

Coming to Believe that the Divine is Love

- Amanda Udis-Kessler, High Plains Church UU, November 6, 2011; updated June 15, 2022

Prayer: Spirit of Love, within, among, and beyond us, it can be so hard to trust that love is at the core of all things. Sometimes, when the day is beautiful and people are kind and the universe conspires to be on our side, love comes naturally, love comes easy. And sometimes, when everything is going wrong and our stomachs are clenched and our jaws are tight and we feel completely alone, the idea of love seems like a fantasy, a pipe dream, even a mockery of our experiences. Spirit of Love, help us to find love in all things and all places and all people and all times, and help us to become beacons of love for those around us. So may it be.

Reading: From Tom Owen-Towle, *The Gospel of Universalism* (John Murray's famous exhortation to his flock in the 1770s; p. v)

Go out into the highways and byways of America, your new country. Give the people, blanketed with a decaying and crumbling Calvinism, something of your new vision. You may possess only a small light but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. Give them, not Hell, but hope and courage. Do not push them deeper into their theological despair, but preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.

Reading: From Clarence Skinner. *The Social Implications of Universalism, 1915*

The Universalist idea of God is that of a universal, impartial, immanent spirit whose nature is love. It is the largest thought the world has ever known; it is the most revolutionary doctrine ever proclaimed; it is the most expansive hope ever dreamed.

Three phrases. They are on our orders of service every week, and many weeks the Worship Associate includes them in the opening words. The Divine is love. Everyone matters. Reason can be important in religion. Given how often we encounter these phrases at High Plains, we might come to find them mundane. But if we consider the history from which they emerged, all three phrases are radical and startling. And given some of the challenges of our world today, they remain equally radical and startling. Today we begin a three-week series on those three phrases and how they came to be on our order of service and in our words of welcome and in our hearts and in our aspirations. In a few weeks, Nathan Mesnikoff will talk about the importance of reason in religion. Next week, Roger will meditate on the power of claiming that everyone matters. And today, I'll start us off with the audacious claim that the Divine is love, and that God's love is universal.

While Unitarians such as William Ellery Channing believed that God's love was all-encompassing, I'll focus today on Universalists, who actually go all the way back to such early church fathers as Origen of Alexandria and Clement of Alexandria. Such church leaders had good material to work with, such as the First Letter of John with its famous words, "God is love,

and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” But notice that there’s still conditionality in First John’s quote: only those who abide in love abide in God, and God only abides in those who abide in love. What would First John say about Hitler? What would First John say about dictators the world over and just plain mean and ornery people? If they didn’t abide in love, did they not abide in God? More importantly, did God not abide in them?

Enter the Colonial and early-US Universalists, who took the conditionality and made it unconditional. Universalism during this period began with a simple question: How could a good God, the perfect father of all, damn the children he himself had created to eternal suffering? No loving parent would do that, and so Universalists rejected the idea of hell or at least the idea that anyone would be sent there permanently. Universal salvation said simply that all souls would eventually be reconciled and reunited with God. Some said there would be no hell; these were the ultra-Universalists. Others, the Restorationists, thought it would be okay for people to burn for 50,000 years or so as long as their suffering ended at that point.

Universalists came to this position based on visceral reactions to the Calvinist hellfire-and-damnation religion of the time, but also based on reasoned biblical scholarship and theological argumentation. For example, both Charles Chauncy and Hosea Ballou argued in different ways that since both humanity and sin were finite, God would not exact infinite torture. God as an infinite being must have infinite love and infinite patience for humanity. Therefore, said Ballou, humans could not frustrate or limit God’s love, no matter how much they tried. Similarly, in arguing against the Calvinist notion that there would be a saved elect and a much larger hell-bound population, Ballou asked whether a human father with ten children and enough food to feed them all would only feed five and leave the others to starve.

Given how good this news was in the context of its time, given how it must have restored and freed hell-fearing multitudes, it’s not surprising that early Universalists were tireless and fierce evangelizers. Recall John Murray’s 18th century exhortation, read earlier, to “go out into the highways and byways of America [and] Give the people...something of your new vision. You may possess only a small light but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. Give them, not Hell, but hope and courage. Do not push them deeper into their theological despair, but preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.” George de Benneville, possibly the first Universalist in America, wrote, “And I took [Universalism] so to heart that I believed my happiness would be incomplete while one creature remained miserable.” Universalist evangelist Quillen Hamilton Shinn reported in 1897 that in less than three years he had traveled more than 15,000 miles, averaging almost one sermon or address a day; had worked in 34 states, the District of Columbia, and two Canadian provinces; had organized eight churches and had gotten more than 20 other groups started. No wonder the Universalist movement took off.

The early Universalists were not merely passionate, they were clever. Once, John Murray was preaching and a stone crashed through the church window and nearly hit him. Lifting the stone, he said, “This argument is solid and weighty, but it is neither reasonable nor convincing.” He then added, “Not all the stones in Boston, except they stop my breath, shall shut my mouth.”

A number of good stories have also emerged around prominent Universalist theologian Hosea Ballou. Once he encountered a man who said that his son got drunk in the village every night and fooled around with women. (He must have lived in my neighborhood.) The man was afraid the son would go to hell. "All right," said Ballou with a serious face. "We'll find a place on the path where your son will be coming home drunk and we'll build a big fire and when he comes home, we'll grab him and throw him into it." The father protested, "But that's my son and I love him." Ballou said, "If you, a human and an imperfect father, love your son so much that you wouldn't throw him into the fire, how can you possibly believe that God, the perfect father, would do so?"

