

What is Unitarian Universalism?  
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This is a sermon designed for newcomers, because we get a lot of first time visitors this time of year. It's also a sermon for those of us who have been UU a long time, and still struggle to explain what it is. It's hard to do! Even for a minister.

Because there's so much to explain, so much history, and dynamism, and changes that have occurred in our 200-year plus history, just on American soil. As our wonderful guest minister Rev. Gordon alluded to last Sunday, our theological underpinnings go way back in Europe: to Servetus, Spinoza, and many others, to those burned at the stake, because they dared to assert in the face of crushing church doctrine that the old world theology simply did not hold water.

For our purposes today I'll stick to American history. While I'll allude to what Unitarian Universalism is *today*, this is primarily a sermon about UU history, because it's fascinating, one we should be familiar with, and proud of. First I'm going to tackle Unitarian history, because it's our Universalist history with which people are less familiar, and I'll spend a little more time there.

So the Unitarians and the Universalists started off as two separate religions. We have only been Unitarian Universalists since 1961 – while our past informs our present, we are very different from our nascent stages. Today I like to think of ourselves as “post-Christian,” but we started off very Christian indeed.

While you hear about various Christian protestant religions breaking off into various sects, the Unitarians were not a sect, even as we did indeed break off from the Calvinists who had Puritan roots - going back to famed Salem church - or the Churches of the Standing Order who dominated New England in the 16 -1800s. I hadn't quite realized until recently that Calvinism is still a thing, when I learned that our Education Secretary, Betsy DeVoss, is a Calvinist, and that the DeVoss/Calvinist empire of western Michigan is extremely powerful, and has influenced races for the US Senate and House nationwide.

Now I'm not sure how closely these modern Calvinists follow the earlier doctrines, but I can tell you a few of them that the Unitarians came to reject. The first is the idea of “predestination.” This means that before you're born, God decides if your soul is worth saving or not, even before you take your first breath. So you could live the most pious life imaginable, and still end up in hell. Damned if you, damned if you don't, applies here. Or, you could live a life of raucous sin, and still end up in heaven. To religious liberals, it makes no sense, nor did it make sense to our forbears.

Predestination is connected to the belief in human depravity, that we're born bad, with “original sin.” Now, many people think that Unitarianism mainly sprang out of the rejection of Trinitarian theology, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. It's true, the

Unitarians rejected this tri-fecta, pointing out that Jesus never said anything about a holy ghost – who’s this ghost guy? They wondered.

But the *main* notion Unitarians weren’t having was this demoralizing concept of human depravity. “We’re not depraved!” They asserted. The concept they did embrace was called Arminianism, based on the ideas of the Dutch Reformed theologian Jacobus Arminius. To this day, I refer to Arminianism time and again in my sermons because it’s a central root to what makes us a unique religion - again not a sect - but our *own* religion that has nothing to do with Christology, even as our righteous friend Jesus still plays a role, as you’ll see.

What Arminianism meant to Unitarians is the concept that every human being is not born bad, but instead, with a mixed bag of traits: yes, we’re born selfish, self-serving, domineering, and fearful, but also curious, humble, loving, and compassionate. The list of good and bad traits is infinite. Arminianism says that it’s up to us, to our families, and to society at large, to develop these traits *toward the good*. But Unitarians believed that, above all, it’s up to us, as individuals.

This is an incredible theological notion that I treasure. Because what it says is that even if you had a horrible childhood, even if you were abandoned and abused, and developed into a hateful, vengeful, violent, sinning person, there’s still hope for you. There could still be a point in your life when you turn yourself around, find worthy teachings, and then you apply what you learn to the fabric of your life, and you change. What this amounts to is that Unitarians came to embrace, and we still do, the concept of worldly salvation. With enough love, courage, and discipline, we can save ourselves.

This is why I shared the Richard Wagamese reading, because it’s such a perfect example of this.

So just to place this in the context of American history, it was clergy that started getting uppity and challenging the Calvinists’ literally damning theology, in the first 20 or so years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These uppity clergy were called a derogatory name by their colleagues. Can you guess what it is? They were sneeringly referred to as - Unitarians!

It all came to a head when in 1819, William Ellery Channing preached at an ordination, and he said something to the effect of, “if they want to call us Unitarians, then by golly, that is what we will be, Unitarians!” Of course, this is only one of the earliest chapters of Unitarianism, and someday, should there be enough interest, I would love to teach a 4 – 6 week course on UU history, because I have loads of inspiring and interesting history to impart. But for now, I move on to Universalism.

