

## LOVE WINS

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July 17, 2011

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As many of you surely know, in the early days of the United States, the predominant theological landscape was both dark and foreboding. The prevailing theology (in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century America) was Puritanical, Calvinistic Christianity which understood God as a stern and judgmental cosmic ruler, an angry and omnipotent God disgusted with humanity's depravity, sin, weakness and imperfections. Human beings were seen as trapped in the fallen state of Adam and Eve, and so humanity stood convicted of original sin, for which eternal damnation in hell was the fate for almost all of humanity...except a few pious and righteous Christians who would be saved by God from the fire. When folks went to church in early America, they routinely heard how despicable and depraved they were, and how they were doomed to eternal torment in hell because God was so disgusted with all their imperfections.

One of the most famous Puritan preachers of the day, the Rev. Jonathan Edwards – in a fire-and-brimstone sermon entitled “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” – brought congregations all over New England to open tears and wailing, by his vision of the hell that he declared was awaiting most of them. Let me quote a few lines of that famously brutal Puritanical sermon now. Edwards is describing the horrible fate of those listeners in the pew who, because of their sins, are “out of Christ”

*“[A] world of misery, that lake of burning brimstone, is extended under you. There is the dreadful pit of the glowing flames of the wrath of God; there is hell's wide gaping mouth open; and you have nothing to stand upon, nor anything to take hold of... Your wickedness makes you...heavy as lead... [and] the God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like a fire...you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more.... sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit...you hang by a slender thread, [and you have] nothing to lay hold of to save yourself...nothing that you can do [will] induce God to spare you one moment...your punishment will indeed be infinite.”*

So, as you can see, going to church in those puritanical days in America wasn't exactly a barrel of sunlight and laughs!

But it was precisely in this dark and depressing theological context where the more hopeful Unitarian and Universalist ideas (about humanity and Jesus and God) arose, and offered a direct theological challenge to the stern and pessimistic views of Puritanical Christianity. Indeed, the reason that both Unitarianism and Universalism prospered in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century America was precisely because our spiritual forbears were offering a much more positive, hopeful, life-and-humanity-affirming worldview.

Perhaps the most crucial component to our theological challenge to Puritanical Christianity was Universalism's conviction that God was a kind and loving God, and so (unlike the God of Jonathan Edwards and the other Puritans) this God did not condemn most of humanity to an eternity of punishment. In fact, Universalism offered the radical (and some said heretical!) theological idea that all persons – every man, woman, and child...no matter how far they strayed from human perfection during their lifetimes – was destined to be saved for all eternity by a loving God.

It was Universalist preacher Rev. Hosea Ballou, who was born in 1771 and died in 1851, who best articulated this new, positive theology of life and persons. In his famous book *A Treatise on Atonement*, Ballou (who had almost no formal training as a theologian, but was a skilled writer and orator) directly challenged the Puritanical idea (so starkly articulated by Jonathan Edwards in his “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” sermon) that most of humanity, steeped as they were in a life of intractable sin, would be doomed to eternal punishment by an angry and judgmental God. Ballou, as all the early Universalist preachers and thinkers, was convinced that the God of this creation is a good and loving and merciful god, who created humanity (his children) in his image of goodness, promise and love, and therefore could not and would not ultimately condemn any persons, even those who strayed widely from human goodness into wickedness, to eternal suffering and damnation.

Whereas Edwards and the other early Puritans were certain that humanity needed the “threat of god’s eternal torment and punishment” to keep them “in line” – and that is a key part of Puritanical thinking to which we will return later in this sermon – Ballou felt that humanity’s natural, God-given inclination toward goodness and happiness was all that was required for moral and social order. Ballou believed that the primary human motivation – that which first and foremost shapes our behavior -- was happiness and that God, whose primary quality is love, wants us to be happy as well. And that sin – most often “passions of the flesh” which we human beings fall victim to – involves the “conscious broaching of one’s own internal moral system,” which carries with it its own unhappiness and discomfort.

As my colleague Sam Trumbore explains Ballou’s thinking, Ballou believed that to be in a state of sin is to be in a state of misery. Ballou criticized the puritanical association of pleasure with sin. To sin, Ballou concluded, was to betray one’s own moral sense. This divides the self and creates suffering, and creates the motivation within the soul to return to right and proper relationship. In other words, Ballou believed that our universal human desire to be happy and in harmony with our world and one another is all the motivation required to ensure maximum human goodness. “Sin” and “wrongdoing” carry with them their own misery and punishment here and now in this life – in fact, Ballou once wrote that sin and misery are one. When we act badly we feel badly -- so we don’t need God holding an angry sword of judgment, or the threat of eternal damnation in hell, over our hearts to make us strive toward goodness and decency.

In a famous exchange with a Baptist minister over this theological point, the Baptist minister said, “Brother Ballou...if I were a Universalist and feared not the fires of hell, I would hit you over the head, steal your horse and saddle, ride away, and still get to heaven.” To which Ballou retorted, “Friend, if you were a Universalist, the idea would never occur to you!”

But the Puritans like Edwards and this Baptist preacher were unpersuaded, and fiercely attacked the thinking of Ballou and the other Universalists, suggesting that eliminating the threat of hell and its eternal punishment would lead to rampant human immorality and wickedness...indeed the fall of the world itself. And so the Puritans clung desperately to the theological idea of heaven and hell...and the necessity of eternal damnation to ensure human goodness.

Now...fast-forward 200 years, please. The year is 2011...and in countless Christian churches this morning people are being taught that hell awaits them if they do not think and do what God commands...that hell awaits them if they stray from the established moral standards. This thinking still dominates much of mainstream Christianity today.

