

Love Wins – and that’s the Truth!

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough

Rev. Patty Hanneman

May 29th, 2011

Call to Worship

O Spinner, Weaver of our lives,
your loom is love.
May we who are gathered here
be empowered by that love
to weave new patterns of Truth
and Justice into a web of life that is strong,
beautiful, and everlasting.

- Barbara Wells

Chalice Lighting – We light this beacon of hope, sign of our quest for truth and meaning, in celebration of the life we share together. - Christine Robinson

Opening hymn - #346, “Come Sing a Song With Me”

Children’s Time – *To Tell the Truth*, by Marty Hoffman

Candles of Joys and Sorrows

Singing the Children to class

Offertory

Prayer

Spirit of Love and Life,
may we gather here, now,
into an unclenched moment,
taking a deep breath;

a letting go of heavy expectancies,
of shriveling anxieties,
of dead certainties,

so that, softened by the silence,
surrounded by the light,
and open to the mystery,
we may be found by wholeness,
upheld by the unfathomable,

entranced by the simple,
and filled with the kind of joy
for which we have been created.

May it be so.

Sermon

When first time guests walk up to our church doors on Sunday mornings, what runs through their heads? I have often wondered what the average person must be thinking as he or she grabs that door handle and gives it a pull (other than the fact that it's a pretty hard pull). What hopes, dreams, or apprehensions are linked with imagining themselves landing in this congregation?

With a smile on their faces, they may open our doors carrying painful church stories from their past. They wonder if the minister is going to be manipulative, or even worse, duller than dirt. They fear that someone is going to seize on their newness and ask them to volunteer for a committee. They wonder if this will be yet another congregation that spends its money reluctantly, doesn't take its mission in the world seriously, ignores the neighborhood, and obsesses over the trivial. Someone taught them that religious communities are about rules and boundaries, about who is in and who is out, so they will be on the lookout for subtle boundary markers.

They may be troubled by theological confusion. They want to know, just which of the Gods described earlier this morning is going to be proclaimed here? What is this congregation's Truth? What is the "good news" that they claim for themselves? When the minister says "God", which one does she mean? As you know, this doesn't just happen to visitors.

So let me be clear. I speak as a Unitarian *Universalist* minister. The Universalist message is that God is Love. Love wasn't one of our contestants this morning, but love wins the contest. That is our Truth. And you can expect that whenever I invoke the name of God, that is the one I'm pointing to, and whenever I use Scripture, it is always through the lens of Love. As David Bumbaugh, my preaching professor writes, "Universalism [is] centered on an abiding conviction that we are all children of the same great love, that we are all fated to a common destiny, that nothing any of us might do will serve to sever us from that great community, and, therefore, there can be no division of the human race into sheep and goats." (*UU World*, summer, 2011) That is who we are here.

The Universalist message has been hotly debated in religious circles lately. An Evangelical minister by the name of Rob Bell has written a book entitled, *Love Wins: a Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Has Ever Lived*. The book's message is essentially Universalism. Now, Pastor Bell leads a church with over 10,000 members in Michigan, so you can imagine that anything he writes is going to be commented on. It's been fascinating reading people's comments! I first heard about the book on the UU minister's chat line. Some UU minister's were incensed that Bell had "stolen" our message and was "using" it for Evangelical Christians! "We should stand up and claim this as ours!" they wrote. Yes, we should, but that doesn't give us exclusive rights to the message. Quite honestly it makes me pretty excited thinking about 10,000 Evangelicals hearing a message of universal love.

And then soon after this flurry from the UUs, I began reading articles from Evangelicals who were just as incensed with the book. “How can he claim that God loves and intends to save everyone? What is the point of the resurrection!”

Another Christian columnist writes, “Calm down. Bell is not a universalist. Universalism means you can believe anything you want.” So that’s what we’ve become known for.

With all this brou-ha-ha about the book, I had to read it. And I recommend it to anyone who wants a clearer picture of classic Universalist theology. Bell begins his book with a story about a conversation he had with a member of his church, as he was teaching a course on non-violent protest movements. As he was sharing the life story of Mahatma Gandhi, the man said, “Too bad he’s in hell because he was Hindu.” “Really,” Bell thought, “Gandhi’s in hell?” So this exchange caused Bell to search Scripture more closely, and what he found was what other Universalists throughout history have found: that in the stories Jesus tells – which some believe should in fact be central to the Christian faith – there is no mention of hell; there are instead poignant parables, over and over, that point to God’s love for us and a yearning to be reconciled, finally, to each and every one of us. *Nothing* can separate us from that great love, and we did not need the death of Jesus to be rescued.