First some questions: when someone asks you, what religion are you? Or what is your faith? Do you say, “I’m a Unitarian Universalist,” or do you say, “I’m a Unitarian.” Does it depend who you are answering to? If the person asking has never heard of Unitarians, what are the odds they know what a Universalist is? Why make it more complicated to

explain? More compelling, what are the odds the average UU could explain what Universalism is?

When I first entered Seminary, I actually could not answer this question myself. The most I could say was, "they merged." But I was fortunate to earn a scholarship at seminary in which I was tasked with collecting source material of Universalism, and getting it on the web. So now I know a lot about Universalism, and I'll highlight today the central tenets that influence us to this day.

Unitarians and the Universalists had enough in common to consolidate in 1961, but the fact is they were quite different from each other in the beginning. There's a reason why the Universalists kept dodging the wooing calls of the Unitarians to join forces. The first talk of merging actually began about a 100 years before it happened.

Like the early Unitarians, the early Universalists reacted to the judgmental and retributive God of the Calvinists. Like the Unitarians, they were some of the earliest heretics in our country's history. However, they didn't think of themselves as heretical. Rather, they felt they were offering an *improved* version of Calvinism. Like the Unitarians, they inserted reason, or rationale, into the old theology to make it more palatable and practical.

So the Universalists' "heresy" was this: they chose to believe in a God who was loving and benevolent, a God who ultimately wanted humanity to be united, fulfilled, and happy, both before and after death. In other words, we are all saved, even the most disreputable of characters. Since every being is held in one universal love by God, then all beings return to this love after the journey of life. We are all reunited to the One. Or, God brings us all home, and that means everybody, even Hitler, even our most disliked politicians. Nobody is left out. So the universal in Universalism originally referred to the central belief in universal salvation, or universal love and forgiveness by God. Nobody is excluded from the Christian belief in Heaven, and Hell does not exist in the afterlife.

So it is key to understand that the Universalists in their earliest stages *were* Trinitarian Christians. In fact, they felt like they were the only real Christians because they believed that the message of Jesus, as well, is Universalist. That was the good news: we are all saved! So what I have just told you is the nutshell version of early Universalist theology. The first major Universalist preachers actually had several different ways of describing or explaining the concept of Universalist salvation and indeed there was much debate among early Universalist ministers and itinerant preachers. It was actually considered fine Saturday night entertainment for preachers to engage in preach-offs, where they actually debate their theological arguments in turn and the people decided who was the most convincing. Back before radio and television, this was the best show in town.

Now it is also key to understand how universal salvation in particular differed, and still does, from the vast majority of Christian belief, whether Catholic or Protestant. The conventional idea behind the Christ, the savior, the crucifixion, atonement, etc., is that *God* needed to be reconciled. God was really mad. So Jesus, bless his heart, came along

and died for us all, representing the ultimate sacrifice to appease an angry God. That's the conventional theology that still thrives today.

The pivotal difference in Universalist belief was that it's the other way around. It's not God who needs to be reconciled, but rather *humanity* that needs to be reconciled. This reconciliation takes place when we practice the universal love of God that we are all held in. We are reconciled when we see that God comes through for humanity - and presumably all life on Earth - when we treat each other with dignity, love, and respect. So - very important - universal salvation can also be thought of as worldly.

But Jesus still served a purpose. Jesus came to *teach* us about this love - this incredible, holy, dynamic love - that is possible in the sisterhood and brotherhood of humanity. This is why I, personally, regard Jesus of Nazareth as one of my greatest heroes, for he taught us how to live, how to live in a way that brings about our worldly salvation. So as UUs there is never a need to throw Jesus out with the bathwater – Jesus, you might say, remains one of our ultimate teachers if we want to fundamentally change our lives, by changing how we relate to ourselves and our world. However, UUs today tend not to regard Jesus as divine, but as a human being like you and me, a prophet, in the echelons of Mohammed, Buddha, and Dr. King.

For this line of thinking - that it was humanity that needed reconciliation, not God - Universalists were labeled heretical, radical, and eventually, liberal, much like the Unitarians. However, I want to make it very clear how the Universalist theology was totally different from the Unitarians. You may be familiar with the saying that Universalists believed that God was too good to damn them while the Unitarians believed they were too good to be damned. I think this comes fairly close to accurate.

Whereas the Unitarians threw out the trinity and embraced the ability of a person's free moral agency to do right, the Universalists maintained the trinity, and believed that it was only through relationship with God that living a good life was possible. There existed very little mutual admiration between the two. Some of the earliest ministers of these respective denominations actually despised each other with a passion. When prominent Universalist minister Hosea Ballou moved to Boston to take up his parish in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, William Ellery Channing refused to acknowledge his existence and was a complete snob towards him.

