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Sermon  
***A Bare Knuckle Universalism***

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First Reading: 1 Corinthians 15:12-22 (NRSV)

<sup>12</sup>Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? <sup>13</sup>If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; <sup>14</sup>and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. <sup>15</sup>We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. <sup>16</sup>For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. <sup>17</sup>If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. <sup>18</sup>Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. <sup>19</sup>If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. <sup>20</sup>But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. <sup>21</sup>For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; <sup>22</sup>for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.

Second Reading: John Murray Atwood

The present is a time fraught with danger; it is an age of freedom, mostly counterfeit. Thousands on thousands are delighted with the consciousness that they can do as they please, that old restraints and catalogs of forbidden pleasures are a thing of the past. They also rejoice that there are today so many and such diverse interests to satisfy their desires. So they are out to get and have all they can. And responsibility, social or other, is hard to find or spasmodic in its manifestation. Never before was there such a need to educate young people to make right choices, to develop within them some aim, some purpose that will control their desires, coordinate their interests and guide them wisely amid all the myriad things that clamor and appeal to their passions and desires. This is particularly the function of the liberal. We must teach that one must justify the freedom in which one rejoices by showing that there is some inner purpose . . . and that freedom is just for this and none other, that one may obey the higher purposes of life.

Sermon

Earlier this month I attended the annual gathering of The Prairie Group, a study group for ministers. Each year about thirty of us meet on the banks of the Illinois River near its juncture with the Mississippi at the Pere Marquette State Lodge for the presentation and discussion of five different papers on a topic selected the previous year. It is a time for diving deep into that place where the spiritual meets the intellectual. This year's topic was Universalism.

The name of this church is Hope Unitarian Church, but this church is a member of the Unitarian Universalist Association formed in 1961 out of the merger of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America. The Unitarian movement is popularly thought of as originating out of the rejection of the Trinity, but it has a more radical root in the rejection of the doctrine of original sin which is another way of saying it emphasized the human capacity for righteousness, the human capacity to be good, the human capacity to act with love. Universalism, on the other hand, was a movement that emphasized the loving nature of God, rejecting the idea that God could condemn people to eternal punishment. As Thomas Starr King said, "The Universalist . . . believes that God is too good to damn us forever; and you Unitarians believe that you are too good to be damned."

Universalism has biblical roots in passages such as the one I read from First Corinthians that says, "so all will be made alive in Christ." Universalists have traditionally insisted on taking those words literally as an indication that all will be restored to eternal life in communion with God. But there is another argument that is not biblical. Over the centuries orthodox Christianity developed what's known as the classical model of theism that defined God as omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly loving. If that is the true nature of God, said the universalists – how could you explain a perfectly loving God condemning people to eternal punishment in hell for crimes – the worst of which – even the Holocaust – were finite? That's why traditional Universalists believe even the Jeffrey Dahmer's of the world get to heaven.

During the early nineteenth century traditional Christian universalism flourished. It grew rapidly, much faster and with more followers than Unitarianism ever attracted. But by the end of that century it had faltered. The Universalist church was on the edge of dying outright in 1961 when it merged with the Unitarians. As it shrank in size the nature of universalism itself began to change. Beginning about the turn of the previous century a new form of universalism emerged that had little or nothing to do with its Christian roots, little or nothing to do with belief in an afterlife. This was a universalism that was not about going to heaven, but about a universal acceptance of all people and a universal religion that included all religions using the metaphor that says there is one light and each religion is like a window admitting the one light into a common cathedral. Eventually this led to the notion that one Sunday there could be Christian worship, the next Sunday the Buddha was celebrated, etc., etc., etc. This new form of universalism is hard to define as it takes different forms. Perhaps its most salient feature is a lack of distinctive boundaries. Where it begins and where it ends is hard to see. It is a movement that delights in these words of Edwin Markham:

He drew a circle that shut me out –  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout  
But love and I had the will to win  
We drew a circle and drew him in.

This is the Universalism that has become dominant in modern Unitarian Universalism. Traditional Christian Universalism is little more than a footnote amongst us today. And just as universalism stopped growing in the nineteenth century, modern

Unitarian Universalism is not growing. A reasonable question is why? I think the answer is important - not only for our own religious movement, but for religion in America as a whole - and the answer is to be found in the nineteenth century.

Universalism once flourished because it offered an alternative to the prevailing notion of God as a brutal, sadistic deity who condemned people to eternal hell not for what they done, but because they made the mistake of being human. Universalism was a breath of fresh air for people smothered in doctrines that espoused hatred and anger as the prime characteristics of God, as the prime characteristics of that which has greatest value. Universalism offered a message of Hope, not of Hell. Of course it grew. Faced with a choice between such radically different ideas of the nature of God it was perfectly natural that universalism would attract a multitude of followers.

