

“Universalism’s Role in Widening the Circle ...”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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As we heard in the reading that Carolyn shared with us earlier; “It is hard for modern readers to understand the deep fear of being excluded from heaven.” I highly doubt that anyone attending our service today has much, if any concern, let alone a deep fear, of being excluded from heaven. And yet, the deep fear that Rev. Buehrens mentions was very real, and is still very real, for some people. It was real for many people in the early European colonies on this continent during the first half of the 18th century. During that time period what is referred to as the “Great Awakening” was occurring. And the fear continues to be very real for a sizable number of people today—people who believe that a person, upon death, will spend eternity in hell unless they have accepted Jesus as their personal redeemer and savior during their lifetime. The belief that a few, those who are chosen, will go to heaven, and everyone else is destined, or even predestined for hell, is one example of how some humans can tend to limit the circle of inclusion.

I say how some humans can tend to limit the circle of inclusion because our Universalist forebears challenged and refuted the dominant Christian theology regarding salvation and where a person’s soul would go after death. As Rev. Buehrens points out, “it can be claimed that either Paul or Jesus was “‘the first Universalist.’” Rev. Buehrens cites three passages from the Gospels as evidence for his claim. In case you want to look them up they are Mark 7:25-30, Matthew 15:21-28 and John 4.

The earliest proponents of universal salvation asserted that the circle of inclusion had to be significantly larger than the dominant theological perspective would allow. In the first half of the third century, Origen, an early Christian scholar and theologian, wrote that God would restore all creatures to the equal state in which they had been created. Therefore, all would eventually be reunited with God. Such a belief was not received well by those in power at that time or subsequently. In 543 Emperor Justinian I declared Origen a heretic and ordered that all of his writings be burned. From Origen’s time to today, many scripture verses, not just those Rev. Buehrens identified, have been cited as evidence that all are accepted and loved eternally by God.

The theology of universal salvation is still alive today. Early in this century, Bishop Carlton Pearson was declared a heretic by the Joint College of African-American Pentecostal Bishops. The designation as a heretic came about after Bishop Pearson began preaching what he referred to as “the Gospel of inclusion.” Starting in the early 1980’s, Bishop Pearson, a black Pentecostal minister, was lead minister of the Higher Dimensions Evangelical Center. Higher D, as it was often called, was a church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, that at one point had over 6,000 members. The congregation was multi-racial, which was a rare and significant occurrence in Tulsa.

In 1996, Bishop Pearson, a graduate of Oral Roberts University, had an epiphany that God had already reconciled with all humans, no matter what religious belief they held. As you would expect, that didn’t go over well with many members of Higher D. Church membership dropped precipitously and eventually the church building had to be sold. After the sale, the Rev. Dr. Marlin Lavanhar of All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa invited Pearson, now no longer a Bishop, to deliver a sermon one Sunday. Many of the congregants of the Higher D who remained loyal to Pearson attended the All Souls service that morning. Most of the Higher D congregants were people of color. Almost all of the All Souls members were white. The contrasts in skin color, worship style and religious perspectives that morning were very evident. As Rev. Dr. Lavanhar recognized, this was an opportunity for the All Souls congregation to widen the circle and to more fully embrace their Universalist heritage. Not long after that, as Pearson prepared to move to Chicago to become lead minister of a United Church of Christ congregation, he encouraged those congregants who had followed him to All Souls to remain there. Many of them did just that. They had found a new home. They had found a new home because Universalism called them. They had found a new home because the All Souls community welcomed them and offered them a religious home where they could continue working for a better, more inclusive community and world.

There are many other examples of the times and ways that Universalism has widened the circle. One of those examples can be seen in the life of Olympia Brown, who we heard about in this morning's Story for All Ages. With her ordination to ministry in 1863, Rev. Olympia Brown is considered to be the first woman in this country to be ordained, not just by a congregation, but by a denomination. That denomination was then known as the Universalist General Convention. Rev. Brown was an ardent proponent of equal rights for women. Here is a quote from one of her speeches.

It can be no possible advantage to a man that his mother was socially a toy, financially a dependent, politically a slave. On the contrary, the stream cannot rise higher than its source, and if women are fettered, dependent, ignorant, their sons will be narrow in mind, craven and cowardly. When women are free and independent, and by experience in the business of the world, shall have grown into the stature of true womanhood, then, indeed, we may look for a race of noble men such as the world has never seen.

Universalism widened the circle for numerous other women of the late 19th and early 20th centuries as well. I will mention two of them. In 1880 Caroline Soule was the first woman to be ordained to ministry in the United Kingdom. Like Rev. Olympia Brown, she was ordained as a Universalist minister. In 1893 the Rev. Augusta J. Chapin was awarded an honorary doctor of divinity by Lombard College. She was the first woman to achieve that honor in America. She was also a Universalist minister and Lombard College had been founded, in 1853, by the Universalist Church.

Here is what the Rev. Robert Cummins, the Fifth General Superintendent of the Universalist Church of America, had to say about Universalism's role in supporting the advancement of women.

