

Opening words:

Happy Valentine's Day weekend! In honor of love, big love, expansive love, we are exploring our own lineage of heretical love, through song and story, images and words.

On this weekend devoted to love, Let's celebrate the universalism, the love, in UU. Even though I was raised UU, I, like many Uus, only had the vaguest idea about what universalism was before I went to a UU seminary on my journey to become a minister, Maybe you feel that way too. Maybe you think universalism is not so relevant for us now. I hope you feel a little differently by the end of this service!

In its simplest definition, universalism is a belief that love pervades the world, whether you call that love God, or the spirit of life, or the inherent love within and between us all.

So let's celebrate love! Radical, even heretical love, and why we, and the world, need this love now, more than ever.

The song we are about to sing may not be familiar to you. It is based on the words of UU theologian, Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker, and it is a beautiful expression of the contemporary spirit of universalism. You'll catch on I'm sure, or you can let the words wash over you.

Reflection (Rev. Florence): *The Heresy of Love* by Rev. Florence Caplow

I hope you enjoyed those readings from Universalists over the last centuries, and the lyrics of Answering the Call of Love, and that you felt the resonance between them.

One of my favorite things to say when someone asks me about Unitarian Universalism is that we are the marriage of two great heresies, ideas that go all the way back to the beginnings of Christianity, and were only made heresies about 300 years after the death of Jesus, when Christianity allied itself with the Roman empire.

Universalists of earlier centuries also believed that a loving God would never consign anyone to hell, so there was no such thing as hell (and as a matter of fact, there is little mention of hell in the Bible). That was a big part of what made Universalism so upsetting to those who used the fear of hell as a method of control.

Did you know, as you sit here this morning, looking... mostly... like solid upright church-going citizens, that you are all heretics?

This might please some of you, and dismay others, but nonetheless, even today in mainstream Christianity we who are gathered here hold heretical views, that in the past led to exile, ridicule, prison, and death for those who preached them. And views that even now in some conservative Christian denominations can lead to the expulsion of ministers.

I want to tell you the story of a modern day heretic.

One day years ago I was listening to the radio program This American Life and I heard the story the Reverend Carlton Pearson.

Carlton Pearson is an African American evangelical minister, and at one time a super star in the charismatic evangelical movement, with a church in Tulsa Oklahoma which had 5,000 people showing up every Sunday.

And then something happened. As the host of the radio program, Ira Glass, explained, "At the height of his popularity, he became involved in a scandal, though not the kind of scandal that you usually think of when you hear the word scandal. He didn't have an affair. He didn't embezzle money. He didn't admit an addiction to prescription painkillers. No, no, none of that. He stopped believing in Hell.."

This is how it began. One day he was sitting watching TV with his daughter on his lap, and there was a news program about the massacres of Rwanda, and as he watched, he thought about all those children who were not Christian dying and being cast into hell, as he firmly believed would happen to them. But could this be possible? And then he saw and FELT that we create Hell on this planet for each other, and God, a loving God, has nothing to do with it.

As he said in a sermon after this experience, "The God we have been preaching is a monster. And I would say no. My God loves you." There you go. That's Universalism

After Carlton's Pearson revelation he lost everything. He was formally named a heretic. He lost his fame, his wife, his mega-church, everything he had. And yet, once he had seen this great view of love he couldn't go back.

And then we got the part of the radio program where I began to weep uncontrollably. There is a church called the City of Refuge in San Francisco, a radically inclusive multiracial gospel church. I've known people who were part of that church. Many in the congregation are gay, or trans, and have been rejected by the families and the churches they grew up in.

But Bishop Yvette Flunder of the City of Refuge invited Carlton Pearson to preach at her church when he was at his lowest point, when he had been utterly broken and cast out. I'll let him tell the story, in his own words:

“When I finished preaching, they stood and applauded me. And she asked me to walk down through the center aisle and let the people hug me because she knew I had been bruised from my other people that had kicked me out of the charismatic world.

So these people start hugging me, and holding me, and loving me, and shaking my hand. And when I turned around, Bishop Yvette Flunder had come off from where she was. And they had a little container with warm water in it. And they asked me to sit down and take my shoes off, and they washed my feet. She washed my feet. That's one of the holiest moments of my life.” PAUSE

And later do you know what church provided refuge for a while for Carlton Pearson and the small band of people who still followed him? See if you can guess. The UU Church of Tulsa. As Ira Glass said on This American Life, “To the man he was then, the life he leads now, consorting with sinners, and gays, and Unitarians, (I love that combination!) was terrifying. But now that what's done is done, there's no way he'd go back”

Could you have washed the feet of Carlton Pearson, knowing what he had preached damnation about people like you? Would you be willing, as Carlton Pearson was, to lose everything that is most precious to you to affirm this theology of love?

