

Neither Angels nor Demons

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READINGS: The Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans has been at the foundation of almost all Christian theology. These several excerpts of that letter, from chapters Five, Eight, and Eleven are the most germane to Christian Universalist thought.

[Romans 5:18, 8:31, 32, 35, 37-39, 11:32] Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all persons, so also, the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all persons....What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?³²He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all -- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?³⁵Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?³⁷No; in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.³⁸For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,³⁹neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. ...For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

Dorothy Spoerl grew up in a Universalist family in Brooklyn, New York. She was a leader in Universalist, and Unitarian Universalist, organizations as a religious educator and parish minister. She changed many lives for the better, from the time of her ordination in 1929 until well after her official retirement in 1973. She once wrote:

If we want Universalism to continue to exert its historic influence as a constituent part of the Unitarian Universalist Association, we must become articulate about our belief and choose those *actions* which will demonstrate that we do not just talk about compassion and love and understanding, but that they are values which we incorporate into our inner frame of reference.

SERMON: When I came into UU ministry, a great shift was occurring in American culture. Before then, fundamentalist and evangelical Christianity was a cultural backwater: a relic of a fading past or private religious predilections. But it had reawakened in reaction to the counter-cultural movements of the 60s, and by the 1980s had become a major force in American politics, and growing in global influence. One thing that struck me about this moment was how unprepared Unitarian Universalists were to respond. While some preachers would move thousands by invoking the unquestionable demands of God and Jesus Christ, many of our people would respond by talking about reasonable and thoughtful values. For a movement

that has deep roots in Christianity, we seemed to have lost our ability to draw from those roots and confront our opponents in the Christian community. I remember, a couple of years after my ordination, being on a panel about gay and lesbian people at Texas Tech University. I was confronted by an audience member about my complete lack of Christian scriptures and how they related to these issues. I could see how members of audience were moved by his words in ways I could not. I also recall a colleague of mine in Colorado Springs who served there when the number of para-church organizations grew from a mere handful to over 500, following the lead of Focus on the Family. He had a Christian UU grounding and felt he could talk to these people. But when they realized that he was not just another humanist, but a direct threat to their absolutist, authoritarian theology, they simply ignored or avoided him.

Of course, I understand that Christianity is a poisoned well for some of us, a source that some cannot draw from without getting a bitter taste in the mouth or pain in the stomach. While a few of us are explicitly Christian, others of us have a hard time translating theistic ideas into humanist-existentialist language, so we avoid talking of Christian theology. I know that one of our readings this morning was from a book, the Letter to the Romans, which is full of ideas that make us uncomfortable or that we have rejected. But, Christianity is still central to our root identity and must be honored. Universalist Christianity was there at the very beginning of the faith and is integral to it. If we are to have influence in this world, to expand on the words of Dorothy Spoerl, we must not only put our values into action, but understand the ground of those values. So, today I speak about Universalism. Universalism with a small ‘u’ refers to the affirmation of truths or rights that are universal, that is, applicable to all persons everywhere. But I speak of capital ‘U’ Universalism, the Christian possibility of *universal salvation*.

I speak to remind you that the Universalist Church of America was nearly the seventh largest Christian denomination, in the US, by the 1850s. I tell you that Universalism was the dominant theology for the first 500 years of Christianity, propagated by Church fathers like Clement and Origen. Our tradition upholds the best in human nature. We focus on human potential and the potential of “Justice, equity and compassion” in all human societies. But, while paying attention to the best in human nature, we sometimes overlook or underplay the importance of human error or “sin”. To be clear: I have seen very reasonable, kind, well-meaning, well-educated Unitarian Universalists do very hurtful things. It is not that we are bad people, but we are limited and fall short of the ideal. This sermon is about recalling that ideal.

