

**Hope not Hell**  
**The Time is Now**  
**By**  
**Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof**  
**April 2, 2017**

On the one hand, you could say Unitarian Universalism has change a lot over the past twenty centuries. It's gone from being an accepted Christian sect to a heretical Christian sect; through a Transcendentalist shift that shirked off its Christian identity; then into a non-theistic humanist phase; from an original belief in only one God to a belief in one Humanity; and from the initial belief that all souls would eventually be released from Hell to a disbelief in Hell altogether. But, on the other hand, our faith has remained like a steady rock that hasn't budged even as the flowing rivers of church dogma have roared round it in the flow of time, or as a lighthouse remaining sure and unmoved amidst the raging storms of theological change bashing against it on all sides.

In my grasp of our history, Christianity began among a small group of Jews following the teaching of their Rabbi, Jesus. As Jews, it would have been natural for them to hope he might be their long-awaited Messiah, a man anointed by Yahweh to free them from oppression and restore Israel to its Davidic glory. Yet it would have remained impossible for them to consider him as anything more than a great man. For the thought of worshipping a human being would have been anathema to any Jew; an explicit form of idolatry violating the most sacred commands upon which Judaism is founded. It would have violated the very notion that most made them Jewish, their Unitarian theology, the belief in only one God.

It wasn't until decades after Jesus' death, when the self-proclaimed apostle, Paul invented Christianity, focusing only upon the esoteric significance of Jesus' death, never mentioning a word about his life or teachings, that Jesus' original Jewish followers became lost, overwhelmed, and eventually forgotten in a sea of Gentile Christians who had no problem worshipping a man as a god. The belief that kings and emperors are half divine sons of gods who eventually ascend to be with them in the heavens is an ancient part of Greco-Roman mythology and epitomizes the dualistic thinking that continues to dominate our Western-European mindset today.

In the beginning, Paul's Gentile Christians and Jesus' Jewish followers were free to argue with one another, leading to a long-lasting dispute about who was right. But when Christianity became the official State religion under Roman Emperor Constantine, the authorities adopted the Nicene Creed in the early part of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, declaring that the Father and the Son are the same person. With the addition of the Holy Spirit to the godhead fifty years later, Trinitarian theology was complete and Unitarianism, the original belief in only one God and that Jesus was, therefore, a human teacher, became illegal.

Prior to the misappropriation of Christianity by the oppressive Roman culture, furthermore, the first systematic Christian theologian, Origen of Alexandria, could not accept that a loving God would punish anyone in the fires of Hell for all eternity, making him a Universalist. 250

years after his death, the Church condemned Origen and destroyed his writings. So, as you can see, the earliest followers of Jesus, the first Christians, were Unitarian and Universalist in their thinking, because they believed in a human Jesus and a forgiving God.

Since then it is Christianity that has continued to morph, piling on dogmas and rituals completely obscuring the simple teachings of Jesus, continually splitting into an almost countless number of denominations, Catholic and Protestant, as well as others, that are often so different the term “Christian” may be the only quality they share in common. Some are ruled from the top down, and others from bottom up; some believe in the inerrant authority of the Holy Church, and some in the inerrant authority of the Holy Bible; some believe we must confess our sins and ask Jesus into our hearts to be saved, and some that we are saved by believing the right ideas, or by being Baptized in the right way, at the right age, by the right Church; some think being a good Christian is mostly about following a long list of does and don’ts, and for some it means having the right ideas; some think believing will bring them prosperity in this life, and some think suffering now will bring them riches in Heaven. These differences, and numerous others, suggest the nebulous, ever changing nature of Christianity.

As I said, Unitarian Universalism has changed a lot over the centuries too, but through it all our core principles have remained the same, core principles that are rooted, not in church dogma or ritual, but in the original teachings of Jesus, so simple and fundamental to our innate sense of morality that Thomas Jefferson once said they “are within the comprehension of a child,” dismissing what he called the “Platonisms engrafted on them,” as “nonsense.”<sup>1</sup> Those principles as the heart of his teachings include, providing for the poor, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, embracing those who have been marginalized—the outcast, the foreigner, the oppressed—forgiving our enemies, practicing nonviolent civil disobedience, loving one another, and living sustainably by not storing up more riches than we need at the expense of others, sharing what we have with those in need, and learning to be content with enough for today, with our daily bread. Today, as Unitarian Universalists, we may no longer feel a need to proclaim our faith in Jesus, but we still maintain the faith *of* Jesus through our commitment to the same values he expressed so clearly, so simply, and so beautifully two millennia ago.

Of course, we can’t be sure which sayings and parables attributed to Jesus are authentic, though we can be almost certain that most are not. Some of those strung together in creative narratives like the Sermon on the Mount in *Matthew*, or the Sermon on the Plain in *Luke*, were probably passed down through oral tradition until the unknown authors of these gospels wrote them down in these made-up contexts. Only some of the parables attributed to him are likely authentic, although the accompanying interpretations the gospel writers attribute to him are, again, almost certainly not. So, when I ponder their meaning, I consider them in the context of those common values Unitarian Universalism continues to share with the historical Jesus. I consider, that is, what they have to do with compassion, inclusion, justice, nonviolence, equality, and sustainability.

