

# A ONCE AND FUTURE FAITH

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## CALL TO WORSHIP

Snug in a sleeping bag on the banks of the Salmon River, under clear skies, I observed up close and personal a few mysteries of life.

Looking up at the sky full of stars, through and beyond our galaxy, the Milky Way, to the Andromeda galaxy our nearest large galaxy neighbor, watching the natural fireworks, the Perseid meteor shower - a true celestial event.

Half asleep I realize that everything, you me, those stars, and the magnificent Lava Pillar hills on both sides of the river, the fish and the birds are all made of the same stuff – just put together in different ways.

I am full of awe and many questions. We are creatures who try to understand the understandable -- it is both exciting and humbling.

Yet so many questions have no answers. Where did we come from, where are we going? We don't know and that is OK.

It brings me to that thin place between the intellect and the soul and to know I'm surrounded by amazing grace and universal love.

Come, let us worship together.

## READINGS

We offer two readings this morning.

The first from 19<sup>th</sup> century Universalist minister Hosea Ballou

"The belief that the great Jehovah was offended with his creatures to that degree, that nothing but the death of Christ, or the endless misery of mankind, could appease his anger, is an idea that has done more injury to the Christian religion than the writings of all its opposers, for many centuries. The error has been fatal to the life and spirit of the religion of Christ in our world.; all those principals which are to be dreaded by men have been believed to exist in God; and professors have been molded into the image of their deity, and become more cruel."

And this from Augusta Jane Chapin, Universalist minister, one of the first women ordained in America

"We have all of us, whether rich or poor, whether high or low, of whatever nationality and religious conviction, the same supreme necessities and the same great problem and infinity of love. This old world has rolled on through countless stages and phases of physical progress until it is the home of humanity, and it has, through a process of evolution or growth reached an era of intellectual and spiritual development where there is 'malice toward none and charity toward all,' and when, without prejudice, without fear, and in perfect fidelity, we may clasp hands across the chasm of our differences and speed and cheer each other on in the ways of all that is good and true."

## SERMON

I begin with a short story by Anne Gertrude Sneller. "On a Sunday morning the bells of the three churches in the village called all to come to meeting, for the church was still spoken of as the meetinghouse. The bells did not interfere with one another; whichever bell started ringing first would pause after two or three minutes and let the others take up the summons. All three bells had individual tones easily identified. The loungers on the hotel steps, who never went to church,

not only recognized the notes of each, but were able interpret what they said. According to their insight, the Methodist bell shouted 'Repent! Repent!' The Presbyterian bell urged 'Church time! Church time!' Only the Universalist bell held out a cheerful promise. 'No hell! No hell!' it said. The hotel loungers felt safe in staying where they were."

Part of the controversy about Universalism among those outside that theological fold has always been that without the threat of hell over our heads, we would all end up lounging on the hotel steps. That if we didn't go to church out of fear or duty, we would never go at all. Unrepentant, everyone would just lie back in sinful indolence.

Yet, Universalists are not known for lounging on hotel steps or staying safely much of anywhere. Rather, the good and great news that an infinitely loving God could never condemn anyone to hellfire, inspired many to faithful action. Circuit rider Quillen Shinn visited every state and nearly every Canadian province, founding at least 40 churches. Augusta Jane Chapin, one of the first women ordained in America, served at least 15 congregations from Michigan to Oregon in nearly 40 years of ministry.

I often tell people who are new to our faith that both Unitarians and Universalists have arisen spontaneously and throughout history. Both were considered distinct heresies, often punishable by death, nevertheless people keep coming to these ideas all on their own. And it's still happening. We are indeed a once and future faith.

Throughout history, people have had powerful mystical visions and conversion experiences in which they are suddenly overwhelmed by God's great and embracing love. Our own endorsed community minister, the Rev. Dr. Emily Brault spoke just last week about how even as a fundamentalist Christian in her youth she couldn't believe in hell. It didn't make sense to her. How could a loving God condemn anyone to hell?

There's the story of John Murray many of you know, a preacher in 18<sup>th</sup> century England who had just such a mystical vision and got up the next Sunday and preached the gospel of universal salvation. He lost his pulpit and his family and landed in debtor's prison. Coming to America, he swore off preaching until fate dramatically intervened and instead he brought Universalism to the New World.

And these dramatic visions didn't just come to people in the past. It's still happening today. Carlton Pearson was a fourth generation Pentecostal preacher, graduate of Oral Roberts University, who preached the traditional gospel to a congregation of more than 5,000 in Tulsa, OK. Till one day, he stood in his pulpit and told the people that he did not believe God would consign anyone to hell. He had become a Universalist. He lost most of that congregation and lost the church building to foreclosure. He now preaches a new message – to a congregation of 1200 – a message he calls the gospel of inclusion.

Pearson explains: "It's really basic universalism, but I couldn't have called it that. I needed another name. [Perhaps because that one was already taken?] I am an evangelical Pentecostal fundamentalist, and we'd always believed that universalism was wrong. But the gospel of inclusion says that the whole world is already saved – they just don't know that. If salvation is a reality and people have been saved, the question becomes, have they been saved from God? or for each other?"

As Pearson discovered, Universalism does become a this-worldly faith. If we are not here to appease a vengeful God, not just here to earn entry into heaven. Then what is the purpose of life? Most Universalists would say we create both heaven and hell for ourselves, within our own lifetimes. So then, the point of a human life is to create that heaven, to live according to God's kindest wishes for us, here on earth among our brothers and sisters.

