UU Identity & History

Lesson 4: What is Universalist? (part 1)

10.11.2026

Objectives: Explore Universalism as theological contrast to Calvinism.

Materials: Lifesavers & Hot Tamales, lesson attachments.

Time allotment: Suggested for 50 minute class, followed by 25 minute closing service (end class 9:50/11:50 to begin chapel 9:55/11:55).

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1. **The Game of Predestination (** Important to the content of the class **):**

   Meet youth at the door. Give each youth a candy, but one out of four should get a "Lifesaver" and the other three should get a "Hot Tamale." Make it clear that no one should eat the candies until they are told to.

2. **Nametags and Graffiti Wall** (5 minutes before class begins)

   - Make nametags using blank paper, markers, and holders. Youth can create their own unique but LEGIBLE nametag. Make it a regular practice to wear nametags.
   - "Graffiti Wall" questions: Write the following on whiteboard. Invite youth as they arrive to grab a marker and weigh in with their responses:

     a) What's your take on the concept of destiny or fate? Put your name under the category of choice:

We each have a destiny that just unfolds on its own; fate is beyond our control.	*There is no such thing as destiny/fate. Every person chooses their own path.*

     b) If hell really did exist, what do you imagine it to be?

   - Teachers complete attendance sheets.
   - No Silly Fun this week. Instead, youth can begin their quiz.

3. **Self Quiz: How Good a Person are You?** (5 minutes)

   Hand out the quiz attachment. Invite youth to take the quiz individually and score themselves. They will not be asked to share their score.

4. **Chalice Lighting:** Light the chalice, saying these words together: *"We light this chalice as a symbol of our faith; the light of truth and the warmth of love."*

   Teacher reads: (from Universalist, Lewis Beals Fisher)

   "Universalists are often asked to tell where they stand. The only true answer to give to this question is that we do not stand at all; we move."

5. **Your Destiny** (10 minutes)

   Teachers' note: the youth will think their "destiny" has to do with their quiz score, but the quiz is a set-up, the surprise is their ***"destiny" is entirely determined by which candy they got at the door.*** *This juxtaposition of dumb luck versus being good will lead into talking about Calvinism and predestination.*

   - Make sure all youth have one candy.

   Teacher talks: Everyone know their quiz scores? Let's find out if you're going to heaven or hell! … If you got a Lifesaver, you go to heaven, and if you got a Hot Tamale, you go to hell. Surprise! According to Calvinism, your destiny is determined by sheer luck, not by your moral character.

   Questions for discussion: What do you think?

   - If there is an afterlife, do you think good people go to heaven and bad people to hell?
   - How do you know what actions are good or bad? Who should get to determine what is good and bad?
   - Can you think of situations when it might be *moral* to **not** determine if some*one* is good or bad based on their actions? *(Hint: believing in the inherent worth and dignity of every people even if their actions don't line up with our UU values; restorative justice.)*

6. **Calvinism: NOT Universalists** (15 minutes)

   Teacher talks: John Calvin, a white French theologian around in the 1500s, shaped Reformed theology and had influential ideas about God's relationship to people. Calvin supported Luther and the Protestant Reformation, but he also differed some. Among his ideas, Calvin believed that destiny and predestination (that some people are saved and others are condemned) was central to the Christian faith and to be taken seriously. Predestination got people worked up enough to declare themselves ANTI-Calvinists, or…*Universalists. Remember, Universalism is a separate movement that happened before Unitarianism came to America.*

   Hand out lesson attachment and ask volunteers to read the five points of predestination:

1) All people are born stained with original sin. We come into the world depraved and ready to sin. No exceptions.
2) God chooses people—before they are even born—to be in relationship with God. You are either in or out, and it does not finally matter how good, how faithful, how "churchy" you are. Those chosen people are called "The Elect," and you never quite know if you were one of them until you are dead and find out.
3) The sacrifice of Jesus' death on the cross wasn't supposed to secure forgiveness for *everyone's* sins, just for The Elect.
4) No matter what, The Elect will be saved by coming to a perfect faith in God through Jesus, and will go to Heaven. Nothing can prevent this.
5) Once you are elected, you are always the elect. God does not change God's mind about you.

Questions for discussion:

- Revisit the quiz and candy game: How is it similar to the idea of predestination?
- Calvin wanted to inspire confidence in a God who perfectly knows all things, including each person's salvation. If there is an all-knowing God, wouldn't God already know who was going to heaven or hell? If it is actually up to people to choose how to live their lives, how does that challenge the idea that God knows everything about everyone?
- Why do you think some people want to believe that God is all-knowing?

