

## Liberty and Mercy for All

Welcome to First Unitarian Church of St. Louis this Independence Day Weekend. I am Sarah Dashner, your lay leader for this morning's worship. Lay led sermons are a Unitarian Universalist summer tradition stemming from the days before air conditioning when our forbearers went to Cape Cod for the summer. My motivation and chief qualification for leading worship this morning is my deep gratitude for my exposure to Unitarian Universalism as a child and my homecoming when I first entered this church in 1999.

One of my favorite and most memorable efforts for this church was to accompany my son's coming of age class to Boston. I was unaware until I went on the Boston trip how intertwined our Unitarian history was with that of our country's founding. At that time the UUA headquarters stood next door to the Massachusetts State House on Beacon Street. Pacing off that short walk through history brought home to me the influence that our congregational tradition had on self-governance in the colony and later the nation. It is a heritage we can be proud of as American Unitarian Universalists.

However, today we are going to talk about the forbearers who bore our second name the Universalists, so named for their belief in universal salvation. They believed that God was too good to sentence anyone to eternal damnation and too broad spirited to require Christian faith or a particular sect of Christian Faith of God's beloved children.

Both Unitarian and Universalist theology began to flourish during the scientific revolution brought about by Nicolaus Copernicus. When He placed the sun, rather than the earth at the center of our solar system, the micromanaging god of predestination seemed a lot less likely to a lot of people. Philosophers began enacting the scene from The Wizard of Oz where Dorothy looks behind the curtain and finds the voice of the Great Oz is actually that of a small man with only his own wit to recommend him. And as the story ends happily his own wit does more to fulfill their wishes than the great Oz ever could.

I am keenly interested in theology, but these discussions can be dry, so while we are all over the rainbow anyway, I'd like to continue with the Wizard of Oz analogy. When the Unitarians embraced the human nature of Christ as his most true nature, and determined that following his teachings and example were our primary Christian duties, they decided that our ability to be the ordinary men and women was all we needed.

But let's go back to the earlier part of the story, where the big booming voice of the Great OZ tells Dorothy and her friends what they must do to be worthy of the help they needed to have their wishes granted. They were inspired by a Booming voice promising powerful resources to take up a challenge, to rid Oz of a great evil.

Universalism as an ongoing denomination was founded on this continent by John Murray, a man who faced financial ruin after the death of his wife and child. He had been turned out of his church for his Universalist beliefs. He came to America as an alternative to suicide. He had vowed never to preach again and was only persuaded to do so by a powerful sign from God and earthly facilitation from the illiterate Thomas Potter.

John Murray had sailed from England on the Hand in Hand which ran aground off the coast of New Jersey. Murray was given the responsibility of off-loading the excess cargo so the ship could be freed. When Murray docked his sloop in New Jersey he met Thomas Potter who had built a meeting house on his property for itinerate preachers. He begged Murray to preach on Sunday. Murray reluctantly agreed, but only if the wind didn't shift so he could be off with his cargo. The story goes that God kept the winds away so that Murray could preach. He was so well received that he returned to preach regularly and from there rode out to bring the message of universal salvation to New England and the Mid-Atlantic colonies.

Murray also served as a chaplain in the American Revolution. His Universalist theology angered his fellow chaplains. They appealed to George Washington to put a stop to his teaching, but Washington saw the need for religious tolerance in the new nation and endorsed Murray's chaplaincy.

Universalism appealed to working people who needed a powerful voice to speak for and to them. They knew more about hardship on earth than their well-to-do Unitarian cousins and took comfort in knowing that they would experience ease some day. Our most famous Universalist forbearer, Hosea Ballou said, [Most Universalists were] “little better than barbarians when compared with the graduates of Harvard College and other polished literati.”

It is worth noting that Hosea Ballou lived within easy walking distance of the renowned Unitarian minister Ellery Channing, and though they spoke of each other's works, the two never met socially or professionally. They lived on opposite sides of Beacon Hill, Channing on fashionable Mount Vernon Street and Ballou down by the Charles River on Pinckney Street.

There are neo-Universalist congregations today, some within the UUA, some not, where universal salvation is held up as our final destination. One of those ministers, Kalen Fristad, spoke here and said something that changed my thinking. “It matters what kind of God we believe in because we can't be any better than we believe God to be.”

My personal theology would be more in line with Archibald Macleish's *Epistle to be left in the Earth*. “None know if our deaths are now or forever:” and later “Also none among us have seen God./ (...We have thought often/ The flaws of the sun in the late and driving weather/ Pointed to one tree but it was not so.)”

I am drawn to the idea of an all forgiving God that shows us the way to peace among ourselves, but how are we to believe in universal forgiveness from a deity so un knowable and in modern terms refutable? We can look to the example of our Universalist forbearers.

