

Sermon "Saving Universalism" Rev. Lisa Friedman

When the 18th century farmer Thomas Potter built a meeting house on his farm to wait for a preacher who shared his religious views, his neighbors thought he had gone mad. With no children of his own to inherit his wealth, Potter decided to share his gratitude for his good fortune by establishing a house of worship for the residents of New Jersey's Cape of Good Luck. Shortly after the meeting house was finished, the Baptists applied for its use. Potter challenged them, "If you can prove to me that God Almighty is a Baptist, you may have it." A few weeks later, the Quakers applied and then the Presbyterians, but the solitary farmer issued the same challenge to each of them, declaring that unless they could prove to him that God was a partisan, "all should be equally welcome" in the religious house which he had built. So he waited, alone in his empty worship hall, believing that if he was patient enough, God would send a preacher who shared his inclusive message and who would help him to bring it to the world.

It may seem odd to you for me to evoke a three hundred year old story, rooted in an era that we see much differently through 21st century eyes, at the end of a week that has brought such profound heartbreak and outrage to our community and our nation. The violence of the senseless murders, the magnitude of the entrenched racism of our society, the discouraging echoes of our history - we have been shaken to the core. It's tangible in our eyes and our faces, in every community I've touched this week. We long to know - will this be the moment of turning, of lasting change? Will we finally say "enough is enough" and make it reality? We yearn for something concrete to do - for

some way to put our sorrow and grief into effective action. And yet, it is never so easy or so simple to know how to make a difference.

At times such as these, I turn to my faith for strength and inspiration. I reach out to my faith community for support, comfort and solidarity – and I need to say how important it feels to be here together today. Thank you. These are times which challenge our faith and it is important for us to talk openly with one another about our struggles and despair, and to bear witness to those core values that will not let us go, even in the most troubling hours. In my own soul-searching this week, I have come back again and again to the message of Universalism, to the call for an inclusive welcome and universal solidarity, to the unwavering message that every human being is a child of God, deserving of love, justice, and dignity. It was radical 300 years ago, when most houses of worship preached hellfire, division, and damnation, and it is still radical today when we dare to proclaim that there are no other people’s children, no other people’s fate. Our lives are more deeply interconnected and intertwined than we may ever fully know. And so, we still have need of the lonely farmer’s dream and courage. We still have need of sacred spaces, where we can come together to share our honest pain and to reach for a larger hope and vision.

For those of you who don’t know how the story ends, one foggy September morning, Potter’s preacher did come, in the person of John Murray who had landed on the Cape of Good Luck by sheer accident. With Murray’s first sermon delivered in Potter’s overflowing meeting house, American Universalism was born. The controversy spread like wildfire. Universalist preachers traveled the countryside, braving death

threats and stones thrown at their heads through church windows, in order to bring the glad message of God's love for all people. Opponents warned that the belief in universal salvation and redemption would quickly destroy the moral soul of our nation – that without the knowledge and threat of hell, no one would strive to be good.

But the Universalists came back with the argument that it is love and hope which propels the human spirit toward the just, the fair, and the good, not fear or dismissal. The story of American Universalism, as it is told, continues with Murray. But in the wake of this week, I think we need to reclaim the faith and vision and power of that is Thomas Potter's legacy to us now. For this moment is not about the failure or success of our leaders alone - it is about all of us, ordinary people of faith and committed citizens, and the nature of the houses we are willing to build. In this past week, this house, our house, has stood with its doors wide open, along with others in our community. We have held space for protesters and activists to rest and restore from time at the Governor's mansion. We have offered childcare for those who held vigil at J.J. Hill Montessori. We have provided gathering space and food for grieving families. We did not hesitate – it was the least we could do. It is why we are here.

But this house has been standing for over a century, and if there is one thing we have learned in the last decades, it is that no house is big enough, no welcome is wide enough, to effect all the change we seek. Thomas Potter built a building, created sacred space, and waited for the moment when the people would come. Eventually, they did. Today, in this hour, it seems to me that we need to take ourselves out of our individual houses and into the streets to build sacred space there. Sacred space where we meet in

our difference to stand in non-violent solidarity to address the systems of inequity and racism that oppress and kill. Sacred space in which those of us with privilege are willing to give some of it up to make reparations for the sins of our past. Sacred space in which we are willing to show up as ordinary human beings in our grief and pain and doubt to struggle through the questions and the challenges together. For if we truly believe in our essential equality and the universality of our humanity in the eyes of the Holy, then our home, our people, is wherever we meet one another in love and truth. In the 21st century, we need a larger house than any brick or steel can build. We need a larger house, whose foundation is grounded in the human heart.

