

“Universal Salvation”

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Our church was founded over a hundred years ago
as the First Unitarian Church of Stockton.
It was only a few years ago that we changed our name
to the First Unitarian *Universalist* Church.
Our two traditions, Unitarianism and Universalism,
formally merged nearly 50 years ago,
but even today we tend to know a lot less about our Universalist side.

So today I am very glad to introduce you
to the person who did more than anyone else
to spread Universalism here in America.
Hosea Ballou is easily the most influential Universalist theologian
in our history.
His book *A Treatise on Atonement* made a splash immediately
and stood for at least a hundred years
as *the* statement of Universalist theology.¹
(If you'd like to learn more,
I will be leading a discussion of the *Treatise on Atonement*
this Wednesday night as part of the ongoing
“Classics of Unitarian Universalist Theology” series.)

Ballou was by no means the first Universalist.
There were Universalists in England and America
going back at least to the 1740s.
One of the signers of the Declaration of Independence,
Benjamin Rush, was a Universalist.
But in America, Hosea Ballou's *Treatise*
was what really captured the imagination

¹ Charles A. Howe, *The Larger Faith: A Short History of American Universalism* (Boston: Skinner House, 1993), p. 24.

of thousands on thousands of people.
By the 1880s, Universalism was the sixth largest denomination
in the entire country.² Think of that!

Ballou himself didn't have a fancy upbringing.
He was born in 1771 in southern New Hampshire,
far away from the glamorous city of Boston.
He never got much in the way of formal education.³
He was a plain-spoken, folksy kind of guy.
But he was tremendously smart.
And, like many of us, when it came to religion,
he was a seeker.
His father was a Calvinistic Baptist preacher.
As a child, he must have heard his father
preaching that God was angry at sinful human beings,
warning people that they were in grave danger
of being condemned to hell forever.

But Ballou was not the sort of person
to accept what he was taught, without question.
He writes,

I have, from my early youth,
been much in the habit of inquiring into the things of religion,
and religious sentiments;
and have, for a number of years,
seen or thought I saw, great inconsistencies,
in what has, for a long time, passed for orthodoxy
in divinity.⁴

He questioned the teachings he grew up with.
Much of what he heard just didn't make sense to him.

² Ernest Cassara, *Universalism in America: A Documentary History of a Liberal Faith* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), p. 39.

³ Ernest Cassara, "Hosea Ballou," *Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography*, online at <http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/hoseaballou.html>.

⁴ Hosea Ballou, *A Treatise on Atonement* (Hallowell: C. Spaulding, 1828), p. iii.

And, as an adult, he spoke out very firmly
in favor of freedom of belief,
and respect for people with different beliefs.
He said,

We feel our own imperfections;
we wish for every one to seek with all his might after wisdom;
and let it be found where it may, or by whom it may,
we humbly wish to have it brought to light,
that all may enjoy it;
but do not feel authorized to condemn
an honest inquirer after truth,
for what he believes different from a majority of us.⁵

So you can start to see, Ballou had a lot in common
with his neighbors the Unitarians.

Two weeks ago we heard about how the early Unitarians
believed in using their reason to study the Bible,
and how that led them to reject the idea of the Trinity.
Ballou followed the same path as they did, up to a point.

He believed the Bible was the word of God,
but you had to use your reason to understand it.
Ballou was absolutely fearless about rejecting any religious ideas
that he couldn't find in the text of the Bible.

Like the early Unitarians, he rejected the idea of the Trinity,
both because he couldn't find it anywhere in the Bible,
and because it just seemed illogical to him.

He says in the *Treatise on Atonement*,
if you believe God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are essentially one,
you come out with a logical absurdity:

“[I]f [Christ] be the *Son of God*,” he says,
“he is the *son of himself*, and is his own father...!”⁶

⁵ Ballou, p. viii.

⁶ Ballou, p. 103.

Ballou had so much in common with the Unitarians.
But the *heart* of what mattered to him religiously
was not the Trinity, or our powers of reason,
or even freedom of belief.
Ballou was a Universalist.
The absolute core of his faith
was a conviction that God loved people so much
that *everybody* would go to heaven when they died.
Nobody would be condemned to hell,
not even the worst person you could imagine.
He and his fellow Universalists got their name
because they preached *universal salvation*—the salvation of every person,
no one left out, not one single person.
Ballou grew up in a church that taught the older Calvinist doctrine
that people were so sinful, God was angry at them.
The older teaching said, God chose only a few people to save
and condemned the rest to eternal punishment in hell.