So what happened? Universalism triumphed. The mainline protestant churches and the dominant culture become universalist. Not in name, but in practice. This was also true of the Unitarian churches – with a resulting theology that said the whole world was practically perfect. And then what happened? The mainline Protestant churches appeared to flourish in the 1950's, but in fact they were a hollow shell and over the following decades they have approached a possible collapse. There are many reasons, but I believe their embrace of universalism is one of the critical reasons. As the culture of America rejected hell fire and brimstone – as evidenced by surveys that show the majority of Americans believe in a literal hell and that there are people who will go there, just nobody they know, there was nothing left for universalism to push against. Universalism needed hell. I believe that is the context in which Bishop Carlton Pearson found himself. It is not an accident that it was a Pentecostal, hell fire and brimstone preacher who found himself pulled towards universalism. Those in the mainline Protestant tradition have no need of its message, they are already there even if they don't know it. Add to that the fact that universalism, with its insistence that everybody went to heaven – even if there wasn't a literal heaven – had become enamored not only with the perfect love of God, but the essential goodness of humanity.

No better example of this is the famous – or infamous – appeasement of Hitler that took place at Munich in 1938. The architect of that agreement for the allies was Neville Chamberlain, an English Unitarian. I have not read anything about his personal theology, but in general Unitarians were universalist in their theology and the agreement he made at Munich is consistent with a universalist view of the world that believes everyone can be saved, everyone embraced. It was a classic example of the most legitimate complaint made against liberal religion – a difficulty confronting the reality of evil. This, I think, is why universalism began to decline. This, I think, is the primary reason why the mainline churches are in decline. They have nothing to push against. Traditional universalism falls flat when it doesn't have hell fire and brimstone to push against.

There are, of course, those who continue to preach hell fire and brimstone. That's especially true here in Tulsa. But the larger culture, although sometimes browbeaten and bullied by such attitudes, largely goes its universalist way. What!? Me worry? That seems to be the attitude. From a distance of superiority the adherents of

universalism can look down their noses at old time religion. But here's the problem. If universalism is right; if God is not a sadistic monster and we're all going to heaven; or if everyone is our friend and heaven and hell are here on earth of our own making and all it takes to achieve world peace is for all of us to learn to sing Kumbaya together, why do the old hell fire and brimstone religions continue to attract followers, why do liberal religions often struggle?

I don't think it's because the old time religion folks are right. Whatever God is, I am satisfied it's nothing like classical theism. But I am also convinced the world and people are not much like the rosy image offered by today's universalism. There is much to admire about the spirit of universalism. I admire that spirit. It took enormous courage for the early universalists to confront the religious establishment with its God of anger and vengeance. It is a marvelous sentiment to speak of drawing circles that include everyone. That's all good stuff. But if that's all it is, I find it short sighted and naïve and shallow because the reality of this world is different. Even in the absence of a vengeful, angry God this world is a dangerous place. The natural world and human beings can be cruel and brutish. It was, after all, people, human beings who invented the idea of a God so angry with the world that the only way he could assuage his anger was by having his own son killed.

I believe the world needs the spirit of Universalism. I also believe the world needs a practical and realistic universalism, a bare knuckle universalism that recognizes and does not shy away from the brutality and mean spiritedness of the world. The murderer, the child molester, the thief may be a devout believer in the God of anger and vengeance that condemned people to hell or may be a hardcore atheist. A bare knuckle universalism will have the toughness to confront the brutality of the world and stand up to it. It will have the toughness to confront the reality of evil, the toughness to hold resolutely to the spirit of universalism and its desire to bring every soul into the fold while recognizing it is foolish and demeaning of that spirit to turn one's back on the human capacity for evil and the natural world's indifference to the human love of justice. A bare knuckle universalism is one that will not flinch from confrontation with Tulsa's gang problem which has our city on the brink of setting a new record for murders this year. A bare knuckle universalism is one that will not flinch from confrontation with political corruption both in our country where politicians are too often paid representatives of special interests or in foreign countries where political corruption leads to brutal dictatorships that will back down only when confronted with military force. And a bare knuckle universalism will not hesitate to confront the reality of human suffering, the pain and sorrow of life that comes with the loss of those we love and that sometimes overwhelms us.

I believe this is what John Murray Atwood was talking about when he said,

The present is a time fraught with danger; it is an age of freedom, mostly counterfeit. Thousands on thousands are delighted with the consciousness that they can do as they please, that old restraints and catalogs of forbidden pleasures are a thing of the past. . . . We must teach that one must justify the freedom in which one rejoices by showing

that there is some inner purpose . . . and that freedom is just for this and none other, that one may obey the higher purposes of life.

Atwood was a nineteenth century universalist who understood, as Lyman Squires once said, that "Universalism is more than cushioned seats and no hell." But to a large extent that is what universalism has become and that is why it is has faltered. There will continue to be a trickle of new adherents. Most will not be as spectacular as Bishop Pearson's conversion to what he has called the Gospel of Inclusion. But for the most part I suspect universalism will continue to be undone by its success, by its tendency to produce churches that are more focused on having comfortable cushions in the seats and pews than in confronting the reality of hell - not the hell that universalism originally reacted against, but the very real hells that we create for ourselves. Universalism will only grow and prosper again if we apply to its spirit the lesson that May Sarton learned from her mother.

But now her truth is given me to live,  
As I learn for myself we must be hard  
To move among the tender with an open hand,  
And to stay sensitive up to the end  
Pay with some toughness for a gentle world.

Amen.