---

<sup>1</sup> Brodie, Fawn M, *Thomas Jefferson, an Intimate History*, Norton and Co., Inc., New York, NY 1974, p. 453.

In this light, some of my favorites include a few of his briefest analogies, like, “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?”<sup>2</sup> Or, “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.”<sup>3</sup> But my favorite among these is his parable about the mustard seed, because I think it helps us consider where Unitarian Universalism is today. “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”<sup>4</sup>

Today, Unitarian Universalism is among the smallest of religions, representing less than a percentage point of the population, meaning there are more people among the wealthy elite, among the top one percent in the world, than there are of us. That makes us pretty marginal, and, if we’re honest, seemingly insignificant. When we consider the enormity of all the problems facing our world today, global warming, income inequality, the worldwide oppression of women, reinvigorated racism, war, terrorism, and so on, it doesn’t seem a faith so small as ours could possibly make much of a difference. But Jesus thought it was plenty enough to move mountains. “Truly I tell you,” He’s reported to have said, “if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.”<sup>5</sup>

Obviously, this wasn’t meant to be taken literally, otherwise Jesus would have been asked to prove it, and there are no stories of him moving any mountains. It’s more a hyperbolized way of saying, “Don’t give up! You can do it!” It’s, *The Little Engine that Could* saying, “I think I can, I think I can, I think I can,” even though all the bigger and more powerful engines around her have already said, “I can not. I can not. I can not.” Small as we are, marginal as we appear, powerless as we might feel facing the overwhelming problems of our time, our faith may yet be enough to move mountains, even if it means all of us working together to move them one shovel full at a time.

Consider the story of my friend, Alan MacRae, New Zealand’s Youth Justice Coordinator. In the early 1980s New Zealand faced a daunting criminal justice crisis. As Alan explains, “Thousands of children, especially members of minority groups, were being removed from their homes and placed in foster care or institutions. The juvenile justice system was overburdened and ineffective. New Zealand’s incarceration rate for young people was one of the highest in the world, but its crime rate also remained high.”<sup>6</sup> Alan goes on to say his country’s minority, its indigenous Maori population, considered the punitive response to crime he oversaw as a “foreign imposition” that left communities and families and victims entirely out of the process. It was racist, expensive, ineffective, and, nevertheless, a mountain that seemed impossible to budge.

---

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 5:13

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 5:14-15

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 13:31-32

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 17:20

<sup>6</sup> MacRae, Allan, & Zehr, Howard, *The Little Book of Family Group Conferences: New Zealand Style*, Good Books, Intercourse, PA, 2004, Kindle Version, Chapter 2 (14%).

But Alan, being the unusual sort of person who turns every problem into a possibility and every obstacle into an opportunity, was determined to do what his country asked him to do, change the system to make it fair and make it work. After a period of listening to communities throughout the country, especially to Maori communities, he developed the Family Group Conference, allowing young offenders the opportunity to make restitution for their crimes through the development of a plan agreed upon by themselves, their families and other sources of support, the police, and, most importantly, the victims of their crimes. It was so successful and so transformative that just a few years later, in 1989 the New Zealand Legislature passed the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act to adopt this form of juvenile justice throughout the nation. “Although it did not use the term until later,” Alan says, “the New Zealand legal system became the first in the world to institutionalize restorative justice.”<sup>7</sup>

It was so successful that the country closed all its juvenile detention centers and the Family Group Conference, “not the courtroom,” Alan says, became the new way of dealing with juvenile crime. Before this, Alan told me, the Juvenile Court in Christchurch alone, the South Island’s largest city, held court five days a week with the average offender standing before a judge for less than five minutes. Within three years of adopting the Restorative Justice model, it needed to hold it for only half a day on Fridays with plenty of time to consider each case.

I met Alan MacRae in 2010, when a committee I chaired brought him to Louisville, Kentucky to help us start a similar restorative justice program there. I’m happy to say that RJ Louisville has been up and running several years now and has already helped hundreds of youth offenders make restitution to the victims of their crimes, diverting them from entering the nearly inescapable criminal justice system, and saving the State of Kentucky \$72,000 per offender annually, the cost of incarcerating young people, more than what it takes to earn a four-year college degree. Today, there are more than 1000 Restorative Justice programs in 30 U.S. states, thanks largely to the model created by my audacious friend, the Little Engine that Could, Alan MacRae, who not only moved a mountain of trouble in New Zealand, but is now helping to move the whole world.

Having been the minister of a mustard seed sized congregation in Louisville for a dozen years before coming here, I know the impact a small group can make. Whenever people asked how big my church was, I always responded, “About as big as a stick of dynamite.” For it’s not our size that matters, it’s not our numbers that count the most, it’s the impact we have in each other’s lives, in our community, and in our world.

