

“Love with No Exceptions: Origins of Universalism”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

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Many people within our Unitarian Universalist religious movement mark September 30, 1770 as the “birthday” of Universalism in America. And, according to that date, we celebrate 250 years of Universalism this year.

As Liza told it in our Story for All Ages, the events of that day 250 years ago were auspicious and also seemed highly unlikely. A down-and-out preacher from across the Atlantic Ocean happens to come ashore exactly where there is a chapel and a community waiting for a preacher to arrive.

Both Thomas Potter and John Murray were religious seekers within their own Christian traditions of origin. This was a time of continuing reformation within Protestant Christianity and new religious communities were still forming based on theological differences - differences in beliefs about the nature of Jesus Christ, methods of reading the Bible, beliefs about human nature and the fate of human life after death. Thomas Potter and John Murray, along with others in their religious circles, questioned the idea of a vengeful God of retribution and the eternal damnation that could come from that God - doctrines that were taught to them through Calvinist theology. Instead, an ocean apart, they come to the belief that God’s love must be powerful enough to ensure that all people would ultimately find a place in eternity with God.

These two men were not the only ones coming to universalist beliefs. Universalism was emerging from within many Christian communities in colonial America.

Around the same time that John Murray preached that sermon in Thomas Potter’s chapel, approximately 330 miles north in Gloucester, Massachusetts, the Sargent family was beginning their exploration of universalist theology. Judith Saunders and Winthrop Sargent, wealthy traders then based in Massachusetts, had raised their children in the Congregational church but they came upon the writing of the same universalist theologian in England who had influenced John Murray. A man named James Rely. Soon after, the Sargent family, including their daughter Judith Sargent, began gathering people together in Gloucester to explore universalist theology. Winthrop Sargent heard about John Murray and invited him to Gloucester where he made a big impression on everyone especially on Judith Sargent. This group of Universalists were soon banned from their congregational church for failing to show up on Sundays, and they sought to establish themselves as a

recognized religious community. They created the Independent Church of Christ in 1778 calling John Murray to be their pastor. About ten years later, after Judith's first husband had died, Judith Sargent, who had become a strong, female voice in public life and also a prominent literary figure, married John Murray. They both continued to be major players in the growth of Universalism in early America.

Less than a year after John Murray came ashore at Good Luck, New Jersey, Hosea Ballou was born in southwestern New Hampshire. Ballou was a Calvinist Baptist, just like his parents, but in his teens he was moved by the preaching of Caleb Rich, one of the earliest Universalist preachers in New England, and became convinced of the idea of universal salvation. Ballou went on to become one of the most powerful voices and thinkers for Universalism. He was a circuit rider preacher which was quite common at the time. From about 1803 to 1809, Ballou served the "Sister Societies" in Barnard, Woodstock, Hartland, Bethel, and Bridgewater, Vermont before moving on to a settled ministry in Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

Ballou had a dramatically different style from John Murray and represented the next generation of Universalists. He pushed the envelope further on the theological front than Murray did. Ballou was influenced by the thinking and writing of Ethan Allen of Vermont who was quite the critic of orthodox Christianity. Ballou, like Allen, sought to apply reason to his reading of Christian Scripture and came to reject trinitarianism. In fact, Ballou could rightly be called both a Unitarian and a Universalist more than 160 years before the official merger of these two denominations.

Despite their differences, Ballou and Murray were colleagues and major influences within the emerging Universalist religious movement. In 1798, in Murray's absence, Hosea Ballou filled the pulpit of the First Universalist Church in Boston, where Murray was the pastor, for ten weeks. While Ballou had come to a unitarian understanding of God, Murray was very much still an orthodox trinitarian. Hosea Ballou's ideas were so far afield from Murray's, in fact, that Judith Sargent Murray had a disclaimer read from the pulpit by a choir member: "The doctrine which has been preached here this afternoon is not the doctrine which is usually preached in this house."

Quite a statement to make with a guest preacher in the pulpit!

