

Universalism; Past, Present and Powerful

By Kalen Fristad

When I served the United Methodist Church in Dallas Center, Iowa, I became acquainted with the Unitarian Universalist minister in Des Moines. When she became aware that I believed in universalism, she invited me to attend a special service that their church was scheduled to have in **Mitchellville**, which is a small town east of Des Moines. They had a tradition of having one worship service each summer at what was originally a Universalist church, a church building in which there was no longer a congregation. That was to celebrate their Universalist heritage. Anyway, I'll always remember that when I walked up the walk leading to that church, over the door it read, "Universalist Church". And I thought, "I have arrived at home".

Universalism has been a very **important** issue for me for many years. Because of that, I wrote a book on the subject, and spent three years, from 2003-2006, traveling and speaking on the subject. I now spend half time traveling and speaking.

Today I am going to be speaking on the **history and significance** of the teaching of universalism. It is sometimes referred to as Universal Salvation, so I would like to offer a **definition** of salvation, which is different from what you've heard from other sources. You are probably well aware that the common definition of salvation at least among fundamentalists or conservative Christians is to accept Jesus as your personal savior so you can go to heaven when you die. I believe that is a very inadequate understanding of salvation. So I have come up with a definition that works for me. And that is, salvation is to learn and grow, either with or without Divine influence, so as to experience fullness of life, in this life and beyond. And if you don't believe in the Divine or in life after death, you can just leave out those parts of the definition. So to me, the most basic definition of salvation is to learn and grow so as to experience fullness of life.

So, in **contrast** to what many people believe, I reject the idea that a lot of people will experience hell for eternity. Instead, I believe that everyone will eventually experience fullness of life.

The Early Church

During the time of the early church it was **commonly taught** in the religions of the day that many people, perhaps the vast majority, would spend eternity in hell. One exception to that would have been the **Zoroastrians**, who were Universalists. **Jesus**, also, in contrast to his Jewish upbringing, did not teach that a lot of people would experience hell forever, but he taught universalism, which is evident from many passages in the Bible.

In the environment where most people believed that many people would spend eternity in hell, it was difficult sometimes to convince them that everyone would eventually experience salvation. So, the reality of the situation was that some people were **never fully converted** to Christianity. While they claimed to be Christians and to be followers of Jesus, they continued to believe in eternal damnation for many people.

There were many early Christians, however, who did believe in universalism. In fact, it seems that universalism was the predominate belief among the early followers of Jesus. **Clement** and **Origen** of Alexandria were two leading scholars and theologians who taught universalism. **Others** included Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, and Jerome, who translated the Bible into Latin, known as “The Vulgate”.

Women in the Universalist movement during the time of the early church, in the fourth century, included Macrina the Younger and her grandmother, Macrina the Elder, who are both considered saints in the Catholic Church.

As I said, some early followers of Jesus were not fully converted to Christianity. **Tertullian** was one example. He became a Christian at age 40 and continued to believe that many people would spend eternity in hell. This was such an important issue for him, and he so relished the idea of many people suffering in hell that he said that one of the best things about heaven will be “its superb view of the damned frying in hell”. Now, doesn’t the thought of that make you feel good all over? Isn’t that astonishing that a person who claimed to be a follower of Jesus, who spoke so much about love, forgiveness, compassion, and so on, could so relish the idea of many people suffering excruciating torment in hell without end?

The theologian **Augustine** was another example of someone who wasn’t fully converted to Christianity. He became a Christian at age 32, but continued to believe in eternal damnation. He lived in the later part of the fourth century and early part of the fifth century. He was a good theologian

in some respects, even though it seems to me that he clearly got it wrong regarding the issue of universalism. Because he was a good theologian in many respects, his theology soon became dominant in the church.

