

**Get the Hell Out**  
 Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship  
 Rev. Peter J. Luton  
 September 23, 2018

**Song**

The Bells of Hell go ting-a-ling-a-ling  
 for you but not for me.  
 And the little devils sing-a-ling-a-ling  
 for you but not for me.  
 O Death, where is thy sting-a-ling-a-ling?  
 O Grave, thy victory?  
 The Bells of Hell go ting-a-ling-a-ling  
 for you but not for me,

**Reading**     *All This Talk of Saving Souls* by Linda M. Underwood

All this talk of saving souls,  
 Soul's weren't made to save,  
 Like Sunday clothes that  
 Give out at the seams.

They were made for wear, they  
 Come with lifetime guarantees.  
 Don't save your soul.  
 Pour it out like rain on  
 Cracked, parched earth.

Give your souls away, or  
 Pass it like a candle flame.  
 Sing it out, or  
 Laugh it up to the wind.

Souls were made for hearing  
 Breaking hearts, for puzzling dreams,  
 Remembering August flowers,  
 Forgetting hurts.

These men who talk of saving souls!  
 They have the look of bullies  
 Who blow out candles before  
 You sing Happy Birthday,  
 And want the world to be in alphabetical order.

During his itinerant preaching days, Hosea Ballou was once in debate with a Baptist minister. The Baptist said, "Brother Ballou, if I were a Universalist and feared not the fires of hell, what is to prevent me from striking you on the head, stealing your horse, saddle and money, and riding away, without a worry for my soul." To which Ballou replied, "Is that want you want to do? If you were a Universalist the idea would never occur to you."

I will spend my soul,  
 Playing it out like sticky string  
 Into the world,  
 So I can catch every  
 Last thing I touch.

Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout,  
 He drew a circle that kept me out.  
 But love and I had the wit to win,  
 We drew a circle that took him in.

*Outwitted* by Edwin Markham

## Sermon

“The Bells of Hell go ting-a