

UU 101 SERIES

SO YOU WANNA BE A UNIVERSALIST?

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"Go out into the highways and byways of America. Give people something of your vision. 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." These words, while often misattributed to 18th-century preacher John Murray, who established the first Universalist church here in America, are actually words of advice that were given to him, and they are words that every good Unitarian Universalist preacher keeps in mind as they look out from the pulpit. I'm not going to give you hell this morning because it's already out there.

I will ask you the question, "So you want to be a Universalist?" And invite you to honor the legacy and promise of our Universalist tradition by loving the hell out of this world. Universalism has been present going back to the early days of the Christian Church. Over the years there have been various strands of universalism with varying levels of purifying fire involved, but the universalists that we are descended from are people who refused to accept the idea that God would send people to hell for all eternity or that Jesus was the only way to salvation. Universalists rejected the notion that people are either sheep or goats, saved or damned, and that our salvation depends on individual actions or achievements or faith. Instead, based on their interpretation of the Bible, they claimed that the embrace of God is meant for every person no matter what kind of life they have led.

This message of universal salvation has been life-changing for people who are used to a religious message that employs hell as a threat and as an incentive for good behavior. Universalism affirms that every person is worthy of God's love and possesses inherent worth and dignity. You are born with original blessing rather than original sin. Even when people do sin or make mistakes or err from right relationships with others, there is always the possibility of reconciliation. While the message of

universalism is experienced by many as hopeful and encouraging. It is also, as Reverend Forrest Church reminds us in our first reading, "an exacting gospel." It is challenging morally, spiritually, intellectually to acknowledge the original blessing of people who have carried out great cruelties or the inherent worth and dignity of people with whom we vehemently disagree. But don't let the haters destroy your faith in humanity; that's giving them too much power over you. But goodness, I know there are some who really test the strength and steadfastness of our faith. Aren't there?

I was well on my way with the sermon this week when I heard the news that James Dobson died. Dobson was an evangelical Christian leader whose life and work was focused on reversing what he saw as the disintegration of family values. He was known early in his career for encouraging corporal punishment as a way of asserting authority over children who he believed were rebellious and inherently sinful. This kind of punishment, he said, would instill the fear of God in children. He went on to found Focus on the Family, which, among other things, advocated and lobbied against LGBTQ rights, promoted conversion therapy, and started the purity culture movement. His view of humanity as inherently sinful, his understanding of God as something to fear, and his concept of morality caused generations of young people to grow up in a living hell in which they understood themselves as depraved and shameful.

It's been interesting to see the reaction this week among religious liberals to Dobson's death. "Will he burn in hell for what he's done? Will karma come into play? Will God greet him in heaven with a big hug? Or will he have to go through some intensive unlearning process before he can be reconciled with God?" This is one of those moments when Universalism calls us to really wrestle with our beliefs. If we are true to our tradition, we hope that he will be reconciled with a love greater than our understanding, which will help him recognize and atone for the immense harm he has caused. None of us can know for sure, but we can hope. Universalism is a faith that requires us to hold and grapple with great complexity to respect and embrace difference, not to tolerate bad behavior, but to recognize the humanity in others.

Part of what it means to be human is that we are worthy of love and we are capable of evil. It is possible, though, to uphold the humanity of others while at the same time naming evil when we see it. In *Goodbye To Tolerance*, Denise Levertov was saying to her fellow poets in the midst of the Vietnam War, "We must not be indifferent and call it tolerance." She names many forms of indifference in the poem--neutrality, balanced judgment, irresponsiveness--but none of these are the same as tolerance. "Tolerance, what crimes are committed in your name?" She writes. Levertov's poem is as resonant today as it was 50 years ago. How can we be neutral, indifferent, or irresponsible to what is happening in our country and in our world right now? To immigrant families, to children, to communities of color, to our trans and non-binary beloveds.

We can't just respond to what's happening with, "Well, it's a free country." Because it's not. Not for everyone, and it's becoming less free every day. I told you I wouldn't give you hell because it's already out there in abundance, but I do want to be clear about this evil and these hells that I'm referring to. It is evil to systematically deprive Gazans of food and other necessities, leading to famine and the death of thousands. It is evil to force your religion on others, especially in public government-run spaces

such as schools. It is evil to reshape congressional district lines toward racist ends, to surveil lawmakers who oppose this agenda, and to imprison on the floor of government those who refuse this surveillance. It is evil to consort with dictators and emulate authoritarian governments in the treatment of those that you have pledged to serve in the name of liberty and justice for all.

It is evil to force pregnant people to continue with dangerous pregnancies or to go to great lengths to find legal avenues for care in a time when maternal mortality is rising, especially among communities of color. It is evil to deny the truths and to threaten the rights of LGBTQ people for being who they are and loving who they love and to deny them the medical care they need to survive and flourish. It is evil to send unmasked or to send masked, unidentified personnel to capture law-abiding black and brown people and then to hold them in facilities modeled after concentration camps. I could go on, but you get it, right? This is the kind of truth-telling and naming that our faith calls us to, and I give you these words from the Reverend Ashley Horan. "Universalism doesn't require us individually to love every human." As I often quip.

She says, "That's God's job, way above my pay grade." But it does demand that we behave in ways that do not dehumanize or degrade our enemies. Even as we actively resist them and strategically work toward a world in which all people can access the freedom and flourishing that love wills for each and all of us. "The time is now." She says, "For Unitarian Universalists to reinvent and reclaim a universalism that is neither naive about the realities of evil nor retributive in its tactics against those who perpetrate it. Our spiritual task must be to resist numbness, engaging evil directly so that we may counter it with strategy, skill, and resolve." Amen to that.