Not surprisingly, that led to **controversy and division** over the issue of universalism. In order to resolve the controversy, the Roman Emperor **Justinian** called a meeting of the church. It was the Fifth Ecumenical Council in the year **553**. Now, does it seem strange to you that the Roman **Emperor** would call a **church meeting**? Well, it makes perfect sense when you think about the fact that emperors like to control people. Many people had come to realize that threatening people with eternal damnation was a **fool-proof means of controlling** them. Of course, I'm sure you are aware that many churches today still use the threat of eternal damnation to control people. You see, if you can get people to believe that spending eternity in hell is a very real possibility, you've got them where you want them. You can get them to do anything you want by threatening them with eternal damnation. The problem was that the Emperor and many church members were having trouble controlling those free-spirited Universalists. They didn't take seriously the threat of unending hell. So, the Emperor Justinian allied himself with the hell-raisers of the day, with those who taught eternal damnation for many people, and together they pushed through a **resolution** which **abolished** the teaching of universalism.

With all the powers of the church and the state against universalism, it's not surprising that the teaching declined, and **virtually died out** for centuries, actually, for about a thousand years.

Resurgence of Universalism

However, you can't suppress the truth indefinitely, right? It will come bubbling up someplace. That's what happened about **300 years ago**. Actually, it began earlier than that, but it started to make a strong comeback about 300 years ago.

John Wesley, who was the primary founder of the Methodist movement in the 18th century, had a close association with a group of Christians called **Moravians**. The Moravians were Universalists. Initially, Wesley didn't agree with them and used to argue with them over the issue. But, over time it seems that they wore him down. He too came to believe in universalism late in his life. That is evident from his sermon entitled, "On the Fall of Man", which he preached on March 13, 1782.

I love to tell United Methodists that John Wesley eventually came to believe that all would ultimately experience salvation. That is because the most conservative people in the United Methodist Church are the ones who are the most likely to reject the teaching of universalism, while at the same time they often will emphasize that we should go back and **re-establish the teachings** of John Wesley. And I say, “Yes! Let’s do that, because John Wesley, late in his life, came to believe in universalism.”

The **American colonies** proved to be a particularly fertile ground for the spread of universalism. **George DeBenneville** came over from France to Pennsylvania in 1741, and preached universalism in that area. **John Murray** came to American colonies from England in 1770. He worked closely with **Quakers and Baptists** in spreading the teaching of universalism throughout the American colonies.

Of course, it’s **not surprising** to us that Murray worked closely with the **Quakers**, because many of them are still very receptive to universalism today. With the Baptists, however, it’s a different situation at this time, especially with the southern Baptists. But, there are Baptists who are receptive to universalism, especially among the American Baptists, particularly in the northern part of the country.

Also, I’m happy to **report** to you that there are some **Southern Baptists** today who are coming to **embrace** the teaching of universalism. That is especially true in the southern states in the area of Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Mississippi. It includes not only Southern Baptists, but **Pentecostals** such as Assembly of God. What’s happening is that they have always been taught that **God is love**, and some of them are starting to think that if God is love, it doesn’t make sense to believe that God would send people to hell to punish them forever because they were naughty. Of course, when people of those denominations become Universalists, they are no longer welcome in their churches.

I also need to acknowledge that this is still a quite **small percentage** of those fundamentalists who are coming to embrace universalism. But, it is a significant number, and is an important part of the Spiritual movement today, in which a rapidly growing number of people around the world are coming to embrace the teaching of universalism.

Anyway, John Murray worked closely with **Quakers and Baptists** in spreading the teaching of universalism throughout the American Colonies. It was under Murray's **leadership** that the Universalist Church in America was **organized**.

As in the time of the early church, the modern Universalist movement involved many women leaders, including: the Universalist author and evangelist **Hannah Whitehall Smith**, and **Olympia Brown** who was the first women to be ordained by any denomination, which took place in the Universalist Church in 1863.

Hosea Ballou was the most influential leader in the Universalist Church during his life and ministry. When he died in 1852, there were **800,000** members of the Universalist Church. So, universalism was a very strong movement during that time.