Furthermore, I speak about Universalism because today is in that sacred time of the Jewish calendar between *Rosh Hashanah* and the Day of Atonement. The word, ‘universalism’, in Christianity is about universal forgiveness. In Christian practice forgiveness tends to be a simple thing, a canceling of a debt or a grace-filled response to our “sin.” But, in the fullest sense, forgiveness comes only at the end of the journey of atonement. To atone, or as I define it to become “at-one” with Truth, is to act: to Regret, Repent, Repair, and Reconcile. All these steps are essential for true atonement. It means admitting that we can miss the mark or go astray. It is essential that as we look to the potential of humanity, as we look to the stars, that we not

miss the puddles at our feet. Our theology is not about accepting or avoiding punishment for what we have done wrong. It is about admitting what is wrong, healing wounds and doing what is best. I want to be clear about this. I have seen very intelligent, good meaning, self-disciplined and passionate UUs, do very hurtful things. This must be part of our theology. Sometimes “hell and damnation” theologians pass off Universalist Christianity as having no judgment. But it does. It confronts bad actions clearly and harshly, but the punishment simply does not last *forever*. What truly lasts is Love.

In Christian Universalist theology, the death of Jesus is the image of this ideal. His life and death reveal the “justification that brings life for all persons.” In “Romans,” the act by God of grace and forgiveness, for *all persons*, cannot be revoked. Thus, Paul says: “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,” (note that this list includes not just demons, but both bad and good things) “neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” This is the ground of seeing worth and dignity in every single person.

My point here is that this is not the end: it is the beginning. In Christian Universalism, out of this state of being loved we are moved to become the presence of love in the world. From this one act of love, flows all the acts of righteousness and goodness of our lives. In Christian language, in light of God’s love we see all souls as having an essential, inherent, worth. Thus, we treat everyone well. I have mentioned before of when, back in the early 1800s, the Calvinist circuit rider and the Universalist circuit rider meet one another. Riding along they share the joy of the gospel. But, when the Calvinist realizes the other is a Universalist he begins to argue against him as they ride side-by-side. Finally, he cries out, “If I were a Universalist, I could rob and kill you right here and now without any fear of Hell!” The Universalist responds with certainty, “Sir, if you were truly a Universalist, such a thought would never enter your head.” Because Universalism is about claiming that power in our own lives and letting that power work in our actions for justice.

Last week I mentioned our historic response to slavery. There were many opinions in the early days of this nation. Some believed that the people who lived in slavery lacked the ability to be full citizens. Others believed that they could be full and competent members of society, but not this society. Then, there were people like Benjamin Rush. He believed that the Americans who lived in oppression under the slave system were full and equal persons, capable of total inclusion in this nation. Mr. Rush was one of those who signed the Declaration of Independence, but he knew his work continued once America began. He was, theologically, a Universalist, which meant he believed in acting from Love. In 1790, he proposed an antislavery resolution and saw it adopted by the national convention of the Universalist Church of America. This group went on, by the 1850s, to be the seventh largest Christian denomination in America. Seventy years before the Civil War they proclaimed:

"We believe it is to be inconsistent with the union of the human race in a common Savior, *and the obligations to mutual and universal love which flow from that union*, to hold any part of our fellow creatures in bondage. We therefore recommend a total refraining from the African trade and the adoption of prudent measures for the gradual abolition of the slavery of the negroes (sic) in our country, and for the instruction and education of their children in English literature, and in the principles of the Gospel."

Education has always been essential to our movement, Unitarian and Universalist alike. Education that shapes not just our knowledge but our character. I emphasize the line about obligations that flow from this love, including universal education. Likewise, the Unitarian, William Channing, in 1835 preached the same, "To look unmoved on the degradation and wrongs of a fellow-creature... proves us strangers to justice and love, in those universal forms which characterize Christianity." To claim this heritage is to say that we are the people who are moved by love, to include outcast persons into the society of all.

What does it mean to include someone? Not, I assert, just to tolerate or allow to be present. To be inclusive of people requires focused actions, to be welcoming in the specific, as well as the general. We have focused on this in terms of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. Now we are also looking at this in terms of race, ethnicity and culture.

