

“Universalism Comes to America”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on September 26, 2021

John Murray was a leader in the Methodist Church in England as a young adult. His parents, as well as the leaders of the Methodist Church he was a part of, held Calvinistic views. Murray’s perspectives and beliefs, therefore, were very Calvinistic through his adolescence and early adulthood. He was an ardent believer in heaven and hell, as well as the concept that people were predestined to one or the other after death. Perspectives such as these are in direct opposition to the beliefs that are at the very foundation of Universalism. Universalism holds that if there is salvation after death, then that salvation is universal. In other words, all people will be reconciled with God after death. And on the issue of hell, Universalism asserts that if hell exists at all, which it may not, it is a place where people or souls exist for a short time. Many Universalists of Murray’s day believed that hell was only experienced during a person’s life on earth.

And yet, as we heard in our reading, Murray is considered to be a founder of Universalism in America. How could that be? What led him to change his strongly held Calvinistic beliefs, and adopt the more forgiving and inclusive perspectives of Universalism? I will get to those questions shortly. First, however, I want to give you a sense of the strength of Murray’s Calvinistic beliefs, and the animosity he had toward Universalism during the early years of his life.

Here is a quote from one of Murray’s writings that is included in a book edited by Ernest Cassara titled *Universalism in America: A Documentary History of a Liberal Faith*.

I recollect one instance in particular, which pierced me to the soul. A young lady, of irreproachable life, remarkable for piety, and highly respected by the Tabernacle congregation and church, of which I was a devout member, had been ensnared; to my great astonishment, she had been induced to hear, and having heard, she had embraced the pernicious errors of this detestable babler; she was become a believer, a firm, and unwavering believer, in universal redemption! Horrible! most horrible! So high an opinion was entertained of my talents, having myself been a teacher among Methodists, and such was my standing in Mr. Whitefield’s church, that I was deemed adequate to reclaiming this wanderer, and I was strongly urged to the pursuit. The poor, deluded young woman was abundantly worthy of our most arduous efforts. *He that converteth the sinner from the error of his way, shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sin.*

Recall what I said earlier. Murray was an ardent believer in the Calvinistic perspective. And yet his beliefs were shaken to their very essence as a result of the encounter with the young lady mentioned above. After meeting with the young lady, he went to hear the detestable babler he referred to, James Rely, preach a sermon. What he heard led to a major shift in his belief system, and to his acceptance of universal salvation instead of salvation of a few believers.

Eventually his attendance at James Rely’s church was discovered by the members of the Methodist church. Subsequently members of that church changed their opinion of him and began ignoring him and worse. The situation became so untenable that Murray eventually stopped attending the Methodist Church. Not long afterwards both his infant son and wife died, and he ended up in debtor’s prison. Upon his release from prison he decided to leave England holding onto hope for the chance at a new life. That new life would be in America.

As he left England, he vowed never to preach again. That vow, however, was tested very shortly after he reached the shore of this continent when he met Thomas Potter. When Potter learned of Murray’s beliefs and preaching abilities, he offered Murray an opportunity—an opportunity that Murray hadn’t wanted or planned for—the opportunity to preach about his universalist perspectives. At Potter’s insistence, Murray reluctantly agreed to the request to preach. If Murray’s ship was still stuck on the sandbar come Sunday

morning, Murray would deliver the sermon in Potter's meeting house. Murray was confident he would be on his way before Sunday arrived. Because he was a man of his word, when Sunday arrived and his ship was unable to sail, Murray lived up to the agreement he had made. On September 30, 1770 he preached what is considered to be the first Universalist sermon delivered in America.

As we heard in our reading, Murray thought "that God had brought him 'into this new world to make known unto this people the grace and blessing of the new covenant.'" Some, most, or possibly all of us, may question his conclusion that God had intervened in his life on this occasion. What is clear, however, is that he embraced an opportunity that he could have turned his back on. He took a chance on the opportunity that presented itself and, as a result, his life course was changed dramatically. In spite of the adversity he had suffered, and with no assurance that more adversity might be the result of his preaching, he shared his universalist beliefs that Sunday morning.

Once his ship was finally freed from the sandbar, Murray continued on his journey. In the *Historical Dictionary of Unitarian Universalism*, Mark Harris—the same Mark Harris who co-authored the book our reading comes from—writes the following.