All of this may be more religious history than some of you have ever heard or ever heard in a single sermon.

For me, this history is important because it demonstrates how our own religious forbears grappled with truth, righteousness, and morality. It demonstrates how they strove for unity amidst their differences and for their own religious freedom. It demonstrates their imperfections and their search for integrity and the love and grace of God.

And, the history I have shared with you this morning is just a small part of that early history of Universalism in America and right here in Vermont. There are many other important figures and events that shaped the course of this branch of the religious river we swim in today.

As I think about that early history, I try to imagine what the stakes were for those early Universalists. How precious and important their beliefs were to them. How fervently they wanted others to believe as they did.

All of this has resonance today as we know that in our own times the stakes are high, that what we believe matters tremendously for how we choose to act, and most of us, I think, want others to believe what we believe.

Those early Universalists were laying the groundwork for us for a belief in radical acceptance based in an all-encompassing love, a Love with no exceptions. Then and now, radical acceptance is a high stakes theological belief. It is a belief that forces us past our comfort zones.

Those early Universalists were definitely treading in uncomfortable theological waters for many people. They were deemed heretics by many Christians and in some cases shunned in their communities. Amongst one another, they also sparred over their theological beliefs. The original Universalists did not agree on everything, and for many years, Universalist preachers debated with one another about the nuances in their beliefs.

Ultimately, they coalesced as a religious community around some basic tenets:

- God is Love
- God's love is enduring and all-encompassing
- All people will be part of eternal life of happiness with God
- Good works are necessary to maintain sacredness within our human community while here on Earth

Eventually, universalist theology became embedded in most of the mainline, Protestant Christian denominations in one way or another. Any notion of eternal damnation was

either rejected all together or de-emphasized. The belief that God is Love is espoused by liberal Christians of all stripes. As these beliefs became more engrained in mainline Christianity, the Universalist church began to decline in numbers up until its merger with the American Unitarian Association in 1961.

Universalism has continued to shift and grow and change over the years. Individual salvation in the hereafter is no longer of much concern and many people within Unitarian Universalism claim no belief in a divine, supreme being.

Yet, the theological implications of Universalism's most basic tenets find resonance now with the Unitarian and humanist aspects of our faith as it continues to evolve.

The theological propositions of Universalism endure in our religious tradition today and are foundational to our Seven Principles.

The tenets of Universalism continue to influence our religious movement, and contemporary theologians continue to wrestle with our theological origins and their application today.

One such theologian, the Rev. Nancy McDonald Ladd writes in her book, *After the Good News*, "If God's name is love, then God compels us to resist the fall to sinful violence by pushing back with muscular resolve against the social structures that confine our capacity to care. A universalist God for a tragic era is not a gauzy, hymn-singing force of personal devotion that draws us endlessly toward itself, but a fierce and compelling power that grips us by the collar amid our rebellious descent and calls us to choose the will to mutuality all over again, even when that choice is so risky that it could utterly remake us."¹

Today, as we continue to grapple with racial injustice and white supremacy, with exclusion, discrimination and violence against people based on sexual orientation and gender identity, we can feel that a remaking is underway. We can feel that remaking underway as we learn to care for one another in ever more expansive ways amidst a global pandemic and in the face of the climate crisis.

The Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray says, "Universalism teaches us that no one is cast out of the circle of love, that salvation is not individual but collective and that my liberation is bound up with yours. And the way we live this faith out loud is by developing greater courage

¹ After the Good News, pages 87-88.

and building more capacity for action and risk for the principles of justice, equity and compassion for all people today – in this life.”

As Unitarian Universalists, our theological roots are here to inspire us and to challenge us. And, we continue to shape and re-make our theological traditions to be sources of hope and resilience even now.

These words are often attributed to the Rev. John Murray: “Give them, not hell, but hope and courage.”

May we continue to offer hope and courage to one another as those early Universalists did to all those seeking a bit of good news to light their own paths forward.

So may it be.