

Bicentennial Sermon
January 15, 2012
Preached at the Minnie Brown Center
Bath, Maine

Opening Words and Chalice Lighting

-Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

We want more soul, a higher cultivation of spiritual faculties
We need more unselfishness, earnestness
and integrity of high and lofty enthusiasm
and beacons of light and hope,
People ready and willing to lay time, talent and money
on the altar of freedom.

Sermon: “Over My Head”

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Normally, on Martin Luther King, Jr., Sunday my focus would be civil rights. Unfortunately, all this time after his death – almost 44 years! – there is too much to say about inequality and injustice. The economic woes blanketing our nation – well, most of our nation; 99% of our nation – those woes are felt doubly in African-American communities and families. The African-American middle class is in grave danger. In a time when all young adults struggle to find paying work, African-American young adults are unemployed at alarming rates. Normally, I would talk about such things on Martin Luther King, Jr., Sunday, trying to understand what our actions should be and where our hope resides. But it isn't every day one's congregation turns 200 years old, as ours will do on Friday.

On January 20, 1812, 31 men of Brunswick signed the following compact:

We, whose names are hereunder written, do profess to believe in the doctrine of universal salvation by our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ; and feeling it our duty, as well as our privilege and highest happiness, to worship the one living and true God in Christ Jesus, do hereby agree and enter into solemn covenant, to assemble together as a religious Society on the Sabbath as often as we can conveniently, to worship the most high God; and that we will pay our proportion towards the expense of procuring a convenient place for convening together for public and social worship, and for the support of public teachers of piety, religion, and Christian morality in our Society.

There is a lot I would change about that compact today. In fact, last fall we adopted a new covenant to begin our third century together. But the old one? Take for instance, the part about entering into solemn covenant to assemble on the Sabbath as often as we can conveniently. If that were our covenant today, we would never gather at all! These days gathering any group is hardly a matter of convenience. We are all far too busy to attend services – let's face it. But we're still here, and even in our temporarily homeless condition – we are going strong. Perhaps more germane to our celebration, we still understand the importance of gathering, we still recognize our need to do so, whether it's convenient or not.

A lot has changed in 200 years ago. That original compact is just a mere hint of the differences between then and now. What were our forebears hearing in the air back then?

When our forebears first assembled, Bowdoin College, anchor of our town in many ways, was only 18 years old. Hard as it is to imagine, in 1812, Maine would legally still be part of the badlands, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, for another 8 years.

In 1812, the most common mode of transportation between towns was by boat – imagine our Bowdoin students arriving by boat! –although stage coaches had been serving the town for about a dozen years at that point. Roads between towns were few in number. The Adroscoggin Bridge connecting Brunswick and Topsham was only 16 years old. A turnpike suitable for wheeled vehicles was constructed between Bowdoin College at a new Meeting House in Bath (at the corner of Center and High streets) in only 1805.

Those early conveners of our congregation would have to wait another 14 years for the downtown swamp to be filled and turned into the park we know today as the Mall. They would have to 37 years before the railroad reached town.

In 1812, Lewis and Clark, whose 2-year Corps of Discovery expedition had made it all the way to the west coast and back, had been home for only 6 years. In 1812, our nation was still young, and the British were still a threat. Indeed, less than 6 months after our forebears signed their compact, President James Madison declared war on Britain. The war would end two years later in 1814, although some fighting both on land and sea continued in 1815 because word was slow to reach all soldiers and sailors, who didn't have smart phones in those days.

In 1812, the industrial revolution had come to Brunswick. In a town that had once supported itself by fishing, trapping, and shipbuilding, mills now predominated – grist mills, saw mills, cotton mills. The Dennison Manufacturing Company began making boxes here in Brunswick. The same Dennison family were pillars of our church. Indeed, one of the old stained glass windows had their name on it. Our church bell, which has now survived two fires, was initially purchased by subscription Col Andrew Dennison raised. When the bell was damaged and recast after the first fire, Andrew Dennison's family took charge of the project.

