

## **A Faith of Resistance**

**Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD April 2, 2023**

We are a faith made sacred by our acts of resistance. Within this space made holy by our presence, within our meditations in nature, our prayers to God, our celebrations of the Goddess, within our very veins as a community of liberal believers, we hold resistance because our faith is solidified by doubt – no theology nor belief is ever unequivocally true. We hold resistance because we question the status quo – that of the theology of the present day and that of the wellbeing of the least of these. We hold resistance because we strive to offer love when hate is so easy; we strive to offer peace and compassion when bigotry runs rampant. We hold resistance because we create a community – a beloved community – a kingdom of heaven made tangible in this realm – where all are welcome, where all are holy, where all are good. Through these seeds of resistance blossoms the fruit of Unitarian Universalism. A religion that forgives, empowers, loves, and sustains. And so together, today, let us embark upon a journey charting the course of Unitarian Universalism. We will begin with an exploration of the onset of the liberal theology that grounds us, followed a reflection on the doubt that allows us to espouse these beliefs, transition into a conversation about the love that stems from our faith and our doubts, and end with a survey of the beloved community that our theology and our commitment to love calls us to create. And as we begin this expedition let us start with a note on language. Both our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors understood the sacred through the lens of a Christian God, and so that is the language I use. In this day and time, we are blessed with a wealth of theologies and an abundance of beliefs of the sacred. I invite you to connect with whatever is held as holy in your heart.

And so, our forebearers crafted a liberal, radical religion; one of resistance. If I think of a theology that is antithetical to my own beliefs it is the same dogma that sparked the energy and enthusiasm of both Unitarianism and Universalism in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century – the tenets of Calvinism. John Calvin, the founder of this branch of Protestant Christianity, wrote with what I

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imagine to be great confidence and tremendous fear, “we are in God's sight defiled and polluted.” What does this sentiment spark in your blood, in your bones? In the faith created from this theologian we are born corrupt and depraved. To followers of Calvinism, God predetermines who is saved and who is damned – sending unassuming Christians to hell, arbitrarily. When I hear this, I am called to resist – just as our forebearers did. What is a life centered in damnation and depravity, when a theology of love and forgiveness is within our grasp? When Calvinists proclaimed inherent defilement and sin, Unitarians affirmed inherent goodness and worth. When Calvinists claimed damnation, Universalists asserted divine forgiveness.

So, our Universalist resisters. What does universal salvation mean to those who have passed away and left this realm? No one is damned – neither the unassuming nor those who have done wrong. Those who committed crimes in order to survive will never meet the pits of damnation. Those who lived lives that some faiths would deem sinful reside not in eternal despair but in unceasing love. That is Universalist theology - that which espouses a sacred entity who damns no one but forgives all. A God who is not indifferent to wrong doings nor unaware of pain in the lives of mortals, but who can grasp an understanding of forgiveness on a level that perhaps no finite being can.

This makes me wonder – who benefits from a belief in hell? This question sparked an all-embracing theology in our Unitarian ancestors. We are not a people who live lives of service, compassion, and love because we anticipate otherworldly damnation or salvation. We live lives of empathy and care and because goodness is inherent within each of us. No matter what our transgressions we are good, whole, and worthy. And yet let us carefully lift up a caveat – for our faith is not one of the vengeful or of the unabashedly criminal, of the oppressors or the evildoers. We are forgiven, yes, but we are also called to listen to the sacred within and beyond us to do good, to repair relationships, to make reparations. We are called to embody that goodness and wholeness we were granted as we entered this realm.

So much of what we espouse as Unitarian Universalists is pulled in opposition from or in resistance to widespread Christian beliefs. We are saved and good, yes. We are forgiven of our wrongdoings from our God of many names. We are not products of a mythological story of original sin but good and worthy, inherently. Furthermore, Jesus is not divine but fully human. To me, this makes his actions and teachings even more powerful. It was not a divine power who cared so greatly that the ailments of the ostracized were healed – but a man who was fully human. It was not an entity who taught stories of radical love that echo throughout the millennia – but a person. Fully human – just like each of us. This belief was initially heretical. This belief made Michael Servetus, a 15<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian who rebuked the trinity, a martyr who was burned at the stake for this theology.