There are two reasons, two sides if you will, to division and segregation in human societies. Both are active in the majority and minority, the oppressed and oppressors. Both must be faced and tempered if we are to atone for the results of racism and oppression in our lives. The first is the desire for comfort. We stick with the people who make us comfortable. That is natural and good, but it can also divide us from others. It is striking that we have desegregated the workplace and places of entertainment. To a lesser degree we have desegregated the schools. But religious communities remain the most segregated sector of our society. We need to confront our own blindness and discomfort.

For example, imagine an American woman, raised in India. She is with a group of people, perhaps people at her UU Church. The talk turns to the festival of Divali. Some in the group know something about it, and other persons have never heard of the festival. The woman mentions that she misses the smell of cardamom in the ladoo that her grandmother used to make. Now some people at that table have never heard of ladoo, others have never heard of Divali and some have heard of cardamom, but never in a sweet. But when that woman is sitting with a group of women from India, and she speaks of her grandmother's treats, all the faces light up with recognition. Some speak of different spices their grandmothers used, or different treats, or other elements of the festival. The point is that is that we must seek the source of comfort that is greater than mere familiarity. In this city there are many sub-cultures: foods that people eat, music that people love, variations of language, all of which are different from others. We have to notice the way these things enhance and enrich a community, or they will divide us. The vision of one people calls us to find ways to understand and appreciate the

differences that can bring us together and to weave connections and to say this church is where people know how to know and understand and love one another.

On the other hand, there are discomforts, ways we emphasize the difference, which will force us apart. We are aware of the big things, racial profiling, discrimination, overt racism, and such. But there are little ways we divide ourselves, ways that we affirm the discomfort around difference. Some theorists of anti-oppression call these “micro-aggressions.” Here is one example. I knew a man whose grandfather was born in Sacramento, but his great-grandfather had come from Japan over a hundred years ago. This friend of mine had little knowledge, and less interest, in Japanese culture. One day he was at work, and they had a big buffet table. The man ahead of him was someone who probably had Irish or German or English ancestors. He noticed some Sushi. He turned to my friend and said, “I bet you must love this stuff.” In this one little moment, he reinforced a racial division. He said, without saying it directly, “You are in a particular racial group, different from me, and you people are alike.” Of course he was just trying to be friendly. But what he did was reinforce difference. Now if this is the only encounter he had that week it would be no big deal. But when it comes, over and over, the message that you are an outsider, and if violence or discrimination or alienation is implied through the week then that one micro-aggression begins to become part of a pattern of oppression. To overcome the twin forces of alluring familiarity, and micro-aggression we must have a larger vision to guide and motivate us. We must seek, over and again, not mere forgiveness for these errors, but to seek true atonement.

My wife showed me a video this week of a charismatic Christian preacher. He had to give a prayer after a “Universalist” (almost certainly a Unitarian Universalist) a Jew and an Imam. He recounted that the Universalist began her prayer, “To the spirit with many names and none at all...” After a Rabbi and Imam had spoken, this Charismatic preacher began by invoking “the name, above all other names, Jesus Christ” He got sustained, enthusiastic applause. He heard the Universalist prayer as addressed to “Whatever” or “To Whom It May Concern”. What he did not realize was that above all names, beyond even the highest name, is the one power, and reality. The truth of Love, of Universal love, is not a name or a personality, but a reality: the reality that we are all in this together. Knowing this reality has a power that breaks down division and obliges us to act accordingly. If we do not live in that reality then we will live in hells on this earth, hells of being divided. We will feel the divisions, not just in Ferguson, but everywhere in our own lives. Our division echo out into the web of all existence so that even the earth itself, the web of life on earth, is groaning and calling for us to live by love, live by connection. Thus, we who identify with this church, we are called, to educate the children, to befriend the stranger, to reweave, to atone, and to make the world one again. As the Day of Atonement arrives let us reconcile ourselves to all. Let us call everyone into the universal and beloved communion of all souls, from which neither angles nor demons can separate us.