But seemingly out of nowhere, there is a young, charismatic, Christian preacher (with a successful, emergent, 10,000- member megachurch in Grand Rapids, Michigan) named Rev.

Rob Bell, who, along with a growing number of other younger evangelical ministers asking the same kinds of questions, has suddenly reignited this old theological debate within mainstream Christianity about the theological necessity of hell and damnation. Rev. Bell, who is the most articulate spokesperson for this new emerging universalism, has just published a controversial new book entitled, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*," in which he suggests that Hosea Ballou and the other early American Universalists were right when they postulated a loving God, and rejected the idea of hell (after death) as somehow being necessary to regulate human behavior. I'd like to take two-and-a-half minutes now to let Rev. Bell articulate his emerging theological thinking in his own words. Please watch this brief video, which introduces his book, that is getting incredible attention right now in Christian circles:

Well, how about that?!?! Now, as you can imagine, this video and book has caused a huge theological brouhaha within the conservative Christian community. Some ministers angrily accused Bell of outright Christian heresy. Others accused him of totally subverting and perverting the essential, timeless Christian message. Others called him terribly misguided, and others have even suggested Rev. Bell should be totally shunned and condemned by the Christian community.

At the core of these objections is the same objection to universalism that Ballou had to confront 200 years ago – the idea that, without the threat of the miseries and torment of hell, Christianity would have no means to regulate or direct human behavior toward the moral and good. Listen to the furious reaction to Rob Bell's *Love Wins* of Christian writer Katrina Douglas: *"The problem is that, without hell, there is no need for [the human struggle between good and evil]; therefore, there is [also] no need for pastors. Do most Christians believe that universalism is an admirable concept? It is a nice concept, but is Rob Bell just playing to the need of humanity not to worry about their deeds? Bell's concept means that murderers, drug dealers and terrorists sit beside angels in heaven, and everyone can do as they please. If what Bell is teaching in his new book is true, everyone should go out and party?"*

This is precisely what a Christian minister said to me decades ago when we were both hospital chaplains for a year in Memphis, Tennessee. When, in one of our regular theological discussion sessions, he heard that I was a Unitarian Universalist who did not believe in the moral need for hell and eternal damnation, he said to me, "Well...if I didn't believe God was holding an angry, judgmental hammer over my head, I would be out on the streets today raping, and stealing and killing to my heart's desire. Without the threat of hell, why be good?" To which, once I recovered from my genuine moral shock, I responded just as Hosea Ballou did more than 200 years ago, "Oh Sal," I said, "I can't believe you are saying that...I do not need the threat of hell to make me strive toward goodness...goodness carries its own heavenly reward right here and now...I need no cosmic threats from a punishing God to keep me on the path to becoming the best and most decent person I can become...and I don't think you really need such threats either." But like the Puritans of Ballou's day, my Christian colleague was unpersuaded...he clung desperately to the idea that he needed the threat of hell (God's great cosmic hammer hanging directly over his head, if you will!) to be good. To this day, I think this theological belief is a great and almost incomprehensible tragedy.

In his classic book *Stages of Faith*, published in 1981, developmental psychologist Dr. James W. Fowler, of the Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, proposes that there are six progressive stages of faith or spiritual development which can be applied to human beings over their lifetimes. Dr. Fowler's thinking is fairly complex, and I can't do justice to all the nuances of his thinking this morning, so I urge any of you who are interested to go online and dive a bit deeper into his developmental conclusions. But in a nutshell, what resonates with me as a Unitarian

Universalist – and I am sure is total anathema in orthodox religious circles – is that Fowler suggests that as human beings mature and deepen their spiritual response to the world, they move from religious authority and motivations based outside of themselves (such as anthropomorphic Gods presiding in heaven ensuring justice and goodness) to taking personal responsibility for their beliefs and feelings, thus internalizing responsibility for their own lives and beliefs. Fowler suggests that many people “get stuck” in one of the early – and to his thinking, more primitive – stages of faith development and never move to fully own their own beliefs and behaviors.

Fowler’s sixth and final stage of faith development is called “Universalizing” faith , which he says is achieved by only a few rare and exceptionally “enlightened” persons such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, or Mother Theresa. These spiritually mature and wise persons begin to search for universal values, such as unconditional love and justice, and are not concerned with their own self-preservation and needs. Without spending much time critiquing the faith maturity of others, I do believe that Unitarian Universalism calls us to that spiritually and morally mature place where we take personal responsibility for our behaviors and moral choices, as Fowler suggests we should.

So, where does all this all theologically leave us? Right where we began.

For hundreds of years, since our first congregations were founded in New England, Unitarians and Universalists (and Unitarian Universalists) have believed – as Evangelical Christian pastor Rob Bell is also now daring to suggest – that, when it comes to our ultimate human destiny, “Love wins.” We religious liberals have always believed that life and God, howsoever you conceive of God, are “on our side,” and that love and hope and goodness are the most powerful forces in the world – and that they can overpower sin and evil and wrongdoing.

We have always rejected the idea that humanity needs a stern and punishing God (wielding the fires of hell) to force us to achieve goodness and decency. Love wins simply because love carries with it its own goodness...its own rewards...its own heaven. And not heaven in some far-off place, at some far-off time...but rather heaven here...heaven now...as we strive toward goodness...for goodness’s sake. May we Unitarian Universalists always stay on that positive and purposeful spiritual path...and always believe that, through it all and in the end, love wins...love wins.

Amen.