

**The “Gospel” of Universalism**  
**A Sermon by the Rev. Robert L. Morriss**  
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When I first started thinking about writing a sermon about the “Gospel of Universalism,” my plan was to share as much of Tom Owen-Towle’s book by that name as I could cram into the length of a sermon. Universalism has a rich history, full of heroes and heroines whose stories are truly inspiring. Tom does a good job of encapsulating some of that history in his brief book in a way that is easy and fun to read. I find that it is good to periodically visit those ancestors whose courage and hard work have gotten us to where we are today. The stories of their lives are truly inspiring and I wanted to share some of them with you.

But then practicality reared its head. Almost any of the chapters in this little book would make a good basis for a sermon, but there are twenty chapters, and while in good Universalist tradition people once thought nothing of spending 3-4 hours in a church service that was before the days of television and football playoffs, and I didn’t think that would go over too well today. So what to do?

Now I probably need to warn you that it was the gospel of Universalism that first attracted me to the UU tradition so I could go on about it for 3-4 hours. Growing up in the Presbyterian Church, and coming from (and being named for) a long line of prominent Presbyterians, it never occurred to me that I might be something other than a Presbyterian. It wasn’t something I chose. I was taught that it was a matter of having been chosen by God to be a faithful servant and by being faithful to make the world a better place. I didn’t really have a problem with that. Even the Unitarian – Trinitarian conflict didn’t seem significant to me, not that I knew that much about it. Of course God was one, and yet God’s spirit was in all living things and even as Jesus said, in the very stones that could be made to sing if God so willed it. Jesus was as good a model of what God’s spirit would look like incarnated in a human as I could think of and since we were all called to be like Jesus – fellow children of God – focused on the well-being of others - the doctrine of the trinity just didn’t bother me. Besides, it was an article of faith that matters of faith were the result of God’s revelation of God’s self, and could not be derived from rational thinking. So the fact that there were many expressions of the one God hardly seemed worth quibbling about.

But then there was that hell thing. The whole concept of predestination (that God elects certain folks for salvation and allows the rest to spend eternity in hell) is a concept that makes good rational sense if you accept the presuppositions on which it is based. And it is a disgusting theological concept if one thinks about it from “outside the box.” For me, it was particularly troubling because my own father had never been baptized or joined the church though he attended church with the rest of us on a regular basis. Dad just “couldn’t believe” what he was supposed to in order to make a profession of faith and he had enough intellectual integrity not to fake it. Of course that meant he was going to hell according to the doctrine I was taught – unless of course I became an effective enough evangelist to enable him to believe. It was a challenge I accepted at first. It was only years later when I finally gave myself permission to think about matters of faith objectively that I was able to step outside the box enough to reject the presuppositions that led me to believe in any doctrine of hell.

For anyone raised with a good deal of unconditional love – the kind that says “you’re OK because you’re you” the fact that folks could get that worked up about whether or not there’s a hell probably doesn’t make a lot of sense. On the other hand, to those who do believe in hell, and who also believe that one must have doctrinally correct beliefs not to end up there, those of us who don’t believe in hell represent a real threat. Not only do we threaten the salvation of any we might seduce into our unorthodox way of thinking, we also represent a threat to public order in so far as many believe that order and a civil society can only be maintained through doctrinally correct thinking and a proper fear of hellfire and damnation.

If one thinks that the concept of a “saving gospel” has merit, either in this world or the next, then whether or not one is a Universalist matters. We either have a saving gospel in that we liberate people from and irrational fear, or we threaten the “true” saving Gospel. It’s difficult to imagine how one could have it both ways. So let’s spend a few minutes considering whether or not the belief that there is no hell other than the one we create here for ourselves could be considered “good news” in today’s world - perhaps even good enough news that we might want to be evangelistic about it.

Let me start this consideration by saying that I tend to evaluate any theological or philosophical idea by judging it in the context of Kant’s categorical imperative. If everyone in the world believed this way, and acted on it, what would the world look like? It doesn’t work for me to claim for myself a belief system or the right to a behavior pattern that I would be unwilling for everyone to assume. So what about Universalism? If no one believed in hell might the world be a better place?

How one answers this question probably reveals a lot about our view of human nature. Do we need fear of punishment to keep us in line or are we more likely to behave in socially acceptable ways if we know we are loved enough that we will be forgiven for our mistakes? Can it work to encourage folks to do better just in order to create a better life for all those with whom we share life on this planet?