The teaching of universalism was not promoted only by Universalists, or Unitarians for that matter. It has been promoted by many prominent **theologians** and church leaders in other denominations as well. In the 19th century there was **Friedrich Schleiermacher**. I wonder how many of you have heard of old Friedrich. He wasn't a very well known theologian, but he was a fine theologian, and a strong advocate of universalism. Besides that, I just like to say his name. Friedrich Schleiermacher. Isn't that a wonderful name? I just love it. In the 20th century the belief that everyone will eventually experience salvation was taught by Dietrich **Bonhoeffer**, Karl **Barth**, Paul **Tillich**, Leslie **Weatherhead** and many others.

So, the teaching of universalism has a **long rich history**, especially for more than 500 years following the time of Jesus, and in the last three centuries.

Why so Important?

So, you might wonder why this is such an important issue for me as a United Methodist minister, since the teaching of universalism is not consistent with the official teachings of the United Methodist Church? Why is it that I wrote a **book** on the subject and spent three years traveling **full time** from 2003-2006, and now I'm spending half time doing the same, challenging the

teaching that many people will experience hell forever, and instead, promoting the hopeful message of universalism. The reason it is so important to me is because I believe that the teaching of eternal damnation has **prevailed far too long** in most churches, and in our society at large, and with devastating consequences.

Atheism

One of the reasons this is so important to me is because the teaching of a God of eternal damnation **turns many people away** from God. People know that they would never punish their own children without end, and they just can't relate to a God who people say does that very same thing. So, many people reject God. Or at least they reject the understanding of God as one who would condemn many people to hell forever. **Some** of the people become **atheists**.

Now, I need to acknowledge that I have **learned a lot** about atheism from UUs. And I am grateful. I've met a lot of wonderful atheist in UU churches around the country, as well as a lot of wonderful people of other faiths as well. I have learned that for many UUs, atheism works for them. They find it to be a responsible, thoughtful and mature way to approach life. With those for whom atheism works, I have no problem. However, when people of other denominations become atheists, it is often very negative. That is because they often still have in the back of their mind the possibility of experiencing hell for eternity. And if there is no God to rescue them from that plight, they conclude they are doomed, and that leads to **despair** and **meaninglessness**.

Lukewarm Christianity

In a lot of churches, many of the members attend church only at **Christmas** and **Easter**. There is a good reason for that. It is because those are times of celebration and there is little danger at those times that anyone will say anything about eternal damnation. So, it's not because they are too lazy or uncommitted to go to church on other Sundays. It's a matter of protecting themselves. They've been **abused** for far too long. They've heard far more than they care to hear about eternal damnation. So they stay away from church except at the two times when they know that it is very unlikely that anyone will bring up that **god-awful** teaching of a God of eternal damnation.

The Unchurched

Then there is perhaps **half** of the population that doesn't go to church, even at Christmas and Easter. I have talked with many unchurched people, and they so often bring up the subject of unending punishment in hell that it is obviously an issue that **weighs heavily** upon them. It is as if they feel the need to make a rebuttal against what they have so often heard about a god of eternal damnation. They seem to desperately hope that someone will agree with them, and tell them that it ain't so, that God is not like that.

They seem to instinctively reject the idea of a **monster god** who throws people into hell, kicking and screaming against their will, never again to listen to their pleas for mercy. They also reject the idea of a **stupid, weak and uncaring god**, who is either unable or unwilling to save people who go floundering through life and, of their own free will, find themselves experiencing hell. What kind of a god is that, who either mercilessly throws people into hell, to punish them forever because they are naughty, or a stupid and uncaring god who either can't save lost people, or doesn't want to save them?

Who in their **right mind** would want to serve a god like that? Because of that perception, many people conclude that they don't want to have anything to do with the church. In many cases, those disillusioned people are **not aware** that there are progressive thinking and open-minded United Methodist, Episcopal, Lutheran, and other churches, as well as UU Churches, of course. Not being aware that there are churches that teach **love** instead of **judgment**, that teach **hope** instead of **damnation**, they drop out of church all together.