Each day, in our lives, in our church, with each other, in community we as Uus, as Unitarian **Universalists**, are asked to affirm this understanding, to respect and embrace otherness, to trust in the inherent goodness of the world, whether we call it God or mystery or Buddha nature. Some may call us naive for these views. Some may call us sinners or heretics.

And it is not an easy path. Can we make it a practice to open our hearts wider and wider and wider, to let them break, to let ourselves be broken, if that's what it takes, to wash the feet of the other, and let the other wash our feet? To kiss the frogs of the world? To let our hearts cover the whole world, without exception?

We don't talk much about heaven or hell now but our Universalist heritage lives on. However we imagine heaven we can be inspired by the vision that no one is left out of our care, right here and now.

Unitarians and Universalist merged in the early 1960s, after nearly 200 years of being two different American faiths (thereby ending up with our awkward acronym, UU), and at the time the Universalists were worried that they would be submerged by the Unitarians, not just merged.

I think that fear became reality, judging by how few of us know about Universalism, but in the last couple of decades we are embracing our Universalism, and I think this is wonderful.

What do I mean by that?

Perhaps you have seen the photos of the hundreds of clergy who went to Minneapolis to support the people there, in late January. There were 200 II clergy there, from across the country, and many wore yellow stoles with hearts on them, that said “Side With Love”. More and more we understand and affirm that love is at the center of our faith and our practice, as we hear in the hymns we are singing today.

This is not an easy path. Forrest Church, The 20th century minister of All Souls NYC preached, “Universalism is an exacting gospel. Taken seriously, no theology is more challenging--morally, spiritually, or intellectually: to love your enemy as yourself; to view your tears in another's eyes'; to respect and even embrace otherness.”

The easy way is to condemn others to hell, even if only in our minds.

“Those people”, “those conservatives” “those evil-doers” “those idiots”. And for some “those immigrants”, “those non-Christians” ‘those trans people”
But can we make it a practice to open our hearts wider and wider and wider instead? As a radically different way of being in the world?

And I recognize – how could I not? that this spiritual practice – and it is a spiritual practice – is harder than ever, as our daily news feeds fill with the horrors of the Epstein files and the rise of authoritarianism.

Universalism doesn't accept or condone horrific human behavior – in fact, part of loving is being brave enough to speak up when wrong is occurring – it simply asks us to not feed the part of us that makes enemies.; Martin

Luther King reminded us of this when he said, Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.

For me it is a matter of where I put my attention and energy. My favorite of the many, many protest signs we see these days is simply, “Love Your Neighbor”

I see this in real time in Minneapolis, all the ordinary people who decided one by one by one that their neighbors, whether they know them or not, whether they speak the same language or not, have the same color skin or not, have the same citizenship or not, or the same religion or not, deserve protection, deserve love, deserve to be courageously supported.

Did you know that more than 100,000 people in Minneapolis have taken the training to be non-violent ICE observers? That thousands of people are bringing food to families who can't leave their houses or go to work? And of course, two people lost their lives protecting others.

Those people who have been supporting their neighbors are atheists, Catholics, Methodists, UUs, Buddhists, pagans...most wouldn't even know what Universalism is, but they are living examples of universalism. You can be too.

In that spirit, I want to close with the prophetic and provocative words we heard earlier from the 18th c. Universalist George de Benneville, the first Universalist preacher in the American colonies. “The spirit of Love will be intensified to Godly proportions when reciprocal love exists between the entire human race and each of its individual members. That love must be

based upon mutual respect for the differences in color, language and worship. We do not find those differences obstacles to love.”

So we are ending where we began, with marriage. I began with the marriage of two great heresies, and I end with our ancestor George de Benneville reminding us that reciprocal love is born through difference. Let us appreciate and accept with gratitude our myriad differences, whether between us and those we love, or in the wider world, and recognize the oneness that embraces us all.

Each day, in our lives, in our congregations, with each other, in community we as Uus, as Unitarian Universalists, are asked to affirm this understanding, to respect and embrace otherness, to trust in the inherent goodness of the world, however foolish others may think we are. Some may call us naive for these views. Some may call us sinners or heretics. I call us the love and justice people, and I am proud to be with you this morning.

I hope we can continue to support each other on this challenging path of love, and know that behind us are 200 years of Universalist ancestors who are cheering us on.

Let's rise in body or spirit for hymn #1008, When Our Heart Is in a Holy Place

Closing words:

I would like to close with these inspiring words from Rev. Ashley Horan that we heard earlier, written from the streets of Minneapolis: *when our communities are at risk, when democracy is at risk, when the planet is at risk, it is our moral duty to come together, to remind society and each other, that we are, in fact, each other's comfort, we are each other's salvation here, in this life, in this world....*

In these difficult times, may you feel the embrace of goodness, however and wherever it shows up in the world. Blessed be.