Two weeks ago we saw that the Unitarians rebelled
against this dark vision of God and of human beings.
The Unitarians saw God as loving and merciful.
They said, God loves us and wants us to succeed.
The Universalists agreed wholeheartedly.
They studied the Gospels
and heard Jesus saying over and over,
God loves you; God loves everybody.

But the Unitarians and the Universalists disagreed
about what human beings were like as moral beings,
and how good you had to be to “get right with God,”
as the old saying puts it.
In fact, they disagreed so strongly
that our old friend William Ellery Channing,
the undisputed leader of the early 19th-century Unitarians,

would not give Hosea Ballou the time of day.
By 1817, Channing and Ballou were both serving churches in Boston,
just a few blocks away from each other.
They were both quite famous by this point.
At home, they were neighbors on Beacon Hill.
But Channing treated Ballou “as if he did not exist.”⁷
No friendly words of greeting to a new colleague,
not a nod on the street,
nothing.

So you have to ask, what was the deal?
What was it about Ballou that so offended Channing?
Some of us today think the main problem was,
Channing was a snob.
I’m sorry to say this about a man who was so brilliant
and so great in many ways—but there it is.
Channing had come from a rather posh family;
Ballou was definitely lower-class.
And Channing was preaching a faith that said,
you have to earn salvation through your own moral virtue.
It seems that Ballou’s faith that everyone was going to be saved,
no matter what, really grated on Channing.⁸

Channing and the Unitarians were saying,
people aren’t so bad as the Calvinists want us to think.
We have our reason, we have our powers of will and moral discipline,
and we can be good enough to earn a place in heaven
based on our own efforts.
They called this philosophy “salvation by character.”
But they thought, if some people squandered their gifts
and spent their lives doing wrong,
God would be quite justified in condemning those people to hell.
Anything else would be a mockery of human freedom.

⁷ Jack Mendelsohn, *Channing: The Reluctant Radical* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), p. 178.

⁸ Ann Lee Bressler, *The Universalist Movement in America, 1770–1880* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 3–6.

Here Ballou and the Universalists said, no,
the God we know would never do that.
The God we know will save everyone,
first of all simply because God is infinitely good.
In the reading we heard today, Ballou tells us a story.
What if we came across ten starving people,
and we had plenty of food to feed them?
And what if we decided to feed only a few of them
and let the rest die of hunger, begging for a crumb of bread?
Would this not be evil almost beyond our comprehension?
And yet, that is exactly how the Calvinists believe
God acts toward the human beings he created.

Ballou gets even more direct when he says:

We are told of a God who acts for his own benefit...
and that, in millions of cases, he finds it most for his glory
to make his rational, hoping, wanting creatures
endlessly miserable;
and this is called *goodness*.
We are likewise told of a devil,
who acts for his own gratification,
and who delights in making God's creatures miserable;
and this is called *badness*.
But, for my part, according to such statements,
the difference between goodness and badness is so small,
I can hardly distinguish it.
It is profane, in my opinion,
to attribute a disposition to the Almighty,
which we can justly condemn in ourselves.⁹

Ballou says, no, I cannot accept this version of who God is.
And he had some pretty choice words

⁹ Ballou, p. 95.

for Christians who scorned his Universalist faith.
In fact many Christians of his day
thought you needed hell to keep people in line.
If you believed in Universalism,
what would keep you from murder, rape, pillage,
all sorts of awful things?
Ballou said that was nonsense;
Universalists wanted to be good people in response to God's love.
He writes,

Those, whom the Lord hath blessed
with a belief of universal holiness and happiness,
are proscribed as heretics, infidels, offscourings of the earth,
...nuisances to society.

...But...are we nuisances to society,
because we endeavor to persuade all men
to love God and one another?
Can these things be displeasing
to him who was born in Bethlehem?¹⁰

...At what do my opposers rage?
At what are they dissatisfied?
Not because I exclude them from any privilege,
or blessing of the gospel.
What, then? I am sorry to name it.
It is because I extend these blessings further,
and hope they will do more good than what suits them!¹¹

In Ballou's version of Christian faith,
God is infinitely good, and infinitely loving.
He says, God loves all his children, infinitely more
than the best and most loving parent could love their own child.

