***Hosea Ballou, Father of Universalism***

**A sermon for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation**

**By the Rev. CJ McGregor**

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You may have caught on that on Mother’s Day and Father’s Day I choose a person from our history and offer how their lives might inform living our faith in the here and now. It is Father’s Day and I’d like to introduce you to Hosea Ballou, known as the father of Universalism. As evidenced by our congregation’s sign near the street, we sometimes forget about Universalism being part of our tradition. Unitarians were the city folk, with wealth and education, and power. Universalists might be called the Unitarians hillbilly cousins as they lived in rural areas, were farmers, and led a simpler life. I say that Unitarianism is the head of our faith, and Universalism is the heart. Thomas Starr King, a young late nineteenth century Unitarian minister once said, “Unitarians believe they are too good to be damned by God and Universalists believe that God is too good to damn.”

Hosea Ballou was born in 1771 and grew up in a Baptist family who believed that people were sinful and should live in fear of a punishing God. But when he was a teenager, Hosea started questioning the beliefs he was raised with. If God loves us, why would God want to punish us? If God is like a father to us, what father would want his children to be punished for all eternity? Hosea became a Universalist and preached the good news that what God wants is for us to be happy, and to build our happiness through being kind to others. When someone asked Ballou how God could show such grace even to people who were bad, he responded by asking: If your child falls down and gets all filthy, and you wash them and get them clean clothes, do you love your child because they are now clean, or did you clean your child because you love them? Hosea, and Universalists to come after him, believed in a God of grace who loves everyone just as they are.

I’m particularly interested in lifting up parts of our liberal religious heritage that provide strong evidence of how our courageous ancestors were on some of the same paths we are on still, one of which, in this instance, is to uphold the value of religious inclusion. This is still a radical proposition— religious inclusion, since most organized aspects of the human spiritual instinct spend inordinate amounts of energy and verbiage on declaring who doesn’t belong to their particular brand of religiosity. Keeping out non-believers, infidels, heathens, heretics, etc., seems to pre-occupy the more orthodox in cultures far and wide, ancient and current.

But I maintain that it is our rather unique UU contribution to honor and embody an alternative posture, what Hosea Ballou called “something more interesting than tradition has taught.” We seek to both establish high standards for ethical living and model an inclusive spirit—“an infinite field” in which to learn and demonstrate “the doctrine of universal holiness and happiness.” In other words, we do not believe in hell. We believe that all souls are saved. This is our tradition, and it’s a good bit of what sets us apart from the religious mainstream.

The poet Edwin Markham was not a UU, as far as I know, but he could have been speaking for us when he wrote a famous and inspiring stanza, perhaps speaking about the kind of critic Hosea Ballou faced: “He drew a circle that shut me out– Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout. But love and I had the wit to win: We drew a circle that took him in.” Ballou’s Universalist circle was wide indeed, stopping only at inclusion of all humanity in a system of salvation that believed heaven large enough to contain every soul, with no exceptions. Such belief was not original to Ballou, however, even though he took it another next level. Perhaps surprisingly to us, he appeared to be influenced by the brief but relevant writings of Revolutionary war hero Ethan Allen, whose name we today might associate mostly with furniture. But Allen had stridently articulated a God of infinite goodness, minus any eternal punishment. For example, it is incorrect and immoral to use God to justify the separation of families and to cage children.

I don’t want us to get wrapped up in all the God talk. Let us glean from the Universalist theology the notion of a benevolent father. A father who loves versus punishes. A father who forgives us, holds us, and builds us. Some of us can’t relate to what I just said. Some of us never knew our fathers, some of us suffered at the hands of our fathers, some of us struggle relationally with our fathers. Some of us grieve for our fathers. But within all of this I believe that we must hold onto the idea that at one time, even for a second, our fathers wanted to be, or are or were the father’s that Hosea Ballou describes. A benevolent and loving father. Kenneth Patton writes, “The family is the center of devotion; we declare it so. The child justifies the family, for no child survives without its nurture. We live for the family, more than we live for nation, corporation, or religion. Parents have one superlative function, to bring new lives into the world, to share in the creation of persons. The old man, sorting essential works from trivia, knows fatherhood was the best of what he had to do.” The old man knows fatherhood was the best of what he had to do.

Doug shared in our reading a story of his father. Let me share with you a story about my father. I am the spitting image of my father. So much so that after his death I visited his sister. She was working in the garden and she turned and saw me approaching and screamed in fear. She thought I was my deceased father. My father had an amazing sense of humor and a great laugh. He was a hard worker and a master carpenter as a hobby. He would build furniture then dismantle it because he only needed to know that he could do it. I never doubted my father’s love, but there was always a distance between us. He was unable to offer affection I felt I needed and seemed only to interact with me when he was upset or angry. When I left for college my father drove me all the way and dropped me at my dormitory. We didn’t speak the entire way. I’m not sure he could of if he wanted to because he quietly cried the entire way. I knew then, though he didn’t tell me, that he loved me, he was proud of me, he encouraged me, and he would miss me at home. You see, like Hosea Ballou, I always knew in my heart that my father was a loving father. I witnessed it on a long ride to college. My belief that I carried all my life was confirmed that day. I just knew it. That single occasion allows me to love my father unconditionally.

I wonder, no matter your relationship with your father, if you can recall one instance, big or small, where your father showed you benevolence, surety, and love. This is what you need to hold on to today. Our Universalist theology call us to do that. Fatherhood can be complicated whether you’re fathering or being fathered. Universalism also tells us that this relationship can be complicated. It is with faith and compassion that we can remain in relationship, just like Hosea Ballou and his God.

In our time, too, a hunger for the Universalist message, recast in new language, abides. Divisions, separations, conflicts still frustrate our hopes for unity and peace. Universal salvation can still be a beacon, if we give it strong, new voice. And so, we make a bridge with our love, to connect our needs today with the inspiration of inclusive pioneers like Father Ballou. We make a bridge to weave our works of love into the web of life. We make a bridge to join heart with heart and hand with hand.

May it be so.