

The Universalists and God's Love
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“The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked. His wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else but to be cast into the fire. It is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment.” (Jonathan Edwards 1741)

These are the words of the Reverend Jonathan Edwards, from his famous sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”, preached in Northampton, Massachusetts. Written in 1741 these words described quite well the Calvinism of 18th and 19th century American and England. In some places, this Calvinist theology continues to be practiced today.

“The great idea of universal salvation filled its believers so full of joy, giving such an impetus to the benevolence and love, that their zeal to impart its light and comfort to their fellow-men seemed to correspond with its vastness and glory. The natural consequence of

this state of things was to arouse the clergy, who had quietly settled in the doctrine of endless misery, and were enjoying a comfortable living with their people, who believed their doctrine, to look about them, and to exert all the means in their power to oppose and put down a doctrine, which, to them, appeared to be subversive of Divine Truth, and dangerous to the interests of souls committed to their charge". (Hosea Ballou mid-1800s)

These are the words of the Universalist preacher Hosea Ballou from his paper "A Short Essay on Universalism" written around 1849.

Ballou was responding to the Calvinist theology of the day which had not changed since 1741 when Edwards uttered these now famous words.

And, also, John Murray. Murray's Universalism came hard to him. A strict Calvinist in England, Murray and his wife were drawn to a local church that was described as wicked and immoral where a strong doctrine was being preached. What he found was a group of people who believed that no one would be damned to hell for eternity. Initially he was horrified. What else would keep people on the straight and narrow if not eternal damnation? Soon, however he was converted to this radical theology.

John Murray and Hosea Ballou...two of the most notable American Universalist theologians. Let me tell you about John Murray.

On the New Jersey shore about 2 hours from Newark stands a small white church. It is very old. It is the Potter Memorial Chapel. It is hallowed ground for Universalists who see it as the true beginnings of Universalism in the United States. Every year in November I go to the Murray Grove Retreat and Conference center and worship on Sunday morning in the Potter Chapel. One year I preached from it's famous pulpit. The chapel is, as I said, very very old. It is unheated, there is no electricity, and the only chalice that can be lit is a battery operated flame as the building would be lost if there was ever a fire. Some years we worship in heavy winter coats, mittens, hats and we can see our breath as we sing and pray.

This is the chapel that Thomas Potter built with the philosophy of "if you build it they will come." He was desperately hoping for someone to come and preach the Universalist theology that he loved and practiced. The Universalist theology of universal salvation and love.

In England a crushed John Murray, now a widow, excommunicated from his community because he had been

preaching Universalism, and having vowed to never preach again, boarded a ship to American...New York to be exact. Off the New Jersey coast the ship ran aground on a sand bar in a town called "Good Luck." I kid you not....Good Luck. When Murray went ashore he had a chance encounter with a farmer named Thomas Potter. In their conversation, Potter learned that Murray was a preacher of the "good news" of Universalism and excitedly asked Murray to preach in his chapel. Murray vigorously declined. However, Potter prevailed, suggesting that if the ship was still aground on Sunday, Murray might preach. Sure that the ship would be well on its way to New York by then, Murray agreed. As you might have guessed by now, the ship was still on the sand bar on Sunday, Murray preached at that small white chapel on Potter's farm, and a new American voice of Universalism was born.

This is what John Murray had to say on that auspicious day:

"I had no rest through the night. What should I say, or how address the people? Yet I recollected the admonition of [Jesus]: 'Take no thought, what you shall say; it shall be given you, in that same hour, what you shall say.' Ay, but this promise was made to his disciples. Well, by this, I shall know if I am a disciple....

Sunday morning [came]; my host was in transports. I was-I

cannot describe how I was. I entered the [chapel]; it was neat and convenient.... There was one large square pew, just before the pulpit; in this sat the venerable [farmer, Potter,] and his family, also particular friends, and visiting strangers. Surely no man, upon this side of heaven, was ever more completely happy. He looked up to the pulpit with eyes sparkling with pleasure ... and he reflected on the strong faith, which he had cherished, while his associates would tauntingly question, ‘Well, Potter, where is this minister, who is to be sent to you?’ ‘He is coming, in God’s own good time.’ ‘And do you still believe any such preacher will visit you?’ ‘Oh yes, assuredly.’ He reflected upon all this, and tears of transport filled his eyes; he looked round upon the people, and every feature seemed to say, ‘There, what think you now?’