Another time, Ballou was asked what to do with a man who died reeking in sin and crime. He answered, "I think it would be a good idea to bury him." On a different occasion, a Baptist preacher told Ballou, "If I were a Universalist and feared not the fires of hell, I could hit you over the head, steal your horse and saddle, and ride away, and I'd still go to heaven." Ballou responded, "If you were a Universalist, the idea would never occur to you."

Universalism was initially organized between about 1770 and 1820, and we see in the early faith statements of Universalists the commitment to God's loving nature, which sometimes involved describing God as loving and other times describing as God as love. Two early examples: the 1790 Articles of Faith from a convention held in Philadelphia included the following: "We believe in One God, infinite in all his perfections; and that these perfections are all modifications of infinite, adorable, incomprehensible, and unchangeable Love." And a decade later, the 1803 Profession of Belief included the claim that "there is one God, whose nature is Love."

Eventually, based partly on contact with Asian religions, Universalism moved away from its Christian focus, a turn that was cemented in 1943 at the Universalist Church in America General Assembly. At that gathering, Robert Cummins, the General Superintendent, argued that, "Universalism cannot be limited either to Protestantism or to Christianity, not without denying its very name. Ours is a world fellowship, not just a Christian sect. For so long as Universalism *is* universalism and not partialism, the fellowship bearing its name must succeed in making it unmistakably clear that *all* are welcome: theist and humanist, unitarian and trinitarian... A circumscribed Universalism is unthinkable." Following Cummins' argument, Universalism today includes Christians, non-Christian theists, and religious naturalists who find in the natural order the same welcome that early Universalists found in Jesus, as well as many others. When mid-century Universalism asserted in its 1935 and 1953 Declaration of Faith that, "We avow our faith in God as eternal and all-conquering love," they included Christians but also a wide variety of people drawn together by the continual insistence that love is the core of all things, and love is at the core of all things.

History lessons are all well and good, but they only mean something if they invite us to respond today with our lives. So, there will be a brief quiz on today's sermon as you leave church today. Just kidding. We affirm that the Divine is love. So what? What does this mean for us today? How might we respond?

First, I believe we are invited into a different way of focusing on what's most important in our lives. If God is love, love is God. Love is what is deepest in our being. This suggests that our growth into wholeness and fullness is about cultivating love in our lives, prioritizing

relationships, practicing compassion. Whether this involves affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every single person or lifting up the interdependent web for tender loving care, seeing the Divine as love, and seeing love as holy, gives us a life program – something to work on as individuals, families, a religious community, a nation, and a planet. Unitarian Universalist minister Thom Belote has put this well; he observes that, “The central image [is] of a loving, merciful God – not jealous or wrathful – and our human response naturally to the knowledge of such a God would be to live lives of joy, mercy, and love. If God [is] merciful to us when it could be otherwise, we should be so merciful to one another. If God is gentle and loving to us when it could be otherwise, we should be so gentle with one another. If God [doesn’t] condemn us for our faults when it could be otherwise, we shouldn’t be so quick to judge.” If we think about how difficult it is to act consistently in loving ways, to refrain from judging, to put others before ourselves, we can see that arranging our lives around love is truly the work of a lifetime. And it is work that we are invited to by the claim that the Divine is love.

We’re also invited to cultivate gratitude in response to the good news that love grounds all things. The word gratitude comes from the Latin word *gratia*, which can mean grace, graciousness, or gratefulness. If there is a grace in all things, the grace that proceeds from all-inclusive love, gratefulness seems like a pretty good answer. Unitarian Universalist minister Galen Guengerich has actually proposed that gratitude should be the spiritual discipline of UUs, not least because, as our Postlude will remind us, if we are grateful all day, we will have peace at night. If we come to be mindful that, to quote a song by Joe Uveges, I am that I am and we are all in God, gratitude will be as natural as breathing.

Finally, along with gratitude, an acknowledgement that love is at the heart of everything leads us to work to make that love manifest in places where it may now be hidden by the scourge of poverty and the pain of injustice. In Hosea Ballou’s day, God did all the reconciling of humanity to God’s self; by the mid-20th century, Universalists affirmed “the power of [people] of goodwill and sacrificial spirit to overcome all evil and progressively establish the Kingdom of God.” Christian language, yes, but language that acknowledges human responsibility for bringing love from the core to the surface and helping all people to thrive. When we stand on the side of love, we affirm that we are doing the work of the holy in the world.

Almost a hundred years ago, minister and Universalist educator Clarence Skinner claimed that the Universalist idea of God was “the largest thought the world has ever known...the most revolutionary doctrine ever proclaimed...the most expansive hope ever dreamed.” We are the inheritors of that thought, that doctrine, that hope today. Its gifts bless us. Its demands call us forward. We don’t need to believe in a personal God that has saved humanity, as long as we are willing to hear the voice still and small inside us, singing the truth of love through storm and rain, sorrow and pain. Our Universalism can be grounded in giving thanks to life that enfolds us and helps and heals and holds us, so that we are prepared to go back out into the world and give it, not hell, but the hope and courage of our Universalist forebears. Let us take up the powerful invitation of Universalism and find deep joy, awe and humility there. And above all, let us be grateful, for the history and future of our liberal religion depends on it. Amen, and blessed be.