

**The Triumph of Love: The Gospel of Universalism**  
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*Note: This sermon was preached in Universalist style – that is, extemporaneously. I used an outline and preached from my heart. In my mind, reviving the Universalist style of preaching from the heart is a crucial part of reviving our Universalist heritage in UUism today. Also the reading by Mark Mosher DeWolfe and the quote by Olympia Brown were recited from memory.*

The reading which accompanied the sermon:

Lovers Tossed By These Difficult Times.

“Know that the love which blooms inside you is stronger than fear,  
for people who love find strength they didn't know they had.  
Know that the love inside you is stronger than illness,  
for people who love hang in when physical health is gone.  
And know that love is indeed stronger than death,  
for people who love are like stones tossed into a pool.  
The circles of love radiate out and echo back  
long after the stone has come to rest on the bottom.  
So remember your love as a source of strength;  
remember who you are:  
lovers tossed by these difficult times.”

Rev. Mark Mosher DeWolfe

## **Unitarian Universalist History**

As Unitarian Universalists, we have a complicated and compelling history. It can be seen in two ways: 1. as the history of ideas or 2. as the history of religious denominations. We'll look at the history of ideas first. Both of these ideas unitarianism and universalism (with small `u's) date back to the second and third century in Christian history. Universal salvation is the *idea* of “universalism” with a small “u.” Those of universalist persuasion argued that no one is damned by God. It was an antidote for the belief predestination. Whereas “unitarianism,” also with a small “u,” is about the *idea* of the unity of G\*d. It was an anti-dote for trinitarianism.

We can also view the history in terms of denominations. The denomination of Universalism with a capital “U” that was founded in late 1700's in the United States. Hosea Ballou, a Vermonter, was the most influential Universalist of the 1800's. He was born 1771 died 1852. He wrote a pivotal book called the “Treatise on Atonement.” In it he “rejected the entire concept of the necessity of a vicarious atonement to reconcile God to humankind.” (Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalist*, p. 62).

The denomination of Unitarianism with a capital “U” was founded in the US 1825. William Ellery Channing and Theodore Parker were two significant leaders in the early Unitarian denomination. Boston at the time was THE culture center of the US. And Unitarians were among the educated Boston elite.

There were differences and similarities between the denominations. The two denominations had a lot in common. Both groups worked for abolition of slavery; both believed in the inherent worth and dignity of humans,

rejecting Calvinism's belief in depravity; both were organized by congregational polity. Both used the Bible and thought that scripture should be subjected to reason and not taken literally; and both were gradually distancing from mainline Christian ideas. Members of both groups were leaders in the women's suffrage movement. Both groups ordained women; Both believed in universalism (with a small 'u') -- that is belief in universal salvation. And both groups believed in unitarianism (with a small 'u') --that is a belief in One God.

So many ideas, figures and streams of thought. When I first started to study the history of our movement, I was confused. There is a little saying we use sometimes with our children in Religious Education:

We are the religion of  
The Open Mind  
The Loving Heart  
And the Helping Hands.

I have come to a simplified understanding: to associate the Open Mind with the Unitarian part of this tradition, The Loving Heart with Universalism. The Helping Hands or service is where we bring it all together.

While there were doctrinal and theological similarities, there were also differences, particularly social and economic. Unitarians were upper class, highly educated. Their ministers were seminary-trained. Universalists tended to be lower class, less educated and rural. Their preaching was more earthy, and moving. Their ministers did not necessarily attend seminary.

### **The Merger**

Since they had a lot in common and both denominations were struggling, the two denominations merged in 1961. "Universalists thought that God was too good to damn them, and Unitarians thought that they were too good to be damned." The Universalists at that time of the merger were concerned that their tradition would be eclipsed by the more forceful, intellectual, heady, erudite Unitarians. And I think that what they feared has come to pass to some extent. And we are experiencing now in Unitarian Universalism, a resurgence of interest in the Universalist side of our tradition. It's this less valued side of our UU tradition, Universalism, which is what I want to explore with you today.

