

Universal Salvation and Our Faith Today

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, Ellicott City, MD, May 24, 2020

My sister Annie and I had just moved into a new neighborhood in New Jersey. Our new apartment, perched on top of a small art gallery, was near the town park – lush and green this fine June day! Well, Annie and I hopped on our bikes and went to explore. When we arrived at the park we were presented with two options: a trail to the left or a trail to the right. “A circle!” I exclaimed! I had a brilliant idea – she would go right and I would go left and we would meet on the other side! So, she went right and I went left, and yet we both soon discovered that the path did not create a circle but an series of intersecting loops. “Oh no!” I thought, “what have I done?!” I lost my little sister and it was all my fault! “Annie! Annie!” I yelled and biked around in circles and yelled until, quite some time later, I found her, crying on the ground and covered in mud. “Annie!” I exclaimed! “I’m so sorry.” She forgave me. We hugged, held hands – so very glad to be together again – and went home to play within the safety of a walled-in living room.

Now, this is a simple childhood story, but it is applicable to what we are talking about today. In the story – I messed up! I made a mistake and caused a great deal of anxiety and fear in an innocent child, but I was forgiven. Second, I did good in this story – I took Annie home to play in the living room – not out of fear of punishment, but for love, for simple goodness.

We heard another simple childhood story in our Story for All Ages. The young boy got muddy over and over and over again, to the displeasure of his family! No matter how many times he messed up, no matter how many times he came home muddy and covered in dirt, he was forgiven.

These two stories highlight some important, theological ideas: the importance of forgiveness, and goodness for goodness sake.

These ideas were sacred to Hosea Ballou, one of the founding figures of American Universalism. Ballou was raised in a Calvinist Baptist home, the son of a farmer-preacher. Ballou struggled with the idea that an all-powerful God would damn most of humanity to eternal punishment. At age nineteen, he began preaching sermons professing Universalist theology that all were saved. Shortly after, he was ordained, and wrote his groundbreaking book, "Treatise on Atonement." He preached his Gospel of Universal Salvation for decades – and his book was a foundational text for this movement.

Ballou had ideas that were radical at the time: this forgiving nature of God – this forgiveness that ultimately leads to salvation for all. He believed that sin was not infinite and deserving of eternal punishment, but finite, forgivable. This idea that we do good on this planet – that humans do good – not because they fear the punishment of damnation, but because that is the just, joyous, moral way of living life. Sin, to Ballou, was not infinite, but humanly finite. His ideas were contrary to many Orthodox beliefs.

Orthodox beliefs saw sin as an infinite evil and considered punishment for this infinite evil a separation from God. Orthodox beliefs preached that Jesus took on the burden of this sin by dying on the cross. Calvinism taught that humans were depraved, and that God predetermined a great majority of humans to hell, just as we heard in our Story for All Ages. Ballou thought these ideas not only to be wrong, but detrimental! These ideas showed God as an angry figure; as a vengeful figure.¹ This does humanity no good. To Ballou, this hid the ultimate nature of God – God as eternal love.² Ballou was convinced that if one read the Bible with reason, one would find no acknowledgement of eternal damnation – and that these "false doctrines" that had done great harm to Christianity could be brought to light.³ Ballou wrote, "The belief, that the great Jehovah was offended with his creatures to that degree, that nothing

¹ *Universalism in America: A Documentary History of a Liberal Faith*, Edited by Ernest Cassara, pg 20

² *Universalism in America: A Documentary History of a Liberal Faith*, Edited by Ernest Cassara, pg 21

³ *Universalism in America: A Documentary History of a Liberal Faith*, Edited by Ernest Cassara, pg 20

but the death of Christ, or the endless misery of mankind, could appease his anger, is an idea that has done more injury to the Christian religion than the writings of all its opposers, for many centuries.”⁴ God does not dislike God’s creatures; God did not send God’s son to be murdered to atone for sin; God did not inflict endless misery on God’s creatures; God was not punishing to appease any great anger! These ideas do harm, not good! Ballou understood that God could not be responsible for endless suffering of creatures God created – a loving God would not do this!