After he build his chapel, Potter waited over ten years for his preacher to arrive, and he was reconciled to the fact that one might never come in his lifetime. Somehow, through the seasons and the years, he was able to stay present to his hope and faith, even in the midst of uncertainty and in the face of the ridicule and indifference of his neighbors. But it can't have been easy. And I wonder about the role of the other few scattered universalists in the region in reaching out to him through the years. History does not record their names, but we know they were there.

I am deeply aware of the power of presence this week to the sustaining power of hope and faith, as we have received outreach from other Unitarian Universalist congregations, from the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, and others who simply want to say we're here. We're grieving with you. Let us know what you need. And in the early hours of Friday morning, as I awoke to the news of the police killings in Dallas, I sent an email to our colleagues at First Unitarian Church of Dallas, letting

them know that Unity Church was sending love and strength to them in their hour of need. Later that day I stood on the corner of Penn and Lowry in Minneapolis and cried with the crowd gathered there to mourn the tragic death of a two-year-old boy.

Sometimes, there are no words. Only tears.

Christopher Buice puts it best, when he reminds us that how we relate to each other can be a matter of heaven or hell. And the salvation that we find often comes from how we show up to the present moment. In the midst of our longing to act, to solve the problems that have been so graphically laid before us this week, I hope that we will not forget the power of faithful presence, even amid our doubts and fears. In that spirit, I share this excerpt from “A Litany for Those Who Aren’t Ready For Healing” by Rev. Dr. Yolanda Pierce. (If you have not read the whole piece, I commend it to you): “Let us not rush to the language of healing, before understanding the fullness of the injury and the depth of the wound. Let us not rush to offer a band-aid, when the gaping wound requires surgery and complete reconstruction....Let us not be afraid to sit with the ugliness, the messiness, and the pain that is life in community together... Instead, let us be silent when we don’t know what to say. Let us be humble and listen to the pain, rage, and grief pouring from the lips of our neighbors and friends... Let us pray with our eyes open and our feet firmly planted on the ground.”

If I could go back in time (every historian’s dream), there is one question that I would ask of Potter. In all those years of the pulpit standing empty, why didn’t he claim his own voice and preach? Why didn’t he begin with his story, his own vision and journey of faith? Each of us has the right and responsibility to speak up for what

matters most to us. To consider the nature of the faith we would proclaim to our community. At a meeting this spring with white allies of Black Lives Matter, Lena Gardner charged those present to consider the responses that they could create in their own communities. Each of us has the right and responsibility to find our voice in this moment.

I can feel that presence and that voice rising in us. As this week unfolded, more of you reached out to volunteer for Freedom School, to join the Racial and Restorative Justice Committee, to sign up for Beloved Conversations this Fall. You called. You emailed. You checked in. You stood at the ready for whatever call might come, and you found ways to show up for one another. Ours is a shared pulpit and a free faith, and it is my prayer that we will help one another to find our voices and to live into this moment of history together.

As someone who was raised by two bonafide Universalist preachers and teachers, I believe it would be both a tragic and dangerous mistake to allow our Universalist roots to fade in this hour. Something foundational and important to our everyday lives is at stake, something that is captured in the astute words of the agnostic Robert Ingersoll close to a century ago when he observed: "The Unitarian Church has done more than any other church - and maybe more than all other churches - to substitute character for creed. I want to thank the Unitarian Church for what it has done. [But] I want to thank the Universalist Church too. They at least believe in a God who will leave the latch string out until the last child gets home."

The pure fact of the matter is that it remains a radical – and radically important – statement of faith to affirm that each and every human being on this earth is born with equal access to all that is holy and to all that saves and redeems us, time and time again, from our own moral lapses and abject human failures. Without this affirmation, our first principle of the inherent worth and dignity of every person becomes mere hypocrisy. Without this faith, it would have been impossible for us to have achieved our long history of social change – or to be ready for the work of change that still lies before us. Where do you stand? Who will be our people, in the eyes of a loving God and in the judgment of history? Our Universalism matters, for it is that faith that continues to open our hearts to one another until we find a way to save us all.

I live about 10 blocks from the St. Anthony Village police station. Last night, as I was driving home after a full day of board meetings, emails, and a memorial service, on my way to revising a sermon, I drove by a lemonade stand on the street next to mine. The whole family was out waving a sign – lemonade 25 cents! On a spur of the moment, even though I felt pressed for time, I dug through my car for a quarter and walked down the street to purchase a cup. A small child solemnly took my payment and proudly announced “We’re raising money for Black Lives Matter!” They had been sitting out all afternoon, greeting neighbors and strangers alike, having important and wide-ranging conversations. It was something we could do, the dad said. Something we could explain to the kids. As I walked home, I thought that Thomas Potter would have understood.