¹⁰ Ballou, p. 221.

¹¹ Ballou, p. 228.

Do you remember our story?

[W]hat if I carried our eggs...and I tried to be careful,
and I tried to walk slowly,
but I fell and the eggs broke?

Then I would be sorry. But still, I would love you.

...What if I threw water at our lamp?

Then, Dear One, I would be very angry.
But still, I would love you.
...I will love you, forever and for always.¹²

This is the God the Universalists knew—
a God who would forgive them over and over,
no matter how much they messed up.
Ballou and the other Universalists
were actually not all that impressed with human nature.
Yes, they respected the human mind,
and they believed most people were capable
of living good and thoughtful lives.
But they also saw people all around them
who acted in greedy, angry, jealous, mean-spirited ways.
Other Christians might say,
those are the people who are probably going to hell.
But the Universalists said,
God made those people too—
God gave them their temperament,
God put them in a particular situation in the world.
The place they started, the circumstances of their early life,
the influences on them, were totally out of their control.
So how can we blame them for being who they are?
And how could God blame them,

¹² Barbara M. Jooose, *Mama, Do You Love Me?* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1991).

the very God who created them and *made* them who they are?

In a nutshell, Ballou and the Universalists said,
people are always messing up, but God loves us all anyway.
The God they felt they knew in their hearts
wanted every single person on this earth to be happy,
no matter what.
The God the Universalists knew
would never send a single one of his children to hell.
Everyone would be saved.
everyone would be made perfect in heaven
and enjoy eternal peace and bliss—everyone.

By the way, you should know that there was some disagreement
on exactly how this would work.
Universalism was always a non-creedal religion,
just like Unitarianism.
There was plenty of room for freedom of belief
within their main message of universal salvation
So, some Universalists thought
people would go through a sort of purgatory on the way to heaven,
getting their sins burned away.
Others, including Ballou, thought God wouldn't ask even this of us.
They thought people would go right to heaven
and be instantly transformed.
And it was OK to disagree.
Many of you know these famous words of Ballou's:

If we agree in...love,
there is no disagreement that can do us any injury;
but if we do not,
no other agreement can do us any good.¹³

But certainly the Universalists *did* agree that everyone would be saved,

¹³ Ballou, p. 236.

no matter what.

So here we have Ballou preaching God's love
no matter how flawed we are,
and Channing believing we can and must be good enough
to be saved on our own merits.

A few years later, our own Thomas Starr King,
who served the First Unitarian Church of San Francisco
during the Civil War, summed it up this way:
“The Universalists think God is too good to damn them;
the Unitarians think they are too good to be damned.”

It took a long time for these two sides to come together.
Culturally, it was a stretch.

This weekend I got to hear the Stockton Symphony
playing a work that sounds pretty unlikely on the surface—
a harmonica concerto.

As I listened to it, I thought of Channing and Ballou.

It seems to me that Channing was like the symphony orchestra—
elegant, high-class, poised, refined.

And Ballou was like the blues harmonica—folksy, down to earth.

In the symphony's performance, it totally worked.

Both the elements just flowed and enriched each other.

It was edgy and exciting, and it worked.

Just so for us,

it took time for our two religious cultures to mingle.

But it did happen eventually—

in 1961, to be precise, when the Unitarians and the Universalists
finally joined forces to become the Unitarian Universalist movement
that we know today.

And now we have the gifts of both—

the Unitarian commitment to freedom and moral excellence,
the Universalist faith in God's love and salvation for everybody.

I said before that, in the years after Ballou's book was published,
Universalism grew to be one of largest denominations.

It began to shrink again
only after the mainline churches more or less adopted Universalist ideas
and stopped threatening people with the terrors of hell.

This is another story for another day.
Suffice it to say today
that, for a time, Universalism became
a sort of victim of its own success—
but I think Ballou would not have cared.
I think he would have been overjoyed
at the spread of his faith in a shared destiny
based on love for all people.
Today we need it again in a divided society,
all too ready to point fingers and accuse and condemn.
And today I charge you to remember,
especially in this political season,
that in the eyes of our Universalist ancestors,
even our worst enemy is a beloved child of God.

May this be abundantly so.
Amen.