Making the World a Better Place

We all want to make the world a better place. But that's not likely to happen as long as the teaching of a God of eternal damnation continues to prevail in most churches, and in our society at large. That is because, for people who believe in God, which is the vast majority in our culture, what people **believe about God** has a powerful and direct **influence** on how they **live** their lives. If people believe that God is judgmental, condemning and cruel, it's very easy for them to justify living that same way themselves.

It's like the old song, "One **Tin Soldier**" goes, "Go ahead and hate your neighbor. Go ahead and cheat a friend. Do it in the name of Heaven. You can justify it in the end." Sadly, I see people every day in our own country and around the world seeking to justify evil behavior in the name of heaven,

in the name of God, and it's much easier to do that if we believe that God is judgmental, condemning and cruel. On the other hand, if we believe that God is loving, and kind, and merciful, and gracious, and patient, and nurturing, and so on, we are then much more likely to act that same way ourselves.

This is of enormous significance. I believe that if we want to **change** the **world** for the better, perhaps the most important thing we need to do is to change people's **perception** of God. That is because it seems to me that you can't raise people's behavior above their perception of God. So we need to change people's perception of God from being judgmental and cruel to loving.

During the Civil War, Abraham **Lincoln** was sometimes **criticized** because he loved his enemies too much. He was told, "You shouldn't love your enemies. You should seek to destroy them." To which he replied, "Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?" Isn't that powerful!? Abraham Lincoln was **a Universalist**. He rejected the teaching of a God of eternal damnation. He believed that God is love, that all people are precious, and that all will eventually experience salvation. Because of that, he could love even his enemies. And what a powerful difference that made in how he lived his life. It seems to me that **we** also who **believe in Universalism** are called to live the same way. And because we are Universalists, who also believe in the power of love, and that everyone is precious, we can rise above being judgmental and cruel, and be enabled to transform the world through love.

Share the Good News

We who believe in universalism have wonderful good news to share with the world. And it is powerfully important that we do so. **Robert Short**, the author of the book, *Something to Believe In*, says that "There is too much at stake for (us to allow ourselves) to be intimidated by the wrathful self-righteousness of the 'hell' raising gloomy doomies". Isn't that a wonderful statement! "There's too much at stake for (us to allow ourselves) to be intimidated by the wrathful self-righteousness of the 'hell' raising gloomy doomies". He then goes on to say, "Therefore, our witness to them should be just as aggressive and unambiguous as theirs has been to us."

Fundamentalists can be intimidating. They go around quoting the Bible and asking people whether or not they are saved. They exhibit such confidence,

so they can be intimidating. But I say, let's **not be intimidated** by them. After all, **we** are the ones with the **good news**. **They, in contrast**, spread a teaching that is divisive, leads to cruel and inhumane behavior, and justifies abuse.

With the perception of the fundamentalists, it is no big thing to go to **war** and kill people of another faith, or those without a faith. After all, they contend that those people are all going to hell anyway, so they are not of value. And if we kill them in war, it really isn't that big of a deal.

Also, with that attitude, it is no big deal to **torture** people at Guantanamo Bay or any place else. After all, they contend that God fashioned hell specifically for the purpose of torturing naughty people for eternity. If God tortures people, it would surely seem perfectly all right for us to do so as well. Besides, the torture we might inflict on others, whether that be water boarding or whatever, is insignificant compared to the excruciating torture that people say that God inflicts on people for eternity, in a lake of fire, no less.

We who believe in love, who believe in universalism, who believe in the preciousness of each individual, have **truly good news** to share with the world. So we should never be intimidated by the hell-raisers.

The teaching of a God of **eternal damnation** leads to

- wars, racism, oppression and abuse.

In contrast, spreading the teaching of **universalism** leads to

- equality, respect, love and dignity for all.

So, I say, let us not be intimidated by the hell raisers. Instead, let us freely and boldly proclaim to the world the wonderful message of universalism. And the world will be infinitely better off because of it.