Transporting myself back to those times, I imagine some of our forebears lived through the Revolutionary War. For them, the memory of gaining independence was visceral, real. Then, too, change and the possibility of prosperity, improvement, and advancement were in the air, what with the capturing of water power and the advent of industrial machinery.

Against that hopeful backdrop, consider this more solemn one. Our forebears lived in a time when an illness like diphtheria could sweep through a region and carry off many. Many graveyards from those times contain gravestones for young children, often from the same family, and sometimes dying only days apart. For those who set themselves apart as Universalists, the mainstream religion of the day must have offered little to reflect the feelings of possibility the times brought and it must have offered little comfort in the face of the kinds of losses the people felt.

Specifically, the religion of the day, the religion of John Calvin and the reformed church, was centered around five basic points.

1. Total depravity, or the doctrine of original sin. Human beings are completely sinful, fallen creatures who have not capacity to save themselves without divine help.
2. Unconditional election. Salvation cannot be earned. God grants unconditional salvation through grace alone.
3. Limited Atonement... God chooses only a few (a very few) to be saved. Jesus died only for the elect.
4. Irresistible Grace... Those whom God elects cannot resist God's call. If you are chosen, the grace of God is irresistible.
5. Perseverance of the Saints. One cannot lose one's election.

Our forebears would have heard those messages preached from the pulpits of the day. In contrast, they would have known of the writings of Hosea Ballou, who was then in his prime. For them, the more hopeful message of universal salvation held sway.

1. God is loving.
2. God saves all people, not based on merit, but based on love for God's creation.
3. God wants people to be happy, both in this life and in the hereafter; thus God has given humanity a nature that finds doing good deeply satisfying.
4. Human beings are morally equal. Those who do evil are not evil by nature, but unenlightened.
5. The spiritual leadership of Jesus guides humanity to do the work of God.

I have not been able to find an accounting of the town's reaction to the new church established in 1812. Across America, though, Universalism was regarded with deep suspicion. According to UU minister and Universalist scholar Richard Trudeau, in several states Universalists were forbidden to give testimony at trials or to serve on juries because their motive to be honest was called into question. Even the early Unitarians reproached Universalism. An 1824 article in the Christian Register, the Unitarian weekly newspaper stated:

Multitudes who embrace these doctrines, embrace them because they are so congenial with the debased and perverted feelings of their corrupted and depraved hearts; because being a religion without sanctions, it lays no restraint on their vicious propensities and passions, and their impure and depraved habits. (Trudeau 87)

No matter. Universalism swept the land. By 1861, it was one of America's largest denominations. A hundred years later, when both Universalists and Unitarians merged into one denomination to strengthen their shrinking numbers, it could be said that part of the reason for Universalism's decline was its great theological success: By then, many, if not most, progressive Christians had adopted a Universalist viewpoint with regard to salvation.

But at least one sector of society remained unconvinced of the value of a Universalist theology: African Americans were not drawn to it. Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed who has studied and written extensively about the history of black people within our movement, conjectures that the lack of appeal had to do with a weak theology of suffering:

For most black folks universal salvation was a theological absurdity. If the belief was true, knowledge of divine love would lead to the regeneration of the individual. Where, then, was the proof? Why did the southern Universalists argue for slavery's efficacy rather than free their slaves? Where was the

justice in black people's extraordinary suffering in this world if black and white alike shared eternal bliss in the next? If as Hosea Ballou said, "God saves men to purify them. . . and does not require men to be pure in order to he may save them," the ordeal of slavery loses its redemptive power.

Slaves could not reconcile such an optimistic and forgiving message with their experience nor could those living under Jim Crow laws and the ever-present threat of being lynched. Universalism failed to speak to the African-American experience because it was unable to shed any light on the meaning of corporate black suffering, much less to proclaim its redemptive purpose. (Morrison-Reed, unpublished.)