There's one big difference between early universalism and the forms that it takes within our movement today. It has evolved from a focus exclusively on universal salvation after this life to include a sense of heaven and hell in the here and now. And a call for action to create a world that is worthy for all of humanity. There may not be hell after this life. We will never know while we are alive and here to ponder it, but there are certainly hells of human creation. So if salvation doesn't mean avoiding hell later, at least it means confronting and transforming the earthly hells of the present. Hell is something human and social. It can be created and eradicated by humans, and it is not an individual matter but a matter of relationships.

Hell is not a destination; it is a social reality. It's not another place. It's here in our lives and in our society. Hell is alienation, poverty and violence, apathy, hate and closed-mindedness, silence in the face of injustice, and the destruction of our natural environment. And these hells cannot be loved away through individual good acts or through personal salvation. Just like the idea of collective liberation, that none of us are free until we are all free. The idea of collective or universal salvation says, "That none of us is healed and whole unless all are healed and whole because we are connected."

If we really open ourselves to what's going on around us, we can't help but be heartbroken. When our hearts break open, we feel the suffering of ourselves and others, otherwise known as compassion. And hopefully, I pray, this moves us to act. Loving the hell out of the world is a response to our hearts

being broken. And while love may not solve all of our problems, it's one of the best ways that I know. Loving the hell out of the world begins with a feeling, but it's more than that. It's not just, "Oh, if only that person felt the love of people around them, they wouldn't be struggling so much, or they might change their ways." No, it requires action to change things. Love is powerful fuel for action and justice-making and resistance. This love starts with a reverence for humanity and for all of creation.

Imagine if reverence shaped our institutions and systems. But it doesn't, unfortunately. The way our Universalist forebears responded to this heartbreak and suffering was by establishing lots of colleges and universities and seminaries, founding settlement houses, and working for social reform. Universalists were active in a number of movements, the temperance movement, prison reform, slavery abolition, and the women's rights movement. Universalists did all of this because of their deepest beliefs, which also led some to engage in missionary church planting throughout the late 1800s; they traveled around sharing the good news of God's love to all corners of the nations. Augusta Jane Chapin, one of the first women to be ordained in any denomination, was a relentless Universalist missionary, spending her 45 years of ministry mostly as an itinerant preacher and founder of new congregations. Quillen Shinn, a Universalist missionary who established over 40 churches across the United States, including many here in Texas, said, "Our faith is more truly evangelical than any other. It means something better for all. Is that not good news? The very faith compels every believer to be a missionary." He said.

This guy had a lot of enthusiasm and zeal and also a life-saving message to share, and I think we have a life-saving message to share today as well. George de Benneville, an early Universalist in Pennsylvania, allowed British soldiers who died in Revolutionary War battles near his home to be buried on his land. Those graves of enemy soldiers are right next to his own grave to this day. De Benneville said, "The spirit of love will be intensified to godly proportions when reciprocal love exists between the entire human race and each of its individual members. That love must be based on mutual respect for the differences in color, language, and worship. We do not find those differences obstacles to love." That's quite a statement, especially for the mid-1700s. And one that we as Unitarian Universalists continue striving to live out today.

Our Universalist forebears had missionary fervor because they believed that the message of God's love was too big and precious not to share and that it might in fact save the world. Like those who came before us, our faith today calls us to engage in an active form of love. Love that is energetic and alive. Active love can look like taking to the streets for our values, demonstrating, marching, holding individuals advocating for change in the halls of power. But that is not the only way. I think it actually starts with new life. When we dedicate a child here at the church, we celebrate the hope and the joy of welcoming them into our religious community, and we don't concern ourselves with washing the baby clean of original sin, but instead we affirm their blessedness. We're more worried about the hell that they are being born into, and we commit ourselves in these dedications to not only love these children but to love the hell out of the world for their sake.

When we care for one another in community, when we seek and offer pastoral care, we offer love in the face of personal hells. When we engage in faith development at any age, we are discerning how to

live our values of compassion and kindness in a world that is not compassionate and kind enough. When we come to worship, we cultivate a sense of our interconnectedness with others and are moved to live and act differently in the world. The love of God and the love that we show to one another live in many places and is expressed in many ways. We just have to show up and be a part of it. This may mean showing up with food and a listening ear for someone who's ill or recovering from surgery; it may mean returning to relationships with your family or friends that are broken and seeking to restore right relationship.

It may mean becoming more involved in your neighborhood or other communities to decrease social alienation and isolation. To build trust. It may mean showing up in support of and in solidarity with those most impacted by recent legislation and executive actions. It may even mean loving yourself more fully and acknowledging your own worthiness in the midst of your private hells.

My prayer for us all is one that may be familiar. The words of Reinhold Niebuhr's Serenity Prayer, which goes, "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference." When we can find a way to live this prayer to discern the difference between what we can and cannot change, to love what is and what might be, to move toward those places that need to be and can be transformed. The world may seem a little less impossible, a little more hopeful, a little more loving. So have courage, beloveds. We are Unitarian Universalists; we have those who came before us, we have each other, and we have a God of many names, often named love, that dwells within and among us all. Our religious heritage helped people survive and overcome so much, and it points us on our way today just as we will do for future generations. May it ever be so. And amen.