A significant figure in American history is the Reverend Olympia Brown. Brown, born in 1835, grew up caring for and teaching her younger siblings and never relinquished the role of leadership. The Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist biography describes her thus: “She was ordained a Universalist minister, the first woman to achieve full ministerial standing recognized by a denomination. As a young minister, she took an active role in the women's

suffrage movement and was one of the few original suffragists who lived to vote in the 1920 presidential election.”

I did not understand until I read her biography how long and disheartening the work for female suffrage was. It took her a lifetime of advocacy to win the vote. One of her early disappointments was writing to a guest lecturer at Antioch. She had been impressed with his words on expanding suffrage and wrote requesting further help for the cause of women’s voting rights. The speaker wrote back that he certainly did not support women’s suffrage and did not know what gave her that idea. Throughout her life of working for the women’s vote she was told that her cause had to wait until Negro men got the vote, until the right to vote was recognized for immigrants. And don’t get me started on the difficulties within the movement.

The biography continues: “While at Antioch, Olympia Brown invited Antoinette Brown (no relation) to lecture and preach. ‘It was the first time I had heard a woman preach,” she remembered, “and the sense of victory lifted me up. I felt as though the Kingdom of Heaven were at hand.’ Her next step was theological school, even though theological schools at that time did not welcome women.”

That is as close as you will get to a miracle story in the life of Olympia Brown. Perhaps she heard a great booming voice, but more likely she witnessed an event and it filled her with faith that she too could preach. I like to think that her capacity for self-advocacy grew from her conviction that she was the child of a loving God that wanted her to succeed.

The article quotes her daughter and biographer, Gwendolen Brown Willis: “The ministry was the first objective of her life, since in her youthful enthusiasm she believed that freedom of religious thought and a liberal church would supply the groundwork for all other freedoms. Her difficulties and disillusionments in this field were numerous. That she could rise superior to such difficulties and disillusionments was the consequence of the hopefulness and courage with which she was richly endowed.”

Who am I to talk about universal unconditional love, what have I done to create the conditions of universal heaven on earth? Little enough, but I have learned to speak on the side of love. I belong to a church that is big enough that I don't have to step outside to change my mind. That has made all the difference.

Adrienne Riche said in **Lies Secrets and Silences** "The possibilities that exist between two people, or among a group of people, are a kind of alchemy. They are the most interesting thing in life. The liar is someone who keeps losing sight of these possibilities."

For years I was close to a business associate, a gay man in a long term relationship. He was frustrated that he and his partner couldn't share benefits, I knew that. However, in the 20 years we worked together we never talked about same-sex marriage.

In the time that we worked together his partner died. My friend made the decision to withdraw life support. Afterward he retained their home and their shared belongings because they had prepared wills giving each other the rights that would have automatically been conferred on a married couple.

I went to the wake; I brought food to the house. But I never had what could have been a healing conversation about the courage and forethought they showed to make plans for the surviving partner. I had not laid the groundwork for a conversation that affirmed the possibilities between us.

I was silent here at church too. We were a church with a history of supporting LGTB ministers through our intern program. Our minister prior to the year 2000 performed commitment ceremonies for same sex couples. Our good works were not visible on Sunday morning. Visitors, especially those who might be considered minority were likely to come and go without making a connection

I remember thinking that we couldn't really compete with churches like Metropolitan Christian Community that cater to the LGTB community. But that is a thought that sucks the life out of our conversation. There are churches all up and down the street that subtly or not so subtly segregate us by race, sexual orientation or by our sacred opinions.

We can't help drawing lines of distinction, but those lines should and I believe they do distinguish us as the congregants who believe that all people are worthy of love and respect, and that all share a sacred connection to us that we can bring to life in our conversation. That is our Universalist legacy and our ongoing duty.

Stephen Covey said "We judge ourselves by our intentions and others by their behavior." As Universalists we are called to flip that quote. Lift up the intentions of others and prove ourselves by action. That will bring us closer to heaven in that we will be acting in a way that honors a god that is universally loving and forgiving. It will lift us up even if we never meet that God.

I hope I have succeeded in preaching the good news today, but as I said in the beginning, I'm not a pro. The real good news is yours to speak and hear as you leave this sanctuary. I have found joy here, meeting people who are on the surface very different from me and discussing their paths and plans. At coffee hour meet someone who joined us this morning because of Pride or because Black Lives Matter. Discover something new you can do for economic justice. Thank your fellow lay leaders for their work on behalf of this community. And then find ways to continue that practice in your wider community. If you are visiting us, honor us with the pleasure of your company over coffee and join us in upcoming activities.

As I was preparing this sermon I listened to modern UU ministers' words about Universalism. I came upon a familiar voice, as if for the first time. The late Reverend Suzanne Meyer said, "I've experienced glimpses of heaven in those precious and exquisite moments in life with older people and babies gathered around the table at Thanksgiving, often in church, sometimes in prayer. When we reach out to help a neighbor, when we reach across the lines of class and race and religion we have heaven." So may it be. We will now sing Hymn number 121, *We'll Build a Land*.