Traditionally, at this time, humans had seen God as angry, as vengeful!⁵ Because of this, humans could never see God as love! God could not be loved with “whole heart, mind, might, and strength.”⁶

What about this loving God, and sin? To Ballou, infinite sin simply did not make sense; eternal damnation did not make sense. Forgiveness made sense. These beliefs steered his theology! And yet, he saw the significance of sin, he saw the prevalence of sin, he saw the harms of sin. Now, I don’t typically use the word “sin.” I think about acts that are immoral – not necessarily sinful. And I think immoral acts are often done by folks who have been very hurt themselves. Nonetheless, bad things are done. And while our stories earlier were that of children, there are many devastating stories of sinful or immoral acts. Many people grapple with this with the idea of damnation - that’s how some folks make sense of this – these sinful people will be damned. But not Ballou. Ballou believed that sin was paid for by misery in this life – not the next. That here, now, people are suffering for the immoral acts they commit – that is their punishment! His theology was structured around this idea of earthly suffering for the wrongdoings of humanity. So we think about these immoral acts - that person who steals or that person who inflicts harm – they are suffering here, now. Not eternally. And this person who is suffering, they can change! Everyone has the opportunity to choose to live a moral life; to make moral decisions.

⁴ *A Documented History of Unitarian Universalism*, Edited by Dan Mckanan, pg 138

⁵ *Universalism in America: A Documentary History of a Liberal Faith*, Edited by Ernest Cassara, pg 104

⁶ *Universalism in America: A Documentary History of a Liberal Faith*, Edited by Ernest Cassara, pg 105

Now, I must say this idea that all suffering happened in this realm was met with controversy. At the time, not all Universalists believed that there would be no time of damnation after death. Some believed a brief period of punishment was necessary before one was ultimately saved. But this idea of salvation – no matter to what degree – was still key in forming our faith today. Universalists never believed that folks had to be threatened with damnation to act morally.

And what I think this theology highlights is our desire to do right things simply because those things are right – like my story. I took care of my sister and brought her home and dried her tears not because I was afraid of punishment, but because I had it in my heart to do the right thing. Anger in this situation – anger at Annie, or myself – again, a small misdoing but applicable nonetheless – this would be met with more misery on my part. Ballou believed we did good because humans are inherently good. Ballou did not believe we did good because we are scared of eternal punishment – he believed humans would continue to act morally even if universal salvation were promised. He called for us to deeply consider our values – to be in alignment with our values! This is to be happy, and morally at peace. To deviate from our values? That is to live immorally and live in misery. And I want to highlight here how critical it is to always choose good without an expectation for reward – to choose actions solely on morals, and love. That's what leads to true happiness; what steers us away from misery. The best a human can do is to form a firm belief in moral good and act according to this belief. ⁷

All of these ideas, while perhaps not literally applicable to our lives and Unitarian Universalists today, are still a part of our faith! Whether or not we believe in the same God Ballou believed, many of us still have a relationship to the holy – even if we believe the holy to be science. And although personal understandings of what the holy is deviate greatly, Universalism and Unitarianism both traditionally teach us that the holy is love; that we are held in forgiving love. And let us remember that if we act

⁷ UU World *Universalist Manifesto* Charles A. Howe <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/ballou-manifesto>

immorally, we can be forgiven. Whatever the holy is, we can be forgiven. I ask us all for the grace to forgive each other, and to forgive ourselves. “Forgiveness” itself is a complicated word and idea and deserves its own sermon. I often think of forgiveness as a form of acceptance. Yes, this happened. Now what? This is an opportunity to do better! As a faith that inherently does not believe in damnation of any sort, let this be a reminder that we act for good – every single day – not out of fear, but out of love, out of morals, out of our inherent worth and dignity. As we heard earlier, “There is nothing in heaven above, nor in the earth beneath, that can do away sin, but love; and we have reason to be eternally thankful, that love is stronger than death, that many waters cannot quench it, nor the floods drown it.”⁸ Ballou believed love overcame infinite sin, and that it made the world a moral place.

And this compassion is so very relevant in our world today. We will mess up, we will make mistakes, because we are so very anxious. Because there is so much uncertainty. Because we are holding on to some sort of control that we feel may be slipping out of our grasp. So much unknown. We will mess up. And yet if we know that we are held in the loving embrace of whatever our holy may be – that may lend us some peace. And today more than ever we need act for good, not for fear of punishment or expectation of reward, but out of the simple kindness of our hearts. Simple good – this is what’s needed when folks are scared and anxious. Simple, every day courtesies. Today, with love and kindness, we will get through this pandemic. Today, with the grace of forgiveness, we will be ok.

My sister and I have stopped riding our bikes through parks and finding each other in tears covered in mud. Right now, we don’t even live in the same country! But we continue to be kind to each other for the sake of kindness, sharing with each other pictures of cake or those tiny baby chickens she let me know she’s been taken care of. I still treasure the innocence and kindness I learned growing up with my sister – lessons that today appear holy. Let us all embrace this idea that we are held in love, that we will

⁸ *Treatise on Atonement*, Hosea Ballou

never be damned, that our goodness comes from following our morals, and that true happiness is found in this goodness. Even if our t-shirts get dirty over and over and over again, we will be ok.

May it be so, and Amen