

The 2010 Universalist Heritage Foundation Award-Winning Sermon

“The Heart of Universalism”

by Reverend Barbara ten Hove

Delivered on Sunday, February 21, 2010

Dramatic Presentation: You Matter to God

Action: A young woman walks slowly across the stage. Suddenly, a person, who holds up a big sign saying – UGLY, confronts her! She shrinks a bit.

She turns around and walks back. Then she encounters a person, who holds up a big sign saying: STUPID! Her body shrinks again. She is barely standing.

Finally, she slouches back the other way where she encounters yet another who holds up a big sign saying: UNLOVABLE!. Completely undone, she falls to the floor, a sorry mess of a person.

Another person enters. She put her arms around the first woman.

Speaker: "You matter to God."

Action: At first, our shriveled piece of humanity doesn't believe her and she shakes her head.

Speaker: "You matter to God."

Action: She starts to stand up, with help from the other. She sees the nasty signs but before she can fall down again she hears,

Speaker: "You matter to God."

Action: She stands up tall, smiles at the signs, turns and hugs the other woman. Then she goes to the folks holding the signs and hugs them, too. They put down the signs and hug her back. They all stand together holding hands.

Speaker: "You matter to God."

Hymn #34 *Though I May Speak with bravest fire and have the gift to all inspire but have not love my words are vain, as sounding brass and hopeless gain.*

Though I may give all I possess, and striving so, my love profess, but not be given by love within, the profit soon turns strangely thin.

Come Spirit come, our hearts control, our spirits long to be made whole, let inward love, guide every deed, by this we worship and are freed.

Sermon: [The Heart of Universalism](#)

"Come spirit come, our hearts control, our spirits long to be made whole. Let inward love guide every deed. By this we worship and are freed."

I have always loved this hymn with its familiar tune and powerful lyrics. The words are based on the famous letter Paul of Tarsus sent to the church in Corinth nearly 2000 years ago. He was reminding them that the most important thing they could do was to love one another,

completely and fully. You may remember the closing statement of this famous passage. It goes, "And so abides faith, hope and love, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

Love is one of those words that has come to mean so many things that it is almost meaningless. Yet I would venture that it is still one of the most important words in any language. For love is, in my view, the most holy thing in our world, probably in our universe. I believe, with the Gospel writer John, that God is love. And it is about that loving God that I want to talk today.

This morning we are gathered in a Unitarian Universalist Church. We have no creed or dogma that binds us together. We seek to welcome people of all backgrounds into a radically inclusive community based on principles, which inspire us to accept the worth and dignity of every person and the interdependence of all life. So, it is always interesting to note that our non-creedal church has, as its name, two doctrinal statements. And not just any doctrine. The name of our faith is based on two radical views of God.

Our Unitarian forebears came to believe that the doctrine of the trinity – that God was father, son and Holy Spirit – was not scriptural. They preached the *unity* of God, a belief that led them to move Jesus out of the center of their faith, and ultimately to a view of God that was far less personal.

Universalists, on the other hand, came to believe in the doctrine of Universal Salvation. This is the idea that God, who is the source of both life and love, would never condemn people to hell. It may not surprise you that this idea was even more radical than the one espoused by the Unitarians.

While some of the theological aspects of early Universalism have little to do with our approach to it today, I think it is important to understand why it was so radical. The predominant theological perspective in 18th century England and America was Calvinist. John Calvin, the 16th c. Swiss reformer, taught that through Adam's fall in the Garden of Eden, spelled out in the book of Genesis, all people were forever tainted with original sin. (In other words, every human since Adam was born a sinner.) While Jesus' death on the cross was salvific, only a few people, preordained from the beginning of time, would be saved and go to heaven. The Calvinist God was "an angry God," who had no qualms about throwing everyone into the pits of eternal damnation.

This view of God came under fire as the Enlightenment and its scientific gleanings took hold. The ancient understanding of earth as the center of the universe was displaced and human beings knew themselves to be living on a spinning planet in the far reaches of space. God, in this model of the universe, began to seem very far away and not nearly as concerned with the day to day lives of mortals. Human beings were on their own and seemed to be doing just fine without an interfering God.

Our Unitarian forebears began to see in this human progress the seeds of goodness and hope that would lead them to believe in the unity of God and the humanness of Jesus. Meanwhile our Universalist ancestors saw in the same things the hand of a loving God who moved through human beings creating a "Kingdom of God on earth." For them, God might be further away but was no less loving or concerned about human life.

