

**Claire Feingold Thoryn**  
Theme: **“Connections”**  
Homily: **“Love the Hell Out of This World”**  
**September 13, 2015**

**Call to Worship:** Welcome back to church! Happy Ingathering! L’Shana Tovah!  
We gather to worship in a place that was built and blessed long ago, and which we bless again today with our faithful presence. The first people who gathered here, led by their first minister, Charles Follen, were outspoken abolitionists, fighting for justice in their communities, and seeking this sanctuary of hope, renewal, and faith. Generations later, here we are, each serving the world in our own way, and each coming here into this sanctuary to seek joy and solace together.

Let us remember once again the words of this community’s namesake:[May] this church never be desecrated by intolerance, or bigotry, or part[isan] spirit; may its doors never be closed to any one who [fights] against oppression; within these walls may all unjust and cruel distinctions cease, and here may all [people] meet as brethren.

*(Charles Follen, adapted)*

**Reading:** “The Age of Reason” by Mary Jo Salter

“When can we have *cake*?” she wants to know. And patiently we explain: when dinner’s finished. Someone wants seconds; and wouldn’t she like to try, while she’s waiting, a healthful lettuce leaf? The birthday girl can’t hide her grief- worse, everybody laughs. That makes her sink two rabbity, gapped teeth, acquired this year, into a quivering lip, which puts an end to tears but not the tedium she’ll take in life before she’s given cake:

“When I turned seven, now,” her grandpa says, “the priest told me I’d reached the age of reason. That means you’re old enough to tell what’s right from wrong. Make decisions on your own.” Her big eyes brighten. “So you mean I can decide to open presents first?” Laughter again (she joins it) as the reward of devil’s food is brought in on a tray. “You know why we were taught that?” asks my father. “No.” I light a candle, then another in a chain. “-So we wouldn’t burn in Hell.” A balloon pops in the other room; distracted, she innocently misses talk of nuns’ severities I never knew at seven. By then, we were Unitarian and marched off weekly, dutifully, to hear nothing in particular. “Ready!” I call, and we huddle close to sing something akin, you’d have to say, to prayer. Good God, her hair- one beribboned pigtail has swung low as she leans to trade the year in for a wish; before she blows it out, the camera’s flash captures a mother’s hand, all hope, no blame, saving her from the flame.

**Sermon: Love the Hell Out of This World**

The poet-mother remembers her childhood, “By then, we were Unitarian and marched off weekly, dutifully, to hear nothing in particular.”

My greatest fear as a minister is that a child or adult from this congregation might think that Unitarian Universalists believe nothing in particular, or perhaps an even worse way of saying that, that we believe “whatever we want.” Nails on the chalkboard of my soul!

So my goal today is to give you *something in particular*.

As Unitarian Universalists, we believe that God loves everyone; that nothing and no one can separate us or anyone else from the love of God. No matter what race, class, age, gender, sexual orientation, no matter who you have been or who you are, you are beloved. All of humanity is connected to all that is holy. God is Love.

All right, well, I can pretty much call it quits there but...who am I kidding, I have more to say. Haters gotta hate hate hate, Preachers gotta preach preach preach—that’s how the song goes, right?

What is God? “God” is a concept that tends to confuse adults more than it confuses children, because children know how to think in pictures. Here is a description of God that a five year old came up with, and I appreciate Amy Horsbrough, a Follen member, for passing this on from a family friend. This five year old friend of Amy’s said:

“Do you know what I think God looks like? If you made a connect-the-dot picture, and you connected the dots between all living things, all people and all animals, grass, even rocks—everything in the planet, that’s what God looks like.”

God is the connection of all the dots.

That idea is so big, so infinite, it’s hard to know what to call it.

“God” is just a nickname for that big idea: everything that is sacred and holy and meaningful and good and sweet and lovely and hopeful and connecting and ultimate and transcendent and all around us and within us all.

That’s a mouthful, so I just say God.

I didn’t come up with that nickname, it’s not my special little nickname just between me and God, you are welcome to use that nickname too.

I think God is a good nickname for two reasons: first, it’s short, like all good nicknames; and second, because most people, when they hear that word, have a general sense of what I am talking about, at least sort of.

But if you prefer to say: “Spirit of Life” or “Beloved Community” or “Great Mystery of Goodness and Love” or “Yahweh” or “Sweet Baby Deity” or “Mother Earth” or “Poet of Creation” or “The Universe” or “The Force” or “The Connection of All the Dots” or just “42” then go for it.