The Universalists tended to be country folk, whereas the Unitarians tended to be well-educated city folk. Reminds you of the rural/urban divide we are hurting from today in America, doesn't it?

Now one might assume that the Universalists were quite a minority, kind of like the UUs are today. But you might be surprised. In the young decades of our nation, people were hungry for a religious identity that offered a positive and liberating outlook over the rigid and gloomy doctrines of the Calvinists. Universalists represented one of the earliest voices for freedom of religious expression. In the spirit of a nation redefining its character from the Old World, Universalism was quite appealing indeed and enjoyed a

fairly long golden period. The centennial celebration held in 1870 in Gloucester, Massachusetts was the largest organized religious assembly to date in the history of the country, with 12,000 people in attendance at its peak. Today we're happy if we get more than 5,000 people attending our national General Assembly.

A few other fun facts to be proud of is that George Washington picked John Murray to be the official chaplain of the Revolutionary War, despite strong opposition from mainline Protestants. And early in the 20th century, the youth contingency of the movement was so active in their social service work that their organization was invited to visit the White House. That's exciting stuff, but the main point to be made is that Universalists were incredibly patriotic. They really felt that they offered the quintessential religion of democracy and New World ideals of freedom and equality. It was a religion in which everyone was invited to participate.

So what happened? Why did they start losing their numbers in the 20th century? The popular explanation is that the belief in universal salvation became not so unusual in other protestant churches. When the ministers cooled it with the hellfire threats, there was less reason to find a more affirming alternative. Another explanation is World War II. After the evil of Hitler, people were less willing to believe that everyone including Hitler is going to be saved. As Universalism grew more liberal as it aged, the folks who wanted a stronger brand of dogma in rural areas likely converted to something like the Baptists.

There were a few important people in the 20th century who, after WWII, tried to pump new life into the denomination, and changed the face of Universalism significantly. People like Robert Cummins and Ken Patton offered a radical switch from the more conservative and traditionally Christian bent of Universalism. The new focus was on what you may be more familiar with today, the focus on universal world religion, drawing on all sources of religious faith, knowledge, and practice. Detroit minister Tracy Pullman summarized this new liberal direction in a 1946 sermon by calling for a religion that is "greater than Christianity because it is an evolutionary religion, because it is universal rather than partial, because it is one with the spirit of science and is primarily interested in bringing out that which is God-like in man."

That should start to sound familiar. These are the same kind of beliefs we find in UUism today, our respect and value of all world religions. Now what's interesting, is that these are really modern expressions of Universal salvation. Because it is very similar in meaning to the idea that nobody is left out. Let me repeat that. Nobody is left out. To me, that could explain UUism in a nutshell, that we strive to not judge anyone to the point that they are not welcome in our circle of worship. Rather, we go to lengths to make the point that all are welcome, that difference is embraced and that we are all universally loved. We have the Universalists to thank for this cardinal characteristic of Unitarian Universalism.

Because let's face it; the Unitarians were a lot more, shall we say, snooty. The truth is, we UUs today can be very judgmental, even when we are trying hard not to be, we can be

classist or dismissive of more traditional theologies. Back in the day, the Unitarians viewed the Universalists quite critically indeed.

Their main point of criticism was that compared to them, the Universalists were not well organized on national and local levels. Of course this is true, because by the time of consolidation in 1961, the Universalists were basically falling apart and were kind of broke. If this was the case, why didn't they agree to join sooner? What made them try to hold on? It was the fear that what made them distinct would be swallowed up by, at that point, the burgeoning-in-comparison Unitarian denomination. It was the fear that the merger would represent more of a take-over than a collaborative effort.

Well, I'm afraid these fears were realized to an extent. Many of you may have heard this Universalist history today only for the first time. There is much scholarly historical research that has yet to be done for lack of interest, and some of the oldest documents are no longer extant because they weren't protected and valued. The Universalists did get swallowed up by the Unitarians. But we keep the spirit of Universalism alive by understanding how it has influenced our theology and beliefs.

So I want to conclude today by telling you what I believe. And that is, I believe this. I believe in Universal salvation.

I don't believe in universal salvation so much for what I think happens when I die. I believe in it for what it symbolizes in this life. Universal salvation is a great metaphor for what is truly precious in life: that not only are we never ultimately separated from God, but never are we ultimately separated from each other. Humanity's reconciliation to God can only happen through our reconciliation to each other, in this life, on this Earth. All enemies shall reconcile, all lost love shall reunite.

Let it be so.