What allowed for these radical beliefs? What nurtured into being these tenets that some understood as heresy? Our life-giving theology arises from our commitment to doubt. Our biggest act of resistance is doubting that which others accept as irrevocably true. Let us hear the wisdom of Unitarian Universalist minister Robert T. Weston, “Cherish your doubts, for doubt is the attendant of truth... A belief which may not be questioned binds us to error, for there is incompleteness and imperfection in every belief.”<sup>1</sup> What if no one questioned an all-powerful God who arbitrarily damned people? We would not have the truth we hold at our core that the sacred is good and loving – instead, our sacred would be something to fear. What if no one questioned the doctrine of original sin? We would live each of our days entrapped within an evil we did not commit. What if no one doubted the basic tenets of Christianity birthed two thousand years ago? Unitarian Universalism would never have come to fruition. We have today a beautiful, imperfect faith – one we are called to continue to doubt, as our descendants pave the way for even greater beauty, as our individual journeys for truth and meaning continue to unfold.

It is my firmly held belief that the basic theology of Unitarian Universalism calls each of us to live lives of resistance through our commitment to love. Let us pause for a moment to draw

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<sup>1</sup> “Cherish Your Doubts” by Robert T. Weston

inspiration from the work of our prophets Mahatma Gandhi and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. - two revolutionaries who met hate, anger, and violence with non-violent, peaceful movements founded on unconditional, all-encompassing love – sparking two of the greatest revolutions in recent history – stories that emphatically demonstrate to each of us the transformational power of love. To sum this up in one simple phrase - love is stronger and more powerful than hate, prejudice and violence ever will be. And there are smaller, more applicable and yet no less meaningful acts of love that serve as resistance each day by those humble, largely unknown beloveds who share our faith. Those of justice, yes, and those of simple, unconditional compassion. I carry treasured stories in my heart – just as each of us do. That of the peace and solace offered by the first Unitarian Universalist minister I ever had a conversation with, promising me that my aunt who had taken her own life was held in the loving embrace of the sacred, not damned. Or of the Unitarian Universalist Baby Boomer who knew the anxiety I held within and taught me a scripted dance to a Bob Marley’s “Don’t Worry, Be Happy.” Or the young man I met at a Unitarian Universalist young adult retreat nearly a decade ago, whose unconditional love shaped and molded me into the woman I am today – my cherished husband. Their love served as resistance to despair, hopelessness, anxiety, and loneliness. They could have easily met me with indifference or disregard, but they intentionally chose not to. They were grounded in this faith of divine and mortal love.

Held firm in this faith that espouses a love that is both sacred and profane is the idea of beloved community; what I liken to a kingdom of heaven made tangible in this realm. Let us take this idea of beloved community one step beyond its traditional meaning of equality, entering the territory of our specific faith community. What, to us, is the kingdom of heaven? It is not a realm floating above us where angels play music on harps and those who were devout and respectable rest in all that is good. No – the kingdom of heaven is where each and every person is welcomed and celebrated for just who they are. This is where we resist the status quo – where the least of these reside with all of these and the marginalized are centered and inequality is nonexistent. The kingdom of heaven is where those who fell from grace reconnect with goodness and worthiness held deep in their core; where divine forgiveness allows those

who have done wrong to make it right. A lofty idea – and one that is perhaps not within our grasp, as we meet daily with the maladies of hurt, hateful, or fearful people. And yet this is my understanding of the kingdom of Unitarian Universalism – our resistant faith – a kingdom created when unconditional love is held at the center of all deeds and actions. And with the short time we have in this realm, we are called to help create it. So may we bring our theologies, our love, our doubts and our goodness to the world – making heaven a tangible place where the oppressed are freed, where the marginalized are deemed worthy, where the hardest of hearts are softened and those who have caused pain lay bare their souls, repair harm done, and coexist with the rest. May we love – may we resist – this day, and every day.

May it be so, and Amen.