The Universalist Church was the first to sponsor women for its ministry, not because they were women but because they were *persons*. The very first body of women in America to organize on a national scale was a body of Universalist women. The first journal devoted to the welfare of working women was edited by a Universalist minister.

Rev. Cummins held the position of General Superintendent of the Universalist Church of America from 1938 through 1953. As the above quote indicates, he recognized the role that Universalism played in expanding opportunities for women. Cummins was a firm believer that Universalism, in order to remain true to its origins, needed to expand the circle in all manner of ways. Two quotes indicate how expansive his perspectives were. The first is a footnote to an article he wrote titled *The Universalist Church of America*. I will note that this quote is unaltered and the pronouns do not match current sensibilities.

Universalism is the philosophy and religion of the all-inclusive. The whole is greater than its parts. It interprets life in terms of universals and unities, levels barriers, abjures prejudice, renounces all that sets man against his fellow man, endeavors to integrate humanity into one harmonious co-operating society. Universalism is found wherever men work together for a better world, embraces all religions, works with science to create a finer, happier world.

Universalism is being re-born. It is a "one-world" faith in the making.

The second quote comes from a speech he delivered at the 1943 General Conference of the Universalist Church of America.

Universalism cannot be limited to Protestantism or to Christianity, not without denying its very name. Ours is a world fellowship, not just a Christian sect. For so long as Universalism is universalism and not partialism, the fellowship bearing its name must succeed in making it unmistakably clear that all are welcome: theist and humanist, unitarian and Trinitarian, colored and color-less. A circumscribed Universalism is unthinkable.

These quotes make Rev. Cummins' perspective quite clear—the circle of Universalism includes everyone. The willingness of the All Souls congregation to welcome the members of the Higher D congregation into their community required significant openness and a willingness to change. It demonstrates what is required of those who respect and live out the ideals of Universalism. The examples of Rev. Olympia Brown, Rev. Caroline Soule and Rev. Dr. Augusta J. Chapin provide evidence that Universalism works to expand opportunities to those who have previously been denied or excluded.

These are only a few examples of how those who are proponents of the values which are foundational to Universalism have worked to widen the circle. The efforts of the people I have mentioned this morning have had a beneficial effect on the lives of countless numbers of people. The Universalists I have mentioned exemplify the power that Universalism has to make a positive difference in the world.

The question now becomes, how and/or where is our Universalist heritage calling us to widen the circle today. I believe that this question is one for each of us to ponder and answer individually. It is also a question that would be beneficial for us to ponder and answer collectively, as a Fellowship. I want to be clear here. In suggesting that we ponder and answer this question, I am not implying that our circle is small. I am not implying that it is closed. In spite of the pandemic, we have done our best to overcome the limitations that have accompanied it—limitations that have made it very difficult to widen our circle. Here are a few of the ways we have sought to keep our circle as wide as possible, while doing so with everyone's health and safety in mind. We have continued our efforts, through giving away our second and fifth Sunday offerings, to support organizations that represent and carry out our universalist values. We have continued to provide volunteers for our commitments with Family Promise and Fork and Spoon Café. We have continued to share our values publicly through the written word in newspaper articles, through showing up at rallies and demonstrations, and through live-streaming our Sunday services for anyone who can access the internet to see. There are many other ways we have sought to keep our circle wide during these challenging times—more ways than I know or could mention here.

And yet, the pandemic has limited us in more ways than we would wish. So during this time, a time when our activities have been reduced, it could be beneficial to contemplate where and how we might widen the circle as the pandemic recedes. I am certain all of us hope the pandemic will end very soon, possibly tomorrow or maybe even later today.

Along with the limits associated with the pandemic, there are two other reasons for us to consider how and where we are being called to widen the circle. One reason is that the Fellowship will be seeking a new minister after I retire at the end of June. It would be helpful for the Fellowship to have clarity about areas where widening the circle may need attention and energy during the minister selection process.

A second reason can be found in the Report of the UUA Commission on Institutional Change published in June of 2020 and titled *Widening the Circle of Concern*. Here is a quote from the Report that speaks to what I am encouraging us to do.

In a world where people can understand more about one another because of the way the internet allows us to enter one another's lives, cultural competency is increasingly expected. Our theological legacy has long put us on the forefront of advocacy and prophetic action to widen the circle of concern for marginalized groups, and yet without a focus on addressing today's issues of inclusion, we are woefully unprepared to live our values.

It seems to me that we are living in a time when the very essence of Universalism is needed more than at any point during my lifetime, and possibly at any point during any of our lifetimes. There are people today, just as there were when Origen lived, when Olympia Brown lived or when Robert Cummins lived, who would seek to keep the circle of inclusion small, who would call us heretics, and who would strive to prevent the values we hold dear from becoming a reality in the world. Today, we have the opportunity, as well as the challenge, of assessing how and where our Universalist heritage is calling us to make a difference in our community, our country and our world. May we have the courage and the commitment to take this

opportunity, and take up the challenge. And may we carry on the traditions and the work of those who have come before us.

So may it be.