

The Universalist Economics of Hosea Ballou

Unitarian Universalist Church of Spokane

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Reading

God's Ten Hungry Children

from Hosea Ballou, *A Treatise on Atonement* (1805, 1882), pp. 140-142

Almighty God, being put to the necessity of making some of his rational offspring eternally miserable in order to make the rest forever happy, may be represented by a parent who has 10 children, but only provisions enough to preserve the lives of five until he could get more. In this awful dilemma he sits down to consult the greatest possible good; says to himself, if I divide my provisions equally among my children, all must surely starve to death; but by neglecting five, I can save the lives of the other five, which he finally concludes to do. But I ask the rational, I petition the reasonable, I request the impartial, to guess the feelings of a father on such an occasion!

...

But is the **Almighty** poor? Has he not enough **and** to spare? ... Is there not fullness enough in God to satisfy the wants of all of his / creatures? Why the necessity, then, of making some miserable eternally? ... / Suppose we alter the circumstance of the father and his 10 children: suppose the father has provisions enough for the whole, and his object in bestowing of it upon them is to cause the greatest possible happiness among his children. Which way would good sense and parental affection choose, either to feed five to the full, and starve the rest to death, that their dying groans might give the others a better appetite and their food a good relish, or to let them all be hungry enough to relish their food well, and all alike partake of it?

Sermon

It's common to call ourselves the Unitarian church, and forget the second part of our really long name: Universalist. And most people don't know that Universalism is not simply the idea that all the world is one. It's a faith with important history and subversive impact.

Hosea Ballou, who lived 200 years ago, is probably the most influential Universalist. Universalists before him had rejected a basic tenet of Calvinism, the idea that salvation was only possible for the elect few. These early Universalists argued that Christ died for *everybody*. But Ballou went even deeper, rejecting the idea that Christ could die *for* anyone. Like many Unitarians, Universalists, and UUs throughout history, he had cultivated, since childhood, a sense of “huh? that makes no sense!” when encountering key Christian doctrines like vicarious atonement and the Trinity. But what makes our forebears different from many of us, is that they (Ballou especially) took this skepticism straight to their bibles. They considered themselves very serious Christians, and so since they'd been taught that the Bible was the word of God, they figured that all truth must be in there. When Ballou went searching for proof in the Bible that Jesus died for our sins, he was earnest. He *combed* the scriptures. And he couldn't find the proof he fervently sought. Since he couldn't make sense of vicarious atonement in his own rational mind, and the Scriptures offered no indication that he should even try, Ballou decided to preach the message that made the most sense to him: God's unwavering love. He preached love even if it contradicted the mainstream, consequences be damned. Anybody relate to that?

Since Ballou understood himself to be a Christian, and a damn good one at that, his rebellion made him a heretic. That's what “heretic” means: someone who understands the foundations of their faith differently from the Orthodox, and chooses not to leave, and not to pretend they agree with everyone else. Heretics insist on remaining inside it their faith, since it is, after all, theirs. I think UUs are pretty good heretics, because we are constantly working within the system to change it. We are innovators. Of course some of us are also heathens. At seminary, we would often joke about this, trying to discern which of us should be classified as a heathen or heretic on a given day. My favorite example is when my friend Tom went to his ecclesiastical council in South Dakota to be ordained as a United Church of Christ minister. He came back and said, “Guys, I passed! But there were some protesters from a conservative church who accused me of being a heretic. I agreed with them, and explained what heretic means, and then they accused me of being a Unitarian Universalist!” Tom told his hecklers, “You should meet my friends.”

My friend Tom's heresy includes bringing his thoughts about Jesus to his heathen friends, who don't always relate to Tom's love of Jesus, but love *Tom* and want to co-create theology. What the heathens and heretics in my circle share is a commitment to innovating the traditions we've inherited and a lack of loyalty to ideas we find harmful.