For the next few years, Murray became an itinerant preacher of universal salvation. By 1772 he had reached southern New England, and finally Boston in 1773. When he returned to Boston in 1774 a stone was hurled through the window where he was preaching. Murray picked it up and remarked, "This argument is solid and weighty, but it is neither reasonable or convincing." He was attacked again in Gloucester, where a small group led by Winthrop Sargent had invited him to preach.

Some years later, in January of 1779, the Independent Christian Church in Gloucester was founded. This was the first Universalist Church in America. Harris goes on to tell us more about Murray's life and experience with that church.

Soon thereafter the church was embroiled in litigation surrounding its legitimacy. Murray's name appeared on the suit against the Parish Church in Gloucester, which was attempting to tax the Universalists. This suit was finally settled in 1786 when the Universalists won the right to have their taxes support the church of their choice. Murray had to continue to battle state authorities over his abilities to legally perform weddings, and this was resolved the following year when his legitimacy and ordination (which occurred at the December 25, 1780, church building dedication) were confirmed by [the] state legislature... During the next few years Murray took a leading role in attempting to organize and unite Universalist churches—first at the convention in Oxford in 1785 and later in Philadelphia. Murray finally left Gloucester in 1793 to settle with the First Universalist Church in Boston, where he remained until his death on September 3, 1815.

I believe it can be helpful to learn about the history of our religious tradition and those who have forged the path that allowed Unitarian Universalism to get to where it is today. Today Unitarian Universalism is one of the most liberal religious traditions in our nation. And I believe the story of John Murray's life may have something to teach us. Today we are all facing adversity, just as Murray faced adversity. The adversity we are facing comes from the ongoing spread of the COVID pandemic, from the threats posed by human caused global climate change, from prejudice and discrimination based on such things as the color of a person's skin, the religion a person belongs to or a person's gender, and from the dysfunction within our government, our public institutions and our culture as result of the political divides that exist in this nation. It would be easy for any of us to make a vow, as Murray did, to avoid situations that we believe could lead us into more controversy or more adversity. No matter how hard we might try, however, life has a way of presenting opportunities—chances if you will—again and again, just like in the Story for All Ages.

What are we to do with the opportunities—the chances—that come our way. Do we ignore or even pull away from them because, like the young person in our story, we are unsure? Maybe we do what Murray

did upon meeting Thomas Potter, that is, make an agreement to take a chance while being relatively certain that we won't have to follow through with that agreement. This type of approach is not what I would consider to be a whole-hearted embrace of the possibility at hand. In Murray's case, his initial reluctance to embrace the possibility that was presented to him was overcome by his sense of duty to live up to his agreements. And that made all the difference in his life. But sometimes when we reluctantly reach for a chance we miss it and fall, as the young person in our story did.

When we approach a chance, an opportunity, with doubt, uncertainty or reluctance, it is quite probable that the opportunity will flit away from us like a butterfly on a windy day. As a result, we might make a decision such as the one Murray had made prior to leaving England, when he vowed not to preach again. Regularly approaching opportunities with doubt, uncertainty or reluctance may lead not just to the opportunity of that moment being lost. It can result in the loss of future opportunities as well. We can begin to ignore the chances, the opportunities, that are present every day of our lives. Once Murray took the chance that Potter presented him, opportunities began occurring more frequently. Because of his successful first sermon in this country, he went on to a life of ministry and leadership in the earliest days of Universalism in this country.

So today, as we strive to find our way through the adversity that we are in the midst of, I would ask us to think about the opportunities, the chances, that come our way. How do we perceive and respond to those opportunities, those chances, that present themselves to us. Do we ignore or avoid them? Do we respond to them tentatively? Do we embrace them with excitement, enthusiasm and energy? Let me say here that there isn't one correct answer to these questions for every opportunity that presents itself. For example, if you are offered an unbelievably fantastic chance to buy ocean-front property in Nevada, for just a few thousand dollars, don't do it. Ignore and avoid the opportunity. But if you get a chance at something that you perceive to be reasonable, appropriate, and matches your interests, that is a different matter. How might you respond? Will you be prepared to take the risk and embrace the opportunity? I hope so. If we stop taking chances, we may at some point not recognize new ones when they present themselves to us. If we lose our courage, we might not embrace the chance, the opportunity, that could change our life for the better.

In closing this morning I want to share again the ending of our Story for All Ages. "So what do you do with a chance? You take it... because it just might be the start of something incredible."

May it be so.