

Infinite and Unchangeable Love: Why We Need Universalism Now
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For Starr King Chapel, St. Lawrence Foundation, UUCN

The law of heaven is love – Hosea Ballou

When you describe something as infinite, it means that the thing is limitless or endless in space, extent, or size; that it's impossible to measure or calculate; or that it's a space or quantity that is infinite.

“What the world needs now, is love, sweet love. It's the only thing that there's just too little of. What the world needs now is love, sweet love. No, not just for some, but for everyone.”

When Jackie DeShannon sang the song first in 1965, and it was 'covered' by Dionne Warwick, people all over that heard the lyrics helped push the song up the charts. It reached as high as #1 in Canada, and as high as #7 on the Billboard Hot 100 in the US.

It's a concept whose time has come again. After the events of the last couple of months of 2020 and the first few weeks of 2021, we could all use a little more love.

The Universalist faith – one side of the Unitarian-Universalist equation – holds a strong belief that a loving God would NOT elect only a portion of mankind to be saved, to enjoy salvation, and doom the rest to eternal punishment. Since Hosea Ballou asserted that the law of heaven is love, it would have to be a love that surpassed all others in order to allow every member of humankind – all of us perfectly imperfect beings – to receive salvation.

Turning for a moment to online dictionaries and references, there are definitions for many different kinds of love, ranging from four to eight different types. For the purposes of this sermon, I'm going to stick with four kinds – Eros (AIR-ros) – romantic love; Storge (STOR-jay) – familial love;

Philia (FILL-ee-ah) – brotherly love; and Agape (Ug-GAH-pay) – God’s divine love.

Examples of Eros – romantic love – are easy to find and recognize. Just watch your television or listen to popular media, radio, or get online, and you’ll see many examples of romantic love. There are books and poetry written about it, it’s celebrated in the Bible, and the greeting card industry reminds us all the time about how their products can help us express our sense of Eros.

Romantic love certainly makes for a happier heart, but it isn’t the main type of love I believe the Universalists were talking about.

Next, let’s talk a bit about Familial love – Storge (STOR-jay). It’s the love Hosea Ballou spoke of when he wrote:

*A mother’s love, in a degree, sanctifies
the most worthless offspring.*

Storge is the love of family, the affectionate bond between parents and children, and between siblings. It’s a concept we could easily ascribe to the Universalists – to cherish one’s kindred, particularly focused on the tenderness of parents and children.

I can clearly remember the surge of love – of Storge – that I felt when my son Ronald was born. (tell Ron’s birth story, eyes open, we connected)

Until that moment, I’d known love, yes – romantic love, and I probably took for granted to a certain extent the level of familial love I felt for my parents and my family members, but this...this was different.

Never had I felt something so intense, immediate, committed and just...perfect. That love would fuel my motivation for years to come, affecting the jobs I took, the education I pursued, even the car I drove. I wanted the absolute BEST for my little one, and I was determined to protect him at all costs.

That same infinite and unchangeable love was there when I gave birth to my daughter Ariana – perhaps more so because hers was a slightly That That same infinite and unchangeable love was there when I gave birth to my daughter Ariana – perhaps more so because hers was an unusual pregnancy and a slightly difficult birth. (tell Ariana story – couldn't “see” her, heart rate drop, early delivery, surgery, “save the baby”)

The depth and breadth of that kind of love, familial, yes, but SO intense, stays with me to this day. To quote one of my favorite singers, Sade, “...it dives, and it jumps, and it ripples like the deepest ocean.”

Profoundly wise and wonderful poet and author Maya Angelou wrote

“Love recognizes no barriers. It jumps hurdles, leaps fences, and penetrates walls to arrive at its destination full of hope...”

If only THAT feeling – that kind of love – was indeed universal. What a wonderful world it would be...

The next type of love – arguably the hardest to achieve – is Agape (Ug-GAH-pay). Agape love is the highest of the four types, referring to God's immeasurable, incomparable love for humankind – we perfectly imperfect, frustrating, hair-raising, laugh-inducing residents of the planet Earth.

Agape love is perfect, unconditional, sacrificial, and pure – ongoing, outgoing and self-sacrificing, given without condition and given unreservedly to those who may be undeserving of it. It's divine and extends beyond emotion. It's an active kind of love and is demonstrated through actions.