Pearson puts it this way, "[We are meant] to create a heavenly consciousness or reality or experience here. Being good or kind or receptive or tolerant gives rise to some happier experience on Earth. To use reward and punishment is elementary; it will not work. If we stop this idea of a hostile God who is difficult to please or appease, when we get past that, the presence or reality of peace on Earth becomes possible."

How can a person, when touched by the possibility of Peace on Earth, as Pearson has, remain silent? Quillen Shinn

couldn't. Augusta Chapin couldn't. Pearson can't. Neither can we.

Then there's the poignant story of Toribio Quamada, Universalist minister in the Philippines. Quamada, a Pentecostalist minister, came to Universalism through his own careful reading of the Bible. He was excommunicated. [Is the pattern becoming familiar?] Yet Quamada dedicated himself to bringing a message of hope and love rather than guilt and terror to his people, mostly poor farmers on the Philippine Island of Negros.

Then one day in the 1950s he found an article in an American newspaper – some say it was wrapping a fish he bought at market, others say it was crumpled as packing material – in that newspaper, Quamada found an article on Universalism in America. He was overjoyed to find that he was not alone in this powerful heresy. There were others, perhaps distant, but others who believed as he did. He wrote a letter and eventually got a reply.

In 1988, the Universalist Church of the Philippines became a member of the Unitarian Universalist Association. My friend Rev. David Keyes, who knew Quamada, tells the rest of the story. "Quamada was to be present that year at General Assembly [in 1988] to receive the certificate of membership. He never made it. A tireless preacher who roamed the nearly inaccessible mountains of his island home preaching the gospel of universal love and acceptance, Toribio became associated with the justice-making rebellions against the government-supported sugar cane plantation owners who exploited the people, stole their land, and subjected them to near-slavery.

"And it was as a consequence of his justice-making ministries on behalf of poor farmers that, on the night of May 23, 1988, less than a month before he was to be honored at our General Assembly, Toribio Quamada was murdered by a paramilitary death squad."

He became a martyr for our faith.

The pattern does become familiar. Far from causing people to loll about in a sinful state, touched by the great love of God, these Universalists embody that love with their lives. Carlton Pearson says he has gone beyond heresy to Pentecostals. "Now I am a reprobate, and I will be turned over to Satan." Now he finds himself on the board of Planned Parenthood. He has joined the United Church of Christ and has been embraced by the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities and he is welcomed into interfaith circles.

For some of us, the message of Universalism may no longer seem so radical, life-transforming. Of course, God, if there is a God loves all the children of the Earth. Of course that God would never condemn damn any living breathing being to hell. Alternatively, as I like to say: If there is a heaven, we're all going.

Peace on Earth indeed.

Yet we live in a world where we are still teetering on the edge of damnation. There are many who believe that humanity is divided between the saved and the damned. We live in a world where the consequences of such beliefs assault us daily. Religious wars rage. Our children are regularly told by classmates that they are going to hell. And I believe that, in this world, people are just as hungry as ever for the good and great news that we are – ALL of us – saved. We can still be messengers of that good and great news.

Universalism is still compelling to us because it touches a truth that resonates. There is love within us and we can feel it beyond us as well. That love is what calls us to our best selves and ties us to one another.

And Universalism is still compelling because we need it. We like to say that we don't do guilt. Certainly, we have done away with a judging and vengeful God who smites us if we do wrong. And we are done with the notion that through original sin we are naturally depraved needful of salvation. But that does not mean that we don't often feel guilty or unworthy. We are limited and imperfect creatures and we can feel so deeply unworthy.

We have, as Augusta Chapin put it, "the same supreme necessities and the same great problem." We can feel guilty and unworthy because we never manage to get it right. Yet we also have what Chapin called that same "infinity of love." That's the paradox, the dilemma or if you will have it, the great joy.

We feel unworthy and yet simultaneously we are called to worthiness. Called beyond ourselves to goodness and love. We can take comfort in feeling a loving presence with us always. Such a feeling is also ancient and modern. The sense that love is with us even in times of despair and darkness.

Listen to these lines from the 139<sup>th</sup> Psalm

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,"  
even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

This is a loving, non-judging, embracing presence. There is not darkness or light, there is only love. We will always feel unworthy at times, that is the nature of being alive. Yet we can also feel loved and held.

You can look at Universalism as being about hell. A loving God could not consign his dearest creation to the flames of damnation. Or you can look to heaven, knowing we are all saved, by virtue of being born. You can also reflect on being loved. Walking in grace and love, here and now.

No matter the angle, the Universalist message is life-altering.

For, if there is no hell and heaven is what we make of life on earth – the possibility of walking in grace is available to us all, all the time. The Universalist message, it is my deep hope, tells each of us that we are loved, worthy or not. That being loved calls us to loving one another. Marion tells us that she finds such a message in the night sky viewed from the banks of the Salmon River where she could see the Galaxy Andromeda and knew she is made of the same stuff as all of those stars.

For the Universalist good news does break down distinctions. For if we are all ultimately saved. If we are all loved and therefore all called to love one another, then Peace on Earth is possible and it lies in our very own hands.

Such a message does not lounge about, not at all. Such a message calls us to live from the best within us, to see the best in each other, and to take this good and great news into the highways and byways of the world.

Blessed be. May it be so.