All Are One
preached* for the Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver (WA)
by the Rev. Kathryn A. Bert
November 18, 2018

We gather to celebrate once again. We celebrate each Sunday, today included, and this week many will be celebrating the Thanksgiving holiday, an especially American holiday – born of the story told of Native Americans basically helping Europeans get through that first terrible winter in a new-to-them land, but set in the aftermath of a terrible war which nearly tore this country apart. We celebrate new members this morning in an ingathering service, only one among them, it turns out, new to this faith, but all new to this congregation.

I’ve just returned from a trip to the Midwest where I was taking a clergy clinic in family emotional process as it relates to congregational systems – and with the state of the world as it is, we couldn’t help but explore a bit of the rising level of anxiety in society and its resulting impact on families and congregations. As a part of this work, we are required to create a genogram, which is basically a family tree – as we explore the patterns of our ancestors and the family we both inherited and created. And then talk about these families set in the larger society – and I think of this Thanksgiving story and the Civil War and the crises our government is in right now – and the crisis of the government from which we revolted. And I think about these congregations our new members have come from and the system they have now adopted as home. It’s a lot to consider. But consider it we must. Because it is from these histories that our present is formed. When we leave those histories unexplored, we, as you know, wind up repeating them, again and again and again.

Those of you who took the Examining Whiteness class were, in effect, studying the legacy of the history of our nation, on those European ancestors from which many of the branches of our members trees were born. So this morning, I wish to share you some stories from my family tree. I want to highlight and celebrate our Universalist roots – the side of our inherited religion that said that God is Love and a loving God wouldn’t, couldn’t condemn his creatures to an eternity of hell.

It turns out, we have evangelical roots. These Christians proclaimed the good news that all are saved, and preached it with a fervor and enthusiasm that rivaled the energy of the Great Awakening. Only they weren’t preaching hell-fire and brimstone

Brimstone, being the ancient name for sulfur, and used liberally in the bible, such as Psalm 11 verse 6 "Upon the wicked he shall rain snares, fire and brimstone, and a horrible tempest, this shall be the portion of their cup."

No, while the preachers of the great awakening were threatening fire and brimstone, the universalists were proclaiming the everlasting love of God.

Now, some Christians weren’t buying it. My guess is that Gerardo’s first girlfriend’s family nor even his mother probably wouldn’t have bought it as such. Nor did my great-great uncle, Lemuel Reed who served in the United States Christian Commission during the Civil War, which is the forerunner of the Red Cross – so this would be around what would be the third Great Awakening, he wrote from Kent, Ohio on September 3, 1866:
“...Uncle William’s health and also his family’s is very good. Mary has joined the Universalists church in town. There came a minister of that denomination here and has kicked up somewhat of a dust by telling people they would be saved and that God is love and cannot punish his creatures and has organized a church, and upon the day of admission of his members he told them that the joining of themselves to his church would not exclude them from the pleasures of the world and what they had been enjoying so long. My opinion is if we live a Christian life and come to judgment and find that the Universalist doctrine is right, why we’re all right anyway, but if we live according to the Universalists doctrine and find out Christianity is right then we are certainly in a backfire. So it is profitable to live a Christian life anyway...”

So, the written records in my family reflect a rejection of Universalism, although Mary would have been related to me as well. I just don’t have her writings or the reasons she became a universalist while I know why her nephew, Lemuel, rejected it or at least why he said he rejected it.

I would dearly love to know from “what pleasures of the world they had been enjoying so long” from which Lemuel felt a need to abstain... because surely they weren’t advocating free love, and universalists were pretty strong abolitionists and advocates of temperance... so I’m wondering if maybe it was the fiddle? dancing? Maybe my Uncle Lemuel didn’t believe in music... that would be a twist or perhaps explain something, considering how much music I have pushed on you all in worship.

It doesn’t seem from a letter Lemuel wrote July 7th of 1866 that he disapproved of drink.

In that letter, he wrote:

"On the 17th of June Grandfather Cackler was 75 years old. He had all of his children and grandchildren came to his house to dinner who could. I went over, 5 of his children were present, 2 were absent, and 5 were dead. He has 32 grandchildren, 23 are living and 6 were present. They have one great grandchild and it was present. He passed around the wine to all of his guests and then sat down to dinner after which the afternoon was spent in his telling of incidents of his early life which was very interesting indeed. Mrs. Reese came over and declared she could throw him down and both bragged, but did not try it..."

Lemuel’s brother, Frank, was in Iowa and in the union army. Their aunt Ellen – whom we assume to be sister of William in the letter, husband of Mary, was also in Iowa and interviewed for a newspaper article in Eldora Iowa May 9, 1912, a year before her death at age 87. Though we don’t think she joined a universalist church, as did their Aunt Mary in Ohio, we do have evidence of her universalist theology. The article is about Mr. and Mrs. Hulbert – their aunt Ellen and her husband, a childless couple who said “that a man should act as he talked” and “where the friendless could find refuges from hunger or cold.” The newspaper article reads:

“One colored girl who came to them after having been turned out of doors by southern sympathizers when suffering from lung fever was given the kindest care and consideration and when death claimed her, was buried in the Hulbert lot in the Eldora cemetery. Mrs. Hulbert said that when the angel of death comes to her, she desires that her body be placed alongside her husband and this little black girl, for, in the world beyond the stars, the color line is not drawn.”

“In the world beyond the stars, the color line is not drawn.”
That is the beauty and power of the universalist message. It is the doorway to liberation for generation after generation of people who have been ill-treated and downtrodden. Abolishing slavery in one generation because in the world beyond the stars, the color line is not drawn, and women’s suffrage in the next, because the gender line is not drawn, and subsequent freedom movements, all based on the universalist principle that we are all God’s children and a loving god would love her children and treat them fairly. Voting rights act, gay liberation, women’s rights, feminism, equal treatment for people with disabilities, elder rights, trans rights – it’s all here, in this place, in this church, because we believe that we are all One and Love is paramount.

How great is that theology? It’s the good news we can shout from the rooftops! and the heaven we can build here on earth. I do not even partly suggest that we have accomplished the promise of the universalist message – by any means. If recent history tells us anything at all, it is that we have a long ways to go. But, I am hopeful that we have a theology and a faith that can inform us such that with some hard work, some self-reflection and transformation, we might gather the spirit and discover a way, and do our part with others along the path.

*Benediction*

We give thanks this day for our human community, our common past and future hope, our oneness transcending all separation, our capacity to work for peace and justice in the midst of hostility and oppression. We give thanks. Happy Thanksgiving.

* Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form.*