You don't have to do anything to “earn” Agape love – it's spontaneous and heedless – it doesn't determine beforehand if love will be effective in changing or modifying a person or their circumstances. It's divine and extends beyond emotion.

While we can yearn to be capable of this kind of love, it's beyond our reach as finite human beings. There is another kind of love, however, that is VERY compatible with Universalism.

We can get closer to a human-capable, universal love when we look deeper at Philia (FILL-ee-uh) – brotherly (I’m going to say sibling-friendly) love. This is not the same as a familial kind of love – it’s for the siblinghood of human beings – love without romantic attraction, that can be experienced between individuals or groups of people. It requires that there be a sharing of values and respect between those involved. Philia also describes encompassing love for our fellow beings, including care, respect, and compassion for those in need.

Now THAT is certainly a kind of love that Universalists could get behind. That kind of love – leaving no one out – dovetails beautifully with the principle of universal salvation. No soul left behind – all are included.

We are all siblings – and our goals should include the cultivation of and expression of that warm and devoted sibling-friendly love for one another. That kind of love should be demonstrated in such a way that it draws others not of the faith toward us.

What might it be like if we treated everyone like a sibling? Ideally, it means that we’d want the best for them – for them to achieve their own highest personal potential – and that we’d also keep watch over them to help keep them out of danger. We’d “pull their coat tails” as my Mama would say to let them know they were in danger or they were going to do something that wasn’t okay and help them change direction.

In his sermon “Answering the Religious Right with the Big Heart of Universalism” Scott Alexander asserts that

“There is a place set in this creation for every last man, woman and child...a precious, safe place has been set for each and every one of us...period...and it is our human job to respect, protect and nurture the well-being of all of God’s diverse and curious children. The early Universalists said that every human being (no matter how strange or flawed or unlovable or broken or weird they may seem to US) is to be protected, cherished, welcomed, loved.”

Respect, protect and nurture the well-being of all of God's diverse and curious children. What a beautiful way to say it – what a beautiful sentiment, and a call to action. I'm not going to fool you and say that it will be easy to do this – it won't be. We – you and I – must cultivate within ourselves a heart that sees our siblings as worthy and precious, deserving of welcome, protection, and worthy of nurturing.

We can't give up on each other – we are all we have! The Universalist principles of inclusion, optimism, compassion, and hope **MUST** hold sway – even when times seem tough and it feels like we are rolling that enormous stone up a hill – we can't give up.

Hosea Ballou and his contemporaries preached that gospel – that all would be included, that we should be optimistic about the future and the condition of humankind, that we should extend compassion not just to those we agree with or who hold views like ours, but also to those who we disagree with, who shout instead of discussing, and for whom common ground seems impossible to find.

We must not be silent – we must lift our voices and proclaim our values. We must proclaim the Universalist values and describe the faith as one that sees human beings as wonderful and part of one human family.

We must assert and re-assert that division, fear and exclusion is **NOT** our way, and that every individual of this world – be they gender neutral, gender fluid, or what shape their gender expression takes; no matter what their racial identity, financial status, political persuasion, or level of accomplishment is a child of the Most High – one who is valuable simply because they **ARE**, and that there is a place for them at the table of Universalism.

Quoting Scott Alexander again – “...we must be evangelists – unashamed, bold, willing to state publicly and talk up our faith” and hold the line against the mean-spirited and hateful messages that would have us believe that millions of residents of this country would rather be at war with each other rather than working together.

Don't let that word evangelist throw you off – call yourself whatever you'd like – I call myself a Cheerleader for my Faith – and I want you to know that this is our time! The challenging circumstances we are living in have made more and more people search for something more in their lives.

We can bring them the good news – we can let them know about that something more – we can introduce them to the principles of Universalism – inclusion, optimism, hope – and universal salvation – and we can tell them that there is a place at the table for them.

Amen. Ase. Blessed Be

Closing Words – “Names” by Carl Sandburg

There is only one horse on the earth, and his name is all hooves.

There is only one bird in the air, and her name is all wings.

There is only one fish in the sea, and the fish’s name is all fins.

There is only one man in the world, and the man’s name is all men.

There is only one woman in the world, and her name is all women.

There is only one child in the world, and the child’s name is all children.

There is only one maker in the world, and that maker’s children cover the earth, and they are called all God’s children. Amen