

Universalist Love and Humility

A Sermon by Rev. Claudia Elferdink

Sunday, October 21, 2012

Story for All Ages

We begin by looking at our flaming chalice right here in the room.

In our bulletin there is a symbol of Unitarian Universalism:

the flaming chalice encircled by two rings. Do you see the separate rings?

This morning we are going to see what is behind this symbol. One ring represents Unitarianism and the other represents Universalism. We are going to separate Unitarianism and Universalism as they were separate traditions, separate churches before 1961.

I brought in two hula hoops! One circle is Unitarianism and the other Universalism, separate and each an empty circle. I want to share with you how each of our traditions filled their circles, symbolized their religious traditions, before we merged.

I'll begin with the Unitarians. You'll have to use your imaginations here as

I am recreating this symbol out of a hula hoop and newspaper.

This large piece of newspaper folded in the middle represents a book, opened at the middle.

It is a bible. And resting in the center is something that looks like the Olympic torch.

It was meant to be reason, casting its light on the bible. At the bottom are three letters,

AUA. What might those stand for? (American Unitarian Association) In an arc over the top

are Greek letters. Those letters interpret to "Truth in Christ." It's interesting that that was

written in Greek, a language many Americans don't understand. So this was the symbol of

Unitarianism when we first came together over 50 years ago.

Now the next hula hoop, Universalism! After World War II, a small group of young ministers created a symbol for Universalism which they felt would carry them into the future. A few in this group were humanists, some liberal Christians, and others. It was generally adopted. They began with the empty circle which they saw as the universe, open to many meanings. Some were wonder, awe, mystery, God, and love. They saw this wide open circle as the essential symbol. To it they added one thing: a small cross, set to the side. The cross was a symbol of Universalism's Christian heritage, which wouldn't change, and one path to finding meaning in the universe. Other paths might be science, other religious practices, meditation or countless

Spiritual endeavors- too many to portray.

Reading

On July 17, 2012 in New Haven, over two hundred people joined a public walk called the "I Wage Peace Walk." The walk stopped at several religious and public buildings and made similar statements. The following was spoken at the first stop, the United Church on the Green. John Sevanick, a participant and member of the Shoreline UU congregation shared with me the statement read by the walkers.

Together the people say:

We are here, people from many religions: Christian, Jew, and Muslim, Buddhist, Baha'i, Sikh, and others, religious and non-religious alike; we are here before you as one people. We walk with the Combatants For Peace, we walk with the Kids4Peace, we walk with the children of Guns Down Books Up. We are peacemakers from New Haven, from Israel, from Palestine, and from surrounding cities and towns. We walk together, not because we are the same, but because we are bold and we are not afraid of our differences. We are one people who do not need to agree on everything to work together for justice and peace in our world.

We stand before you, United Church on the Green, acknowledging your historical Christian, and very human place in our community. You are symbolic for us today of many people and many traditions, and we promise to respect your membership, honor your freedom to practice your faith and express your cultural identity. So much as it is in our power, we will defend and protect your rights and the rights of all Christians and members of all faith and cultural identities, here in the United States, in Israel, in Palestine, and throughout the world.

This is not easy and we are not naive; still we ask you to join us, walk with us, and work with us today and every day, Waging Peace and Healing for all Americans, all Israelis, all Palestinians, and all people, for our children, for your children, and for the children of New Haven, Israel, Palestine and the children of the world.

Reflections

Universalist Love and Humility. The statement by the peace walkers in New Haven was a statement of universal love and humility. This march was not a Unitarian Universalist event, or even a Universalist walk, but the thoughtful, care and acknowledgement of common love and differences made it an extraordinary practice of our topic today, Universalist Love and Humility.

In the last few months, folks around here have been asking me, “I hear a lot about Unitarianism, what is our other half? What is Universalism?” Today we will take a look.

Outside our building is a large yellow banner that says, “Standing on the Side of Love.” It has become the motto for UU social justice work. Universalism is known from its core statement, “God is love.” This yellow banner comes directly from our Universalist heritage.

When I found Unitarian Universalism in the mid 1970’s, people in our congregations often introduced themselves by whether they came from the Universalist or Unitarian side of our faith. It was important to claim your side of the family tree, as I showed you in the logos of the two traditions. This

congregation started about the time the two traditions merged, but we were definitely connected with the Unitarians.

Now, we rarely hear someone identify themselves as a Unitarian or a Universalist. Most of us arrived in the last fifty years since the merger and we're simply Unitarian Universalists.