This gospel of a loving God came primarily from reading the Bible and through experiences in nature. Our lovely planet touched the hearts of our forebears, and they saw in the Christian scriptures no reason to believe in a hateful God or a benighted universe.

Universalist theology was not monolithic and early on, people within the church came into conflict with each other about it. Hosea Ballou, the greatest proponent of Universalism in the early 19th c., believed in what was to be called (not altogether nicely) "Death and Glory" Universalism. He believed that all people, no matter what their sins on earth, would join in God's glory immediately, and that there would be no suffering at all for sinners at death. He truly believed that sinners suffered plenty on earth, and he would happily tell story after story of such people.

But others weren't so taken with this belief. While they saw in Jesus' teaching the radical love of God and could never get their heads around the idea of eternal suffering, they wanted to think that *some* suffering would occur for sinners. Thus, they were called "restorationists" believing that sinners would be restored to glory after an appropriate length of time suffering – oh, maybe 50,000 years!

Yet all Universalists believed that you mattered to God. What kind of God, they asked, would not love all people? Certainly not the God of Christ. For our early Universalist ancestors were clearly Christian. In fact, as one missionary, Quillen Shinn, was to say, Universalists "believe more than any other Christians. We [believe] the whole is greater than the part. We stand for the whole."

This radical love and wholeness of God was to transform the lives of many people who came into contact with it. People like Horace Greeley, editor of the influential New York Tribune, who would find in his Universalism the basis for his anti-slavery stands and his work for women's rights in the mid 19th c. Clara Barton, famous for founding the American Red Cross, was a Universalist. And P.T. Barnum, who once said "There's a sucker born every minute" truly believed that all those suckers were loved by God. He was a Universalist, of course.

As Universalism matured into the late 19th and early 20th century, it began to focus more on the importance of bringing God's love to bear in the world than worrying about what would happen after. Universalism began to remind people that they and all others were already saved, already part and parcel of the holy. De-emphasizing the role of heaven, they continued to stress the importance of caring for one another in *this* life.

The radical message of Universalism, that all people matter to God, also challenged the traditional view of non-Christians as heathens and unworthy of respect. In its earliest incarnation, few Universalists would have understood themselves to be advocating for worldwide acceptance of religious diversity, but this was a logical progression. If all people were saved, it had to mean *all* people, not just all Christians. And thus Universalists began to see themselves as missionaries to the world and to the culture. Carry the word of this radical love and maybe, just maybe, wars would cease and people could live in peace.

Universalism is still a powerful message. Peculiarly, this message of Universalism has found itself a part of some very conservative churches. For example, it may surprise you that the skit you saw earlier I witnessed many years ago in the largest church in America, Willow Creek Community Church. Willow Creek is one of hundreds of thriving congregations that are based on the idea that "seekers" – people who are unchurched but open to becoming a part of a spiritual community – are looking for a positive and simple message that will help them live their lives in good ways. Many of these churches have become what are called "mega-churches," meaning that they have thousands of members and huge physical plants. They creatively use music and drama to get across the message that "You matter to God."

When I first saw this skit I found it to be very moving. It showed me the kind of message a church like Willow Creek is giving to those thousands of visitors. A message that is affirming, loving, and ultimately, at least within their theological framework, *a lie*.

That is a strong statement, I realize. But it is a lot closer to reality than they would like you to believe. It is what disturbs me the most about these mega-churches. Far too many of them bring you in with the message that "God loves you just as you are," and then they tell you in the fine print that you will go to a "Christless eternity" – their euphemism for hell – if you don't believe in *their* particular version of Christianity. You matter to God *up to a point*. When you reach that point, and don't qualify, off to hell you go.

This idea that all of us matter to God, portrayed so vividly in a church so different from our own, caused me to sit up and reflect on my own faith. For I am a Universalist, a religious position that truly believes that all people matter, unconditionally. When I saw my beliefs used to entice people into a fundamentalist church of thousands, I wondered why we weren't shouting out to the rooftops that this message is Universalism!!! And what they are preaching sounds like Universalism but it isn't. Then I realized that perhaps we are not willing to preach this radical message because we are reluctant to use language that carries weight in the religious culture we live in. In other words, we are unwilling or unable to say that our faith carries the powerful message that all people matter, *to God*.

Now I know that the word God brings up lots of challenging and often negative stuff for UUs. I know that, indeed. And I recognize that here, in our own congregations, we have to be careful and thoughtful in the choices we make regarding religious language. But I am far too aware that when we choose *not* to use religious language in places *beyond* these doors, we are frequently written off as irrelevant, or as a group of people who are not religious at all. And I am unwilling to let that happen. I want to preach the good news of Universalism (and Unitarianism, too!) to people who need to hear that they matter – not just to other people, but to God as well.