### **But What Does Universalism Mean Today?**

Hear these words by Olympia Brown:

#569 in "Singing the Living Tradition"  
"Stand by this faith.  
Work for it and sacrifice for it.

There is nothing in all the world  
so important as to be loyal to this faith  
which has placed before us the loftiest ideals,

which has comforted us in sorrow,  
strengthened us for noble duty and  
made the world beautiful.

Do not demand immediate results  
but rejoice that we are worthy  
to be entrusted with this great message.  
That you are strong enough to work  
for a great true principle  
without counting the cost.

Go on finding ever new applications of these truths  
and new enjoyments in their contemplation,  
always trusting in the one God which ever lives and loves."

Olympia Brown was born in 1835 in Prairie Monde, Michigan and died in 1925. She was “one of the first women ordained to the ministry by an American denomination.” (Robinson, p. 223) She was prominent in the fight for women’s suffrage. She served several churches including one in Racine WI, which is now named after her. “She wanted to preach against the doctrine of endless punishment, that to her horror, had been prevalent in (seminary).” (Robinson, p. 223). Brown and the other Universalists responded to a pressing need of the time. They provided a powerful antidote of Hope, Courage, and Love when judgment, despair and fear had been the prevailing messages from mainstream churches. No wonder Universalism was so popular and spread like wildfire in America in the 1800’s..

However, when I first heard Olympia Brown’s words I was surprised and confused. I was surprised that such a piece was even in the hymnal. It didn’t really seem like this faith of UUism was one of the most important things for most of us. I wonder if Olympia would be disappointed in us modern tepid UU’s? Mainline churches are no longer emphasizing a message of harsh judgment and despair. So Olympia’s message doesn’t have the punch it had back then. In a sense, universalism won. The debate over hell and damnation in the American protestant churches has all but ceased.

So, what does Universalism mean today? Olympia herself gave us a clue of how to proceed now. In the reading earlier, Olympia Brown over 100 years ago sent forth the charge:

“Go on finding ever new applications of these truths  
and new enjoyments in their contemplation,”

It is up to us to keep on delving the depths of the meaning and power of Universalism. See how Universalism speaks to the world today. It is up to us to have the courage to face today’s fears

### **Universalism as Loving Inclusiveness**

Our denomination is different in that we say we have no creed. You don’t have to believe a certain way to belong here. It’s not a creed holding us together, so what is it? (Pause...). I think its love. Whereas Unitarianism is about tolerance, Universalism is about Love. As Mark Mosher DeWolfe says (in the reading from earlier in the service):

“Know that the love which blooms inside you is stronger than fear,  
for people who love find strength they didn’t know they had. “

A religion that is meaningful is an antidote to the agony of the era.. What are the agonies of this era and how does our faith speak to them? It seems to me that one of the greatest agonies of our time is the religious factionalism within the United States and also across countries and faith traditions of all sorts. We are fighting and killing each other over our different beliefs. How does our faith address this agony of our modern world? Universalism asks, do you have the courage to open your heart to this aching world? Do you have the courage to love? The Sufi poet, Rumi, provokes us: “Risk everything for love if you are a human. If not, leave this gathering.” Love is risky. Love opens the heart. In past centuries exclusionism was about judging who was “saved” and who was “unsaved.” Those in our lineage believed that a loving G\*d excludes no one – that in G\*d’s eyes everyone was redeemable and valuable. Such a loving G\*d calls us to find greater capacity for love in our own being. They believed that as humans we should try emulate G\*d’s love. They stood up strongly and spoke out against exclusion. Exclusion is “othering.” Our Universalist foremothers and fathers preached love and acted for inclusion.

Have you felt the pain of being excluded somewhere where you really wanted to be? What forms of exclusion are devaluing individuals and harming communities **now**? The exclusion of GLBT folks is certainly one area. And true to our Universalists roots, our denomination has taken a stance. We open our arms to all people, to all families. This denomination was one of the first to support ordination of GLBT folks, and to take a stand in support of civil unions and gay marriage. Many congregations have gone through the process of become self aware in terms of GLBT issues through the “Welcoming Congregations” training and process. All of these are examples of living our Universalist heritage of love and inclusion.