Ballou's innovation to Universalism was a profound break with Calvinism, a system of thought and social control which had caused a great deal of pain. In this way, he was in tune with the Unitarians, who had been ruffling Calvinists' feathers since... Calvin. Though Calvin himself was a rebel, a key player in the Protestant Reformation that challenged the doctrines of the established Roman Catholic church, he had no tolerance for those who called into question the doctrines he liked. Enter Michael Servetus, whose Unitarian ideas were causing a stir throughout Europe. Calvin retaliated by providing evidence to the Roman Catholic inquisition that led to Servetus being sentenced to be burned at the stake. Servetus escaped from prison before church officials could carry out this gruesome order, but he was captured a few months later in Geneva by leaders in Calvin's church. At this point, Calvin threw his weight behind local civic law to try Servetus again for heresy. He was found guilty again and received the same sentence. He did not escape a second time. Before such gory expressions of intolerance went out of fashion, thousands were killed, driven from their communities, or forced to renounce their beliefs by people embracing Calvinist ideas, people who used their political and legal power to insist on uniformity of thought. The Calvinist movement, inspired to protest and reform the church that led the inquisition, had adopted the inquisition's methods and, I would argue, its God, an Almighty, in Ballou's words, "so offended with man, that he employs his infinite mind in devising *unspeakable tortures*, as retaliations on those with whom he is offended" (McKanan, p. 139).

Ballou was speaking about the God of his Calvinist contemporaries in 18th-19th century America, but he might as well have been talking about the God of Calvin himself, or the God of the inquisition, or the God of those who killed Jesus. Although contemporary UUs may disagree about who the Real God is, we can easily claim our place in a long line of heretics and heathens opposing the Fake God of injustice and intolerance. This Fake God is invoked to dispossess poor people and indigenous communities of their land and culture, to justify slavery, to suppress free thinking, to usurp women's autonomy, and to invalidate the human rights of people who stand up for each other. I call it the God of Scarcity. Because of the continued reverence for such a God, Ballou says, the "tender charities of nature have been frozen..., and the natural friendship common to human society, has, in a thousand instances, been driven from the walks of man" (McKanan, p. 139).

He lived at a time and place of great disruption, the dissolution of Puritan communities bound together by a shared fear of this judgemental God. In the US, new forms of mass communication democratized the process of thinking about God (and everything else), making it glaringly obvious that there were multiple, competing, versions of truth. The historian Ann Lee Bressler writes that one way "of cultivating a sense of community in

this situation was to look deliberately beyond competition, to concentrate on a religious message that ultimately reduced all human differences to insignificance... [She continues,] Universalism extended the ideal of local community to a universal plane;... it taught that the whole world could become one community" (p. 21). Meanwhile, new land in the Vermont frontier was opening up, and farms were growing rapidly. So *families*, especially those who descended from European settlers, were growing rapidly, and Ballou's image of God the Father, tenderly caring for all his children, resonated.

What appeals to me about Ballou's theology is his belief in a God of Abundance, a God I believe in and testify to, even among heathens! His mental pivot from Calvinism is the same pivot that I talked about in my sermon last week. To briefly summarize, I discussed how the field of economics has been misused in justifying humanmade scarcity -- otherwise known as theft -- rather than supporting human innovation to mitigate and overcome scarcity and tap into the abundance that characterizes all natural systems. Key to my understanding of the idolatrous reverence for wealth and fear of scarcity that characterizes contemporary economics is learning about the history of enclosure of the commons. This age-old form of oppression was typified by the the 17th century English experiment of fencing off all the common land. "Fencing" is sort of a euphemism for stealing commonly managed land from the people, forcing men into wage labor, and prohibiting women from any alternatives to patriarchal marriages. Although it's possible to point to the amazing economic surpluses generated in the generations since that concentration of wealth and power -- and economics is a favorite analytical tool for such celebration -- even now, amidst objective abundance, the vast majority of the human population struggles to access enough. Especially now, as the climate warms and ecosystems die, we have to acknowledge that scarcity begets scarcity, and it's time to arrest the thief.

That's my project, as an economist and a minister. I feel a kinship to Ballou because I see him arresting the thief in the realm of ideas. And who better to start with than Calvin, whose distinguishing doctrines were 1) that humanity is innately sinful and 2) that only a small group of the elect can go to heaven? This is the cosmic version of the enclosure of the commons: cast the majority out of the kingdom of God and denounce them as unworthy when they attempt to access their connection to the divine.

Ballou rejected eternal hell, a mythical place that we should fear, and in fearing, become docile supplicants to an oppressive social order. This doesn't sound all that heretical in this day and age, when hell is more a figure of speech than a topic of discussion or debate. But we still have scarcity, a mythical state that creates endless fear, and among the afraid, docile supplicants to an oppressive social order. The preachers of scarcity

would have us interpret every bad harvest or dip in the stock market as proof that scarcity is real, just as Calvinists felt God's judgement manifesting in their misfortunes. To me it sounds like the same damn thing, just a change in language, not in content. And so I want to know more about Ballou's project, because it seems to be incomplete, and maybe completing it is a way to liberation.

The one part of Ballou's theology that is essential, and really uncomfortable for contemporary UU's, is his understanding of sin and atonement. He could not abide by the idea that we are innately sinful, or that we needed to atone to win God's love back. But he still believed that sin happens, and atonement can too. He wrote, "*Atonement signifies reconciliation*" (McKanan, p. 138). So if you don't like the word atonement, try substituting it with reconciliation. Ballou saw reconciliation as the medicine for someone who is injured by sin, first and foremost, the sinner. This is the main reason he couldn't accept that Jesus atoned for anybody's sin by dying on the cross... Jesus wasn't the sinner. It is humanity that is unreconciled, and atonement is necessary to renew our love to God.

I see this in myself. The mistakes I've made in my life, even when they have caused others pain, have hurt me the most. When I ask forgiveness or make amends, with an honest heart, it is because I need the reconciliation in order to go on. And when I have found the right way to reconcile (even if it's a living amends that the other people know nothing about), I can let go of the guilt. I may have sinned, but when I do my part to reconcile, I am able to see again the truth of my own inherent goodness and dignity. An unreconciled life leads to the delusion that I am not innately good, and other people probably aren't either. Reconciliation (atonement) brings me back to clarity.

I see Ballou's atonement theology in the world right now. The mistakes being made by humanity and our leaders hurt humanity. In my heart of hearts, despite my rage at our most misguided leaders, I wonder if they are suffering even more than me, because I know that I would never choose to trade places with them and endure the entitlement, delusion, and guilt they live with every day. If only they could understand the joy that comes from taking responsibility for one's actions and their consequences, we could reconcile. But they don't owe it to God, or me. (Well, actually, they do owe it to me, but that's not why they should change.) They should change because their lives will be better if they do. And I am dedicated to my own change, to learning how to reconcile the terrible mistakes of my ancestors that have led to my undeserved privileges. For example, when it is hard to take responsibility for white supremacy, even as I benefit materially from it, I remember to wonder how much better my life would be if my society could actually get over the false notion that white people are more valuable than

everybody else. What an awful mistake humanity has made with this idea. What an awful lot of good it would do all of us, even especially white people, to heal from it.

Unlike other humans, a God of Abundance isn't harmed by our mistakes. This God does not *need* us to make amends. This is the God that cheers us on in the reconciliation process, present always, but *visible* only when we turn toward goodness, away from greed. The God of Abundance is in the commons, and in the forest, and in the connections between the people who care for the land. It's even in the wood when it's chopped down to build fences to keep the people out, but the way to worship this God is to dismantle the fence and build a public house with that God-given wood.

The God of Abundance, Ballou's God, is revered by Christians across the world. This is partially because the basic spirit of Jesus is easily discovered by any careful compassionate reader of Scripture. But also, Ballou's Universalism has flourished throughout liberal Christian churches since it took root in New England. Universalists historically have had little interest in institutional development and sustainability, so many of the original Universalist churches disbanded, spreading fervent believers like seeds into other denominations. Among the Universalist churches that stuck, joined together in the Universalist Church of America, Ballou's theological sympathy with Unitarianism set the stage for joining with the American Unitarian Association in 1961. Given Ballou's fight with Calvin, it made sense that his Universalist church would grow up to claim Calvin's most vocal opponent, the Unitarian Michael Servetus, as a new ancestor. It also makes sense that the two movements, joined together as one, have continued innovating, with a theology that is sometimes described as "post-christian." As many of you will personally testify, it is not necessary to follow Jesus, or even believe in God, to be a good UU. Heathens are welcome here. This is an essential message, and I am glad to share it from the pulpit, because so many members of our community have been cast out of other churches for raising questions. Many in our midst have rightfully, reasonably, and faithfully rejected the God of Scarcity.

But I cannot end a sermon about Ballou without invoking the God of Abundance. If you'd like, you can simply tolerate this prayer. But I invite you to try it on.

Abundant source of life and love, thank you.
Please remind us of our power together
to care for each other and discover
enough.

Gracious energy of justice,

restore within each of us the confidence
to speak up for ourselves and others
when delusion turns our leaders into oppressors.

God of many names and no name at all,
love us so we know how to love,
sustain us so we know how to give,
forgive us so we know how to forgive,
reveal yourself so we learn how to be vulnerable,
believe in us, so we know how to believe in you.

References

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