Becoming a preacher again, preaching universal salvation and God’s unerring love was not an easy transition for Murray. As in England, Murray came under attack in New Jersey, moved to Newport Rhode Island and then to Gloucester, Massachusetts. He was under attack in all those places by those who were opposed to Universalism, and at one time, it was suggested that he was a spy for the British before the war. However he was able to re-establish his personal reputation by serving as a chaplain to the revolutionary

army.

Universal salvation. Such a radical, unorthodox concept. For the people of the time, people who, for the most part, were Christians, the idea that God's love trumped all was unimaginable. God could not be the one who loves unconditionally. It was beyond understanding that, in a time when people were punished, shunned and banished by the social structures of the day, God could work truly in mysterious ways.....the way of eternal love rather than eternal damnation.

Hosea Ballou, 25 years later, is even more radical in his understanding of Universalism. John Coleman Adams says: "until Ballou...Universalism in America was only Calvinism with a new conclusion—old orthodoxy with an heretical outcome."

Ballou's "*A Treatise on Atonement*" was a wholesale attack on Calvinism. Whereas Murray preached that Jesus died to atone for everyone's sins, Ballou rejected the entire concept of the need for vicarious atonement to reconcile God to humankind. Ballou rejected the idea of the infinite nature of sin because that would mean God is irrelevant. Since Ballou believed in the infinite nature of God, he reasoned that human nature is not inherently evil and that, although we are sinners, punishment for our sins happens in

this world. When we die we are welcomed by an all-loving, all-knowing God.

Universalism in America was very much a grassroots, people centered faith. It was predominantly rural, small and more democratic. As such Universalism was open to women in the pulpit.

Olympia Brown, the first American woman ordained was a Universalist minister who attended Canton theological School and was settled in my hometown of Weymouth, Massachusetts. After preaching each week for one month she was called by the congregation and stayed for 6 years. It is written that she was very popular, preaching the message of universal salvation and love, never failing to fill her church. Brown wrote that she believed “no soul is saved after the first 20 minutes” of a sermon, and I wonder if that wasn’t part of her popularity in a time when sermons could and did run more than an hour!

Augusta Jane Chapin, the second woman ordained to the Universalist ministry, was unable to attend seminary because Universalism was growing so quickly there was an urgent need for preachers in the mid-west. She became an itinerant preaching in the Portland, Michigan area where Universalism blossomed during her

ministry.

Neither Murray nor Ballou would recognize Unitarian Universalism today. Neither Olympia Brown nor Jane Chapin would recognize Unitarian Universalism today. For some of us, who yearn for a God-centered, spiritual liberal religious home, that is a tragedy. For some of us, who embrace a liberal religious community that upholds the human capacity for excellence without need of the spirit, that is the logical progression from 18th century religion to 21st century faith. In either case, the one thing that we can agree on is that love is what centered our early Universalist leaders. For them it was the love of God and how that played out was through the theology of universal salvation. Furthermore, our forefathers and foremothers faith was so so strong that they were willing to sacrifice for it. Some, like John Murray sacrificed their very home. Others, like Augusta Jane Chapin sacrificed their dream of continued study and education for the needs of the people.

We stand on the shoulders of faithful, faith-filled, committed figures. We who sit here today owe these men and women a huge debt. What is that debt? They did not lift up the love of God in Universalism for us to squander it. We have the responsibility to take up the mantle of these great leaders and spread the “good

news” throughout this community, this nation and this world. In a time like ours, when people are suffering, struggling, afraid, and angry, and when our beloved faith, Unitarian Universalism, is shrinking every year, we are called....no we are required to carry on the work of Ballou, Murray, Chapin and Brown so that the world will become a better more peaceful place and so that those who need it will hear that love is the center of our lives.