And what other forms of exclusionism are playing out in your life? What forms of exclusion are playing out in our congregations? I invite you particularly to look at not just places where you might be excluded, but also places

where you may be excluding people. Where do you personally draw the line? Are there people whom you feel are “other”, so different from yourself that you can’t relate? I have for example noticed in particular that UU’s can be unintentionally exclusive along class lines. This I think is a very challenging area for us UU’s to have the courage to look at. It’s very important that we do. Where do you draw the line? Who is “other” to you? Where is fear playing into to how You relate to those who you perceive as different? Universalist were lower class people and their fear of the exclusion of folks like them after the merger seems to have come true. The Universalist message of love and inclusion suggests that we all have work to do in this area.

### **Universalism As Oneness of Religious Sentiment**

A second meaning of contemporary Universalism is oneness of religious sentiment. This meaning of Universalism is summed up in the bumper sticker: “God is too big to fit in one religion.” Behind me you see hanging a string of flags from major religions of the world. Rumi puts it this way:

“I am neither Christian, nor Jew, nor Muslim. Doing away with duality,  
I saw the two worlds as one. I seek One, I know One, I see One, and I call One.“

The roots of the word “universe” mean “turning as one.” Whether we like it or not, we are all interconnected, interdependence, indeed, “turning as one.” As Universalists we seek for the unity that harmonizes. As Universalists we attempt to discern the Oneness -- not only in our theologies -- but in all the known world.

The gospel of Universalism has a message of hope and a message of warning. We are all indeed one, interconnected, interdependent. The Vietnamese Buddhist teacher, Thich Naht Hanh calls it “Interbeing.” Our very being is interdependent, interrelated with every other being. So there is no being that is not inherently part of us. There is no “other.” As a species, we’ll either recognize our commonality or perish from our divisiveness. Our very survival may depend on our ability to live the Universalist message of all-embracing love. In these times of global strife, particularly across religious lines. Universalism offers a compelling message of hope.

Bede Griffiths was a great teacher of these deeper Universalism. He was one of the greatest religious leaders of the 20<sup>th</sup> century whose influence is only now beginning to emerge. The Dalai Lama credits Bede with “opening the hearts and minds of mankind to gain understanding and acceptance of all the major religions.” He was a Benedictine monk. He also lived in India for more than 40 years. Bede went deep into Christianity and also very deep into Hinduism. And You know what he found? (Pause). One light. Within both Christianity and Hinduism -- the One same Light. In the words of Bede Griffiths:

“One of the greatest needs of humanity today is to transcend the cultural limitations  
of the great religions and to find a wisdom, a (universal) philosophy,  
which can reconcile their differences  
and reveal the unity which underlies all their diversities....” (Barnhart, p. 410-411).

Bede uses the example of the hand (holding up the hand, palm out with the fingers spread) with each finger representing a different faith tradition. At the finger tips they seem so different (pointing to the fingertips). But when you go deep to the center they share a common light (moving and index finger down to the palm of the hand). When Bede studied the different traditions deeply, he found the same light in the center. Do you know this Unity that Bede is speaking of? This is the religious experience, beyond words, beyond logic, beyond duality. This is the unitive state that members of any religion or no religion can experience. Some would say it is Love.

Universalism today means having the courage to live with an open heart, emulating G\*d’s love in how we treat others, not “othering,” living with an open heart. Universalism today recognizes the commonality across our difference, including those who are different and stretching our heart to love. It is a powerful antidote for the agonies of our era. For when Love triumphs there are no losers. Hear these closing words from Olympia Brown:

There is nothing in all the world  
so important as to be loyal to this faith  
which has placed before us the loftiest ideals,  
... Do not demand immediate results  
but rejoice that we are worthy

to be entrusted with this great message.  
That you are strong enough to work  
for a great true principle  
without counting the cost.

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