What might it really mean to preach that all people matter to God? My friend and colleague Tom Owen-Towle says it well when he writes,

"In a period of intransigent provincialism, our world hungers for a faith of inclusion. In a time when bigotry is rife and divine retribution is still promulgated from pulpits, contemporary civilization needs a hopeful, courageous religion of earthy compassion and heavenly acceptance" (*The Gospel of Universalism*, p. viii).

"Heavenly acceptance" means that you matter and are loved – by God.

This brings us back to the radical notion that God is love. What if this is really true? What if the loving spirit found in all human beings (though too often beaten out of us by fear) is where God dwells? What if that is what Jesus meant when he said that "the kingdom of God is within you"?

Fundamentalism of all stripes tends to teach that God is something far apart from humanity, and that this God is all about anger and fear (not to mention reward and punishment). We see this kind of belief embodied in acts of terror all across the globe, including here at home. Most of the people who commit these dreadful acts have been taught and truly believe that God wants them to do what God will do eventually: punish sinners. If you believe in the idea of everlasting punishment and the concept of God as a person who delivers that punishment, then it is an easy step from belief to action. The terrorist might think that he or she is acting for God and that God would certainly approve.

Our faith promotes something radically different. Universalism teaches that love is at the heart of humankind. Universalism says that if God is love, then we must act out of that love to make the world a better place.

Clearly, Universalism is a message that our world is desperate to hear. Why aren't we preaching it more strongly?

The former president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the Rev. William Sinkford, had this to say about it.

"We see ourselves," he wrote in our denominational magazine, "as a tiny and fairly radical movement....[and] we have spent most of the last 40 years talking to ourselves about who we are... But while we have been talking to ourselves we have not noticed that much of the religious world has been shifting toward us. Despite a well-funded din from the religious right, most Americans have decided some things in our favor: Empowerment of women is a good thing; gay and lesbian persons are human beings and are to be valued, not discriminated against; the world is a religiously pluralistic place; there is not one gate to the city." He then concludes, "We're no longer way out on the margins, and we no longer need to confine our message to the little side streets in our UU neighborhoods. We can take our good news to the center of the public square with some expectation that it will be favorably received" (*The World*, May/June 2003).

Why don't we? I think one reason may be that we, not surprisingly, choose to distance ourselves from those who have usurped the name of God and made it into something even Jesus wouldn't recognize. But in so doing, we have – inadvertently perhaps – given the religious right the bully pulpit, and have walked away instead of engaging them. And because we resist speaking out in the common language of the religious world, our voices are not heard above the din of religious righteousness.

A few years ago I went to hear Barry Lynn, leader of *Americans United for Separation of Church and State* speak. He reminded us that the percentage of conservative Christians in our nation is actually quite small – less than 20%. Yet, one would think that their way of understanding Christianity and religion is the only way. It isn't. There is another way.

It's called Universalism and it challenges us to speak out to our friends and families and to all who can hear that they matter – not only to the people closest to them but to that mysterious presence that lies at the heart of the cosmos – the great spirit of love.

I do not know what the Gospel writer meant when he said that God is love. I do know that love is the most holy thing in all the world, whether we call its source God or not. And that radical love for all people and all life is at the heart of Universalism, our saving and life transforming faith.

Universalism *is* a faith that can transform lives, as its message did for the character in the skit. I have seen people change in powerfully positive ways because they discovered that they were not "sinners in the hands of an angry God" but flawed and growing human beings with the potential to love themselves and others.

"Come Spirit Come, our spirits long to be made whole. Let endless love guide every deed." Endless love is what I believe God is all about. Can we learn to let that endless love show through us in strong and powerful ways? Can we have faith enough in that love to stand up to those who would say that God's love is limited only to the saved, and instead preach a

Universalism that believes in eternal love?

What do you think our world would look like today if people believed and acted upon the Universalist idea that all people matter to God? And that God is love? I believe it would truly transform us in ways we can only imagine today. But let us imagine it. More, may we seek to live from that loving place inside us all, where I believe God dwells, seeking to change the world one kind act, one hopeful word, one caring hug at a time. For when we reach out in love to others, we create a circle of caring that embraces all.

Closing Words: Let us give thanks for the gift of our gathering, truly a circle of kinship where we discover we are neighbors with all people, everywhere. May we commit to never break the circle of enabling love, but rather be a place where love and forgiveness are given and received.

And may the radical love that lies at the heart of the universe, which some call God, be with you and bless you as you go forward on this day.