightness of this radical and seemingly new doctrine of universal salvation. As he worked his land, he saw a vision - a vision of a little church, with a pulpit waiting to be filled by the right preacher - the preacher who could bring to life the convictions that Potter held in his heart. So he cleared one of his fields and built the chapel - anticipating by three hundred years Kevin Costner's act of faith. "If you build it they will come." One dark and stormy night - and I'm not making this up - a ship ran aground on a sandbar off the New Jersey shore. The passengers waded through the muck and mire and arrived at

Potter's door, hungry and wet. He took them in, offered them hospitality, and around the dinner table that night, the talk turned to theology. Potter discovered that one of his guests, the Reverend John Murray, had fled England with an angry mob at his heels. Calling him a heretic and a traitor, they had forced him to leave his home, renounce his pulpit, and come to America to seek a new beginning - all because of his universalist beliefs.

Potter then began to earnestly plead with Murray to preach from his waiting pulpit. Murray initially declined. He had sworn off the ministry as far too dangerous a profession. After much urging Murray agreed to deliver a sermon. Potter gathered a small band of family and neighbors who had the privilege of hearing the first American sermon from the Father of American Universalism. John Murray was a fine preacher; his words live on even today. Some of them may be familiar to you. "Go out into the highways and byways of America, your new country. Give the people, blanketed with a decaying Calvinism, something of your new vision. You may have but a small light, uncover it, let it shine, use it 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 their theological despair, but preach the kindness and everlasting love of God."

John Murray, eloquent and convinced of the rightness of his universalist theology, went on to found the first Universalist church in America, and to spawn many more churches across the new frontier. In fact, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Universalism spread like wild-fire across the new nation. The idea of salvation for all engaged the imagination and spirit of the pioneers. The picture of the regenerate sinner condemned to eternal damnation just didn't jibe with the sense of adventure, of ability and limitless possibility, of courage and optimism and hope, that the settlers of the American West possessed. A message of love and hope was welcomed, and at one point in the late 19th century, the

Universalist Church of America claimed the 5th largest membership of any American denomination.

It wasn't simply theology that impelled the growth of Universalism. That spirit of love and hope that inspired them shaped their mission as well. Thus the Universalist side of our ancestry arrived much earlier than their Unitarian counterparts on the front line of the abolition movement, the struggle for woman's suffrage, and other issues of the day that were driven by what came to be known as the Social Gospel. Knowing themselves to be loved and redeemed by a powerful and benign God, the only response our Universalist forebears could conceive of was to live one's life in gratitude for that love, and to attempt to bring that message of love to all of humanity. Our work today for racial justice is rooted in universalism. So is our work for marriage equality. For radical hospitality in terms of gender expression and identity. The words of welcome that we say at the beginning of every service, the words Marie said to you just a little while ago, are rooted in Universalism.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Universalism had become a victim of its own success. The Calvinist doctrine of predestination had begun to soften, and the doctrine of universal salvation had crept into the mainline Protestant churches. Rarely did one have to sit through an interminable sermon about how bad one was. Rarely did one have to wriggle in one's pew considering the flames of hell licking at one's feet. Unfortunately, the Universalists were better at starting churches than maintaining them over the long haul, and the Universalist church of America began to decline. But it survived as a small stream in the American religious thought and activism, and we are lucky to be its inheritors.

In 1961 the Universalist Church of America merged with the American Unitarian Association. Universalism brought to the merger the steadfast conviction that God is good, that people are good, and that good people ought to be about the

business of making themselves and the world a better place. You can find evidence of Universalist thinking in our Statement of Principles and Purposes - our affirmation of inherent worth, of the practice of justice, of a commitment to spiritual growth and inclusivity. In that spirit I'd like to introduce you to one more universalist with a small u. Kenneth Patton.

If you identify as humanist, you no doubt know Ken's work. If you don't, all you have to do is look him up in the index of our current hymnal. His writing celebrates all that we human beings are: thinking, feeling, celebrating, loving, hurting, meaning-making, mortal. In his poetry he gave voice to the humanistic affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of every person. In his hymnody he gave us voice to that affirmation. In addition to recognizing and celebrating the individual, Patton believed with all his heart in some kind of ultimate unity of all humanity. He wrote, "The commonwealth of humanity is ours to build. On our backs rest the age old burdens. Ours are the hands to toil, the minds to be tortured. In us flows the river of vision and strength. In ourselves are the fire and the fury, the tenderness and the pity, the wisdom and courage, the love and devotion. Yesterday was ours. Ours is today and tomorrow, this life, this world, if we will make them ours by the largeness of our love. There is a nobler commonwealth than a single nation, with all colors and tongues known as one race, with the nations become a family, a world of fellowship and peace. Ours is the commonwealth of humanity, now and tomorrow, building and yet to be builded."

When Patton was called to the ministry of the Charles Street Meeting House in Boston it was hoped that his leadership would help to revitalize a struggling Universalism. Instead of reviving traditional Universalism, Patton redefined it. His goal was no less ambitious than to create a religion for one world, a unified theory of everything religious, if you will. Ken's problem was that he believed that he had articulated a vision for one religion for all the world, and he expected the world to

welcome and embrace it. But all the world wasn't interested in giving up their particularities and signing on. His new universalism did not come to pass. But still, we inherit his vision and learn from his disappointments to honor the particularities while seeking out the universal.

#### Responsive Reading #437

Let us learn to love. Let us love the world by giving them not hell, but hope. Not sin, but potential. Not despair, but possibility. We live out the conviction that the sun arrives unsullied each morning, inviting us to engage the new day. Let us do so joyfully.