If one holds a belief in humanity as fallen and in need of redemption then the answer to the question of “Can we live creatively without the threat of punishment?” is a resounding no. This brings to mind the story of the Universalist preacher and circuit rider who met up one day with a Calvinist preacher as they were riding from town to town to spread their respective gospels. When the Calvinist discovered that his riding companion was a Universalist, he was appalled and declared that if he did not fear the fires of hell, there would be nothing to keep him from knocking his companion up the side of his head and stealing his horse and saddle. The Universalist minister reflected on this for moment and said that under the circumstances, perhaps he was lucky that his riding companion did believe in hell. And at the same time he wanted to offer his companion some reassurance. He was restrained from engaging in such behavior, not by a fear of hell, but by the fact that he recognized his companion as a fellow child of God, as loved by God and as cherished as he knew himself to be. Given that reality, he couldn’t think of doing him any harm.

For me that is the essence of the Universalist gospel. Do we behave better knowing we are

unconditionally loved and developing a deep empathy for our fellow creatures, or do we need the fear of punishment to keep us in line? The implications of how we answer that question flow through our whole lives. It affects how we raise our children. And if enough people believed it, it would radically alter the way we write our laws and how we structure our correctional system.

As many of you have probably heard me say, my own understanding of human nature is such that I don't believe in punishment period. Not eternal punishment or even the short-term variety we inflict on our children. That is not to say I don't believe in consequences. I do. And I agree it is necessary sometimes for parents to artificially structure consequences so that children can learn important lessons long before they learn about life from the school of hard knocks. Still, there is a big difference between structuring consequences so that someone learns something in a way that promotes their development of empathy, and the concept of punishment, which implies that someone should experience pain or shame as an added consequence. Given my view of the learning process, it is not surprising that I find the concept of eternal punishment repugnant.

But what if no one believed in Hell? Lets imagine for a minute that everyone operated from the assumption that as Jesus often stated, the kingdom, or queendom, or commonwealth of God is at hand – this is it. There's no coming judgment day and the "second coming" has already happened and happens again every time a child is born. Imagine if everyone thought that when we die as individuals we all go to exactly the same place – back into the one marvelous and mysterious creative energy out of which we came - in which we are surrounded by the ongoing creativity and loving affirmation of life that gives rise to everything that breathes.

What if the only heaven or hell that exists is the consciousness of how the contribution of our life's energy has affected this ongoing creative process? Or what if we don't maintain an individual consciousness and we once again become pure undifferentiated creativity and potential and what we did with our lives as individuals is judged only by the effect it has had on the lives of others and on the earth's ability to sustain life? Would holding such a belief affect the way you live your life or the way you treat others? Does holding such beliefs help us develop into loving, creative and compassionate people?

If one eliminates any possibility of eternal punishment, how do you think such a belief would affect a fundamentalist Christian? What difference would it make in the life of a Shiite or Sunni Muslim?

I can't speak for others, but for me the rejection of the concept of hell is a liberating belief. It enables me to tune into the affirmation of the universe without the slightest fear that I will find condemnation there. And yet even while this belief offers me affirmation, it calls me to account. If I don't believe in hell, what is my responsibility to those whose lives are controlled by the fear and the power associated with such a belief?

That is a hard question to answer. It is impolite to question other's religious beliefs. But if one has a vision that truly liberates and transforms lives is it not also impolite not to share it? Of course

sharing our vision can sometimes get us in trouble, and I'll be the first to admit that I normally remain silent unless I'm asked. Still, I sometimes wonder what might happen if I were more open about my beliefs, particularly when I think they represent Good News.

But where does one find such courage? One place might be in the life of John Murray who first preached universalism in this country 225 years ago. While he was welcomed by some, John Murray met with such resistance when he first preached Universalism in New England that he was made out to be a public enemy because of his Universalist beliefs. People threw stones at him in the streets and a public safety committee tried to force him to leave town. Indeed at one point while he was preaching in Boston a stone crashed through the church window, narrowly missing his head. Murray lifted the rock high and exclaimed, "This argument is solid and weighty, but it is neither reasonable nor convincing ... not all the stones in Boston, except they stop my breath, shall shut my mouth."

Murray was facing a belief system that was based on fear and his answer was to offer a different vision, one based on hope, courage, and a belief in the kindness and everlasting love of God. It made a difference in the lives of countless people in John Murray's time, and I believe, if we share our Universalist vision, however we each define it, it will affect the lives of still others as well in 2005.

So May it Be