The criticism is justified, I think. Except for one thing – the theology that proclaims suffering to be redemptive: I disagree that slavery, or any suffering whatsoever, has redemptive power. I believe violence is violence and suffering is suffering, and neither are redemptive. “You'll get your reward in heaven,” the platitude sometimes offered in the face of suffering, makes my blood run cold, for it is often used to justify suffering that is abhorrent and unjustifiable.

Theology is always being fine-tuned, and Universalist theology is no exception. For me, the question is not the centrality of love – I believe love is the strongest force in our possession for saving and blessing the world. And the question is not about salvation after death. Rather, the issue is the question of salvation on this side of the grave. If love is central, what does it require of me?

In their book *Proverbs of Ashes*, theologians Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker set the notion of redemptive suffering on its head. At the heart of Christianity, they claim, the symbol of the cross, which represents God's requirement that his own son be put to death to save, to redeem, humankind, sanctions violence. Some churches have greatly harmed many by suggesting that suffering is a “cross to bear.” Slavery and the soul-killing damage of racism are perfect examples. So, too, are abused wives – often priests and ministers urge them to stay in marriages that are literally killing them, in part, because of a theology that suffering is redemptive. Brock and Parker urge a new way, pointing out that Jesus' death was not unique; the violence with which he died was no more redemptive than the violence with which the thousands of others crucified in his times died.

“Violence destroys life,” they say. “Presence burns fiercely, but Presence cannot override the decisions of perpetrators of violence. It is a human act to stay the hand of violence. Life is ours to choose.”
(Brock and Parker 248)

Salvation, they say, begins with courage... the courage of witnesses whose gaze is steady. *“Steady witnesses neither flee in horror to hide their eyes, nor console with sweet words, 'It isn't all that bad. Something good is intended by this.'... Steady witnesses end the hidden life of violence by bringing it to public attention. They help to restore souls fragmented by violence. They accompany the journey to healing.”*

Next, they say, salvation requires love. *“Fainthearted love, idealized love, impatient love cannot walk in the valley of the shadow of death. Healing love touches the hidden wounds of violation, lances the places of stored trauma, restores glimpses of soul. The world offers too few such love and care. Violence persists.”*

Last, they say, salvation requires mourning. *“Grief... measures the weight of tragedy. It holds the*

memory of what might have been. The light of sorrow illuminates where life has been diminished, its missing faces, its torn photographs. Mourning deepens reverence for what is precious, what is already destroyed, what must be embraced with fierce determination, abiding faithfulness.” (Brock and Parker 250-251; above three quotations.)

Salvation requires courage, love, and mourning. Salvation is possible on this side of the grave – the work of salvation is work we are called to do.

Two hundred years ago, our forebears bravely set a new path, embracing a kinder, more loving God. It was a path of liberation, freeing them from the confines of doctrines that no longer served. I surmise the way was not easy for them. Their radically different way set them apart, no doubt. And the annals of history tell the story of a public largely unkind and unwelcoming to early Universalists. Still, they set an example for us... of thinking freely, of exploring the deeper questions, and of holding love at the center.

I believe present-day Universalism has a great opportunity to take the learning of the past and go deeper. We can create an expression of faith that both holds love central, and seeks to understand what that encompassing love demands of us. In a couple of weeks, on January 31, we, as a congregation, have an opportunity to take up the call of that love, when we meet with others in our community to examine how racism is expressed in the larger Brunswick culture. I cannot think of a better way of launching the next two hundred years of religious thought and experience in Brunswick Maine than to invite love into our individual hearts and connections with others in such a way. May that event be only the start of a long and fruitful exploration.

So, you see? Today's sermon really does look back at Martin Luther King's legacy. It asks us to witness his life and all he stood for to harness the legacy of universal and eternal love our forebears bequeathed us, and to do something deeper to help that love take hold a bit more tenaciously in our world. As we move forward into the next two hundred years, may we be called to hold front and center what an all-embracing Love requires of us.

Sources:

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