7. **Why UNIVERSALISTS?** (20 minutes)

Teacher talks: Some people in the church were baffled by and disagreed with predestination and The Elect (the people who were predestined to be saved no matter what). Let's read the Universalists' main points against "double predestination" (some chosen for heaven and others for hell).

[Ask youth volunteers to read from handout]

- God is too good and loving to condemn most of creation to hell. Why would God go to all the trouble of creating people in God's own image, giving them free will, and then punishing them for using it?
- Jesus told us to love our enemies. What Jesus taught comes from God, right? So God loves God's enemies, right? So why would God condemn anyone to an eternal hell?
- People are capable of forgiving each other for the worst crimes. That's pretty good, right? Well, if God is way more merciful than people are, isn't God much more capable of forgiving than people?
- Ergo… no hell (or if you still want to hold to an idea of hell, you need a different understanding of it.)

Teacher talks: People who argued against hell, and against the idea of God loving and saving only some people, called themselves UNIVERSALISTS, from the adjective "universal."

[Ask youth volunteers to read dictionary definitions of the adjective **u·ni·ver·sal** *on the back of handout]*

1. of, pertaining to, or characteristic of all or the whole: *universal experience.*
2. applicable everywhere or in all cases; general: *a universal cure.*
3. affecting, concerning, or involving all: *universal military service.*
4. used or understood by all: *a universal language.*
5. present everywhere: *the universal calm of southern seas.*

Questions for discussion:

- More than 500 years after Calvin's theology, we are modern day Universalists. How does the word "universal" help us explain our faith today?
- Do you think that some of your religious friends believe in hell? Do they think you're going to hell when you die? How do you respond to that idea?
- Several years ago, Christians were experiencing a controversy over a book written by a conservative white pastor, Rob Bell. The book is called *Love Wins,* and the author makes a radical argument: all people are saved by God's love and Jesus' life, not just Christians. Why do you think some Christians would be angry at this author for writing these ideas?
- Some people call our Unitarian Universalist religion a "saving faith." What might our faith save people from or for?

***Note:** Universalism did not get very far in Europe. Calvin had friends in high places. That's why next week, we will talk about how the Universalists ran away to North America…

8. **UU Timeline** (5 minutes)

- On the wall, there will be a long, blank, laminated timeline tickmarked with centuries. There will also be small laminated circles listing events in our history, plus some sticky-tack/clips for attaching those on the timeline.
- From week to week, based on the events covered by the lesson, invite the class as a whole to place historical events on the timeline as best as they know. (Remember to select only those events covered so far in the course.)
- We will keep adding to the timeline, week after week, as we cover more UU history.
- Teachers can help by referencing the actual UU timeline (last page of lesson plan).

9. **Extinguish the chalice**, saying together: *"May the light of truth and the warmth of love go with us in our hearts."*

10. **Help clean up classroom** before leaving: Please keep regular practice of readying classroom for the next class.
    - leave lesson plan and all materials organized
    - wipe the whiteboard clean
    - tables and chairs neatly returned
    - nametags collected in Ziploc bag
    - leave any comments for RE staff on attendance sheets

UU Timeline

- Earliest written evidence of Judaism, the first major religion with only one God (1000 BCE)
- Jesus of Nazareth born (around 4 BCE)
- Jesus of Nazareth executed (33 CE)
- Christian church votes to decide if Jesus is the same as God (325 CE)
- Martin Luther starts the Reformation, when Protestant churches started splitting off from the Catholic Church (1517)
- Unitarian Michael Servetus burnt at the stake for writing books that reject the idea of God as a Trinity (three persons in one) (1553)
- First official declaration of national religious tolerance (in Transylvania) (1568 CE)
- First Unitarian church built in North America (1686 CE)
- First Universalist sermon preached in North America (1770 CE)
- American Revolutionary War (1775–1783)
- First time a Unitarian minister publicly preaches that the Bible might not actually be written by God but by humans (1819 CE)
- Unitarians and Universalists work to abolish slavery (1830s)
- American Transcendentalism (about 1836-1860)
- Ralph Waldo Emerson preaches a graduation speech at Harvard in which he questions whether Jesus was any more divine than any other person (1838)

- Humanism and atheism emerge in our faith (1860s post-civil war and/or 1918+ post WWI)
- Unity Church – Unitarian built at Holly and Grotto (1905)
- Unitarian Service Committee formed to save Jewish refugees from Nazi persecution (1940)
- The Unitarian Church and the Universalist Church merge together to form the Unitarian Universalist Association (1961)
- The Seven Principles are adopted as a statement of our faiths' common values and ideals (1961, 1984)
- General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association held in Minneapolis, MN (2010)
- Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism (BLUU) is formed in the wake of conversations among Black UUs at the Movement for Black Lives Convening in Cleveland, OH (July 2015)