I am not going to focus on history today, but I need to make a few observations. Both our traditions were founded on burning questions that people were asking over two hundred years ago. The Unitarians were speaking to the nature of god and Jesus with a rejection of the trinity. And in a time where death was common and hell was feared, Universalists proclaimed that no one went to hell because of universal salvation.

These names, Unitarian Universalist, we still carry have evolved in meaning. The literal meaning has almost become an artifact of earlier times.

Both of these traditions shared being part of the radical end of the protestant reformation by taking the right to interpret the Bible from the Pope and church officials and giving it to the people in the congregations. This power to interpret the bible enabled Unitarians and Universalists to develop beliefs based on their reading of scripture. The Unitarian symbol shows this very literally with the open Bible and torch of reason.

Let's explore how Universalism has changed. Last summer I spent the week at Ferry Beach in a workshop with two Universalist ministers studying "Applied Universalism." How do we live out the Universalist side of our heritage? What does Universalism offer our future?

Universal salvation has opened the door to understanding God as loving- God is love. The center of the great circle is open, we each find our path. There are many world traditions and many meanings. Our heritage is Christian, but Christianity is only one way to the great mystery, awe and wonder. That is why the cross is small and off center. It does not come close to filling the space. The universe has room for all.

This Universalist love makes us humble- anyone can have it. It gives us a great equality. Even characters that seem unsavory or low status are welcomed to heaven. Instead of heaven being a sign of worthiness or virtue it becomes common ground. We don't earn this love- it is freely given by the Universe, which you may or may not see as God.

In Universalism, this abundant love is the foundation for the "supreme worth of every personality," the inspiration of our first principle of the "Inherent worth and dignity of every person."

Paul Sawyer, the UU Minister from Hartland, VT, said in Universalism, each may believe in God or not. We should discard childhood and harmful views of God.

But as for the existence of god, how much time do we want to spend talking about something we cannot possibly know?

What can be meaningful is sharing stories from our lives about how love has saved us. He calls these “Love Saves” stories.

Stella’s Café in Hartland, VT is the scene of a Love Saves story. This is a very politically correct café with fair trade coffee and local farm goods. It is also a popular morning gathering place in a very small town. Almost every morning, Paul does his community outreach by showing up for a cup of coffee and talking with whoever shows up. One regular at Stella’s is an older man who grew up in a nearby town attending the Universalist church that long-since closed. He hasn’t attended any church for many decades and is alienated from his family. He lives a solitary life. For the last few years he has had cancer and the treatments tax his body and remind him that he may not have long to live. He’s been having trouble with insomnia and amazingly has found that vigorous yard work relieves his stress and helps him sleep. But he comes to the café with a burning question: will I be reconciled? Can the Universe love me when I have had such a hard life? As a child he was taught Universal salvation. Will it be there even for him? Paul’s message to him is, “God loves you.”

We are called to love in ways we could never imagine. Loving can be the hardest thing we have ever done.

One woman's Love Saves story happened when she received the dreadful phone call that her college-age son had been in a terrible winter car accident. Despite great medical efforts, he died before he even got to the regional hospital.

Through the shock, the loss of this loved son, the grief and despair, people in her New Hampshire congregation held her and her husband. They sat with them, fed them, helped them survive the unspeakable loss. "We were surrounded by love," she said, "we could not have made it without those loving people."

A man told the story of being at camp outside his city when he was about eight. There, his counselor abused him and several of his friends. Later he learned that many boys had been abused that summer. He suffered the humiliation and emotional pain, which over years turned into anger and severe alcoholism. Finally he sought recovery through Alcoholics Anonymous. One night he was asked to give an elder man a ride to a meeting. As he approached his house he realized this man was the father of the counselor who had abused him at camp. He heard the man's story and realized that his counselor had grown up in a home filled with violence and alcohol. Though he could not condone the abuse, he could forgive the counselor and let go of his anger. A while later, he was asked to join a group pressing charges against the abusive counselor. After much soul searching, he decided that he could forgive the man and still hold him accountable- he did press charges. Love Saves in deep and complicated ways.

Love saves. Do you have a story of how you were saved by love? These are powerful stories that transform us.

I Wage Peace Walk is a story of saving love. It is also a story of loving people we may disagree with and who are very different from us. Loving people we like is easy. But we are called to go beyond what is easy.

Can we love people who have wronged us? Can we love people who want something very different from what we want? Can we love in spite of fear?

Will we choose the loving path, even when it is so difficult?

There is more love somewhere, if we keep on til we find it. There's a universe of love big enough for us all.