Of all the parables Bell alludes to, he pays particular attention to the story of the prodigal son, as an illustration of God’s generosity, and the ways in which we separate ourselves from that great love. The parable is found in Luke 15 if you want to look it up later. In the parable, a man has two sons. The younger one, kind of a ne’re-do-well, demands his share of the father’s inheritance early, and the father unexpectedly gives it to him. He takes the money, spends it all partying with his friends, who turn out to be not such great friends when the money runs out, and he ends up feeding pigs for a small farmer to feed himself. Imagine a Jewish audience listening to Jesus talk about a Jewish man feeding pigs. We’re talking real skid row here. He remembers how his father loved him and how he was well taken care of in his father’s house, and he thinks about going home, but for a long time, can’t quite believe he could be acceptable enough for his father to take him back in. In time he does, and when his father sees him, he is ecstatic in seeing his long-lost son. He prepares a special dinner for him, fatted calf and all.

Then there’s the older brother, the one who has always followed the rules, the good son, the faithful son. He refuses to join the party. So unfair this all is, he says. After all I have done for you, you have never once even given me a goat to celebrate with my friends.

And his father says, son **you are always with me, and everything I have is yours**. But your brother... your brother was lost and is now found.

This is the good news of Universalism! That no matter what, **you are always with me, and everything I have is yours**.

Bell says this story demonstrates not only the love that is there for each of us, but also the two ways we most often separate ourselves from that love, thereby creating our own living hell. The first is to see the events of our lives from the younger son’s point of view. We are haunted by our past. Abuse,

betrayal, addictions, infidelity – secrets that lie buried under our pride – keep us from feeling good enough or deserving enough to receive the life and love that is intended for us.

The second is to see the events of our lives from the older son's point of view. We are convinced that we are doing everything right, we are following all the rules, we will therefore be the ones rewarded. Convinced of our own autonomy, our own rightness, or righteousness, we become shocked at the thought that someone who doesn't act in the right way or believe the right things can still derive some benefit from God's love.

We create hell for ourselves whenever we fail to trust that promise: **you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.**

The last time I spoke to you on the topic of Truth, I talked about the importance of our Unitarian heritage and their insistence that we define ourselves through covenants and not by creeds; that creeds divide while covenants unite, that covenants lay the groundwork for a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, which is one of our principles. Indeed, that is part of our good news: that revelation is not closed, and that we will *not* fall prey to the kind of arrogant certainty, the kind of self-righteousness that the older son demonstrated. That kind of certainty domesticates the Holy and separates us from love. That kind of theological humility serves us well.

But, in the most recent edition of the *UU World*, my preaching professor David Bumbaugh, has written an article called "The Unfulfilled Dream" in which he mourns the fact that in the 50 years since merger, this good news of Unitarianism has taken precedence over the good news of Universalism. I encourage you all to read it. He argues quite powerfully that the theology of Universalism, this ground of being that is love, has been largely lost in our efforts to seek greater theological diversity. In doing that, he says, we have lost our center. We haven't claimed it, or proclaimed it, being so afraid of offending someone with a different perspective. It is so ironic that we now seem to be up in arms about an Evangelical pastor who is preaching and teaching "our" message.

You are with me always, and everything I have is yours. Why are we so offended by that?

Over and over, we tell each other that we have a moral obligation to grow and to spread our good news. We say the world needs our good news. Yet when someone asks us what that good news is, we don't know what to say. Or we say we can't speak for all Unitarian Universalists. And so instead we have conferences about how we can be more relevant, more welcoming, how to reach out and build relationships in the community. But at the heart of all this, what is it we are claiming for ourselves? What gives us a vision of what we want our future to look like for our children? What is going to provide a sense of mission for this congregation? If we refuse to claim anything, no amount of marketing, or great music, or excellent coffee is going to disguise the fact that we have no center.

Here is our good news: **You are with me always, and everything I have is yours.** There are no exceptions. We are all children of the same great love; nothing separates us from that love; that non-negotiable love is able to create enough space for Hindus and Buddhists, and Evangelicals and Unitarian

Universalists. It creates enough space for all those religious traditions that are yet to come that choose to embrace its message. Every one. That is our center.

Love is at risk in the world whenever we refuse to proclaim this great Truth. Because the power of God is now incarnated in us – you and me. To say that we all carry a spark of the Divine is to say that the fate of the human venture, the fate of this earth, will be determined by how we use the power given to us. It will be determined by how we perceive that power. If we truly believe that the power of love has been given to us to convey, then we cannot ignore our neighbors. We cannot ignore those among us who are seeking justice or needing our compassion. And we don't have time to obsess over the trivial. We owe it to our visitors and ourselves to be clear about this.

Our Committee on Ministries is currently working on a revised statement of the mission that will guide this congregation into its future. You will hear more about that process next month as we reflect on the theme of vocation – as part of that reflection we will be talking about the vocation of this church. As we continue to gain clarity around what it is we are here to do, may that vision be grounded in the spirit of love and compassion which is so much a part of our Unitarian Universalist heritage.

May it be so, and blessed be.

Closing Hymn - #6, "Just as Long as I Have Breath"