But what inspires me most about this parable of the little mustard seed that could, is that it grows so big it becomes home to all the birds of the air. Normally it would be considered unusual for different kinds of birds to flock to the same tree, not matter how big it is. *Birds of a feather flock together*. Yet Jesus didn’t say the mustard seed would grow large enough for just the sparrows to make their nests, or just the crows, or some other species, he singled out in other allegories. He said, “the birds of the air,” implying all of them. That’s his Universalism,

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., loc. 160.

his radical inclusion, his good news of making room for everyone in the kingdom of Heaven he envisioned creating on Earth. He didn't say they they'd come and build *a* nest, but *nests*, lots of them, for all kinds of birds to dwell together in the same tree.

Gandhi once gave a similar analogy, saying, "the different religions are beautiful flowers from the same garden, or they are branches of the same majestic tree..."<sup>8</sup> Doesn't this get at the very core of what our own Universalist theology is about, including everyone in the family tree, no matter their religion, their ethnicity, their nationality, their gender, their sexuality, their sexual identity, their income, or any other arbitrary difference that should make no difference at all? That's the DNA packed tight inside our mustard seed sized faith, destined to unfold and grow big enough to become home to all the birds of the air. That's the power wrapped up inside our stick of dynamite, capable of making a positive impact in our troubled world. But to nurture this budding vision, to ignite our fuse, we must do as Jesus advised so long ago, uncover our light and let it shine from the highest hill. Or, as our own Universalist evangelist, John Murray said two centuries ago, "You may possess only a small light but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women."

The theme of our generosity campaign this year is, "lighting the way," and to do so, we have to uncover our light so we can, as John Murray also famously said, "Give them, not Hell, but hope and courage." For our light, the light of Unitarianism, radiating human goodness, and human agency, and human unity, and the light of Universalism, radiating inclusion, and compassion, and justice for all, may seem like small flickers on a short candle, but they are part of an ancient fire that has brightened the path of human history since its beginning, keeping our bow steady amidst the turbulent waters working to throw us off course, lighting the way through the fog of fear, and hate, and greed, and Hell on Earth, to illuminate the greater path of compassion, inclusion, justice, nonviolence, equality, and sustainability.

Now is the time to let the mustard seed grow, to uncover our light, and to light the way toward hope and courage. This has been our way since our church was founded in Spokane 130 years ago, when we let our little light shine on freedom and justice by calling Edwin Wheelock as our first minister, a Civil War chaplain in the Union Army, who came to Spokane with a bounty on his head for preaching in favor of abolition.

We let our little light shine on reason in 1888 by adopting bylaws stating, "the method of findings [our] beliefs is scientific. [Our] aim is to crush superstition and establish facts of religion," and our, "First principle is freedom of opinion and is subject to no censure for heresy."<sup>9</sup>

We let our little light shine on freethinking in 1911 by calling John Dietrich to our pulpit, a man recently declared a heretic and defrocked by the Lutherans, who came out as Humanist

---

<sup>8</sup> Gandhi, M. K., *The Message of Jesus Christ*, (Greenleaf Books, Harford, MA, 194, 2008), 58.

<sup>9</sup> McDowell, Esther, *Unitarians in the State of Washington*, Frank McCaffrey Publishers, 1966. p. 97.

here, and went on to become the Father of Religious Humanism, inspired, no doubt, by the liberal culture reflected in our bylaws.

We let our little light shine on reproductive freedom in 1916 when we brought Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood to Spokane to give a presentation at our church.

We let our light little shine on free speech that same year by inviting M. M. Mangasarian to fill our vacant pulpit, known for his controversial book, *The Truth about Jesus*, claiming he is a complete work of fiction.

We let our little light shine in the 1960s when we protested the Vietnam War, advocated for Civil Rights, and started the Spokane Memorial Association, the Spokane Human Relations Council, the Fair Housing Center, the Spokane chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, and became home to the first Planned Parenthood offices in Spokane.

We let our light shine in the early 1980's when our Minister, Bill Houff, used his background in chemistry to help prove radiation leaking from the Hanford Nuclear Plant was contaminating communities along the Columbia River, creating H.E.A.L., the Hanford Education Action League, that used the Freedom of Information Act to force the government to release 19-thousand pages proving his findings were true, leading to the reactor's shutdown a short time later.

We let our little light shine on marriage equality just a couple years ago, in 2014, when we organized a People of Faith Support the Freedom to Marry campaign to gain the support necessary in our community for Initiative-74 to win statewide.

We let our little light shine on criminal justice reform by being among the first organizations to join and support the Smart Justice Spokane Campaign, calling for a move away from the expensive, ineffective, punitive model in our own community.

We are letting our little light shine today by supporting the Safer Spokane campaign, meant to curb the flow of fossil fuels through our community in an age of Global Warming.

Our faith may be tiny, but it's potent enough to move mountains and, I know, to stop locomotives. Our light may be small, but it bright enough to help light the way toward compassion, inclusion, justice, nonviolence, equality, and sustainability, toward, not hell, but hope and courage. *May this small flame be our offering of warmth to those who are cold and alone, and a light to those in darkness. May it be a flame that ignites justice in our world, and a beacon of hope to those in need. And may it reflect at least a spark of truth wherever truth is lost, and cast a healthy shadow of doubt where it's been found.*