So bringing it back around to my *something in particular*. Unitarian Universalism teaches us:

All are saved. All are worthy. No one is damned to go to hell. There *is no hell* when you believe in the saving power of Love. And God is Love. That is what we believe. Now Universalists have been preaching that message for, oh, at least 2,000 years. But it is still new and shocking to some people.

I was reminded of that when I attended a service led by Rev. Bill Sinkford, who was at the time the President of our Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. He was preaching at a local university chapel, so the crowd was ostensibly interfaith but mostly Christian. Christians of many different flavors (You know—vanilla Anglicans, pistachio Presbyterians, Neapolitan Catholics).

Rev. Sinkford started describing our theology and history of Universalism. He probably said a version of some of the stuff I just said. I was honestly paying half attention, thinking “yeah yeah, same old same old.” (I’m sure none of you have ever thought that during a service here at Follen.)

And then Rev. Sinkford got into the nitty gritty. He said that God loves everyone, everyone is worthy of God’s love and salvation, no matter what, SOOO... God would never damn anyone to hell.

And that crowd of Christians GASPED. Audibly gasped.

It was shocking, to them, the idea that Universalists believe that God could just Love the Hell right out of this world. And that we UUs were pledging ourselves to attempt that too, to do our damndest to Love the Hell out of this world.

All hope, no blame, saving every one of us from the flame.

And you know what, that idea is shocking.

Because we have eyes to see and ears to hear and we know this world is both full of Love, and full of hate. It is beautiful and it is broken. If we are looking for Hell, we don’t have to seek an invisible afterworld.

We find Hell when a parent has to decide whether her children should face death in war-torn Syria or face death on a boat too small to carry them.

We find Hell in the ongoing systemic racism in our country that leads to the injuries and deaths and imprisonments of so many young black men and women, from Emmett Till to Trayvon Martin to Freddie Gray to Sandra Bland and so many more.

Hell was there that day the towers came down, fourteen years ago.

Hell is here in our own tree-lined suburban communities, the secret shames kept behind closed doors, the hidden suffering of domestic violence, overwhelming debt, infidelity and despair, loneliness and mental illness, hunger and poverty hidden behind smiles that say, “everything’s fine.”

Loving the Hell out of this world is no easy task.

You may have heard of the idea that a preacher’s job is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. But as my dear friend Robin Bartlett says, that’s a lie. Ain’t no one comfortable. Everyone has an affliction.

There are so many Hells in this world, in our neighborhoods, and in the secret recesses of our hearts.

And still we say: Love the Hell Out of This World.

If we are all saved than we can all be saving, saving graces for one another, hands held out, all hope, no blame, saving each other from the flame.

And so we come here. We come here to connect with our true selves, to connect with each other, to connect with something larger than the sum of our parts, to connect with the Connection of All the Dots.

But I know what all the young ones are thinking, and maybe some older ones too. That ultimate question that rises above the others.

“When can we have *cake*?”

My friends, Debra and I have already decided that at the next multigenerational service, we will have some cake. October 4<sup>th</sup>: There Will Be Cake.

But before the cake, one last healthful lettuce leaf for you.

Hundreds of years ago, a man who had been destitute and imprisoned in his home country came to America. He was an immigrant seeking a new life, like so many others who have come through our borders.

His name was John Murray, and he preached the saving and shocking message of Universalism.

Most of his words are lost to time, but we imagine what he said as he went out into the highways and by-ways of his new country and cried out to all who had eyes to see and ears to hear:

“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.  
Give them, not hell, but hope and courage.  
Do not push others deeper into despair,  
but share the kindness and everlasting love of God.”<sup>1</sup>

That is our message, our very *particular* message.  
Love the Hell out of this world.  
All hope, no blame, all souls free from the flame.  
This is our calling:  
To be bearers of Love who break down the barriers to Love.  
How do you connect the dots, how do you draw the image of God in the world?

Go out into the highways and by-ways, And share our message, share our mission. Give  
the world not hell, but hope and courage! Love the Hell out of this world!

*May it be so!*  
*Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> Paraphrasing Alfred Cole; this quote is often attributed to Murray himself.  
<http://www.uuworld.org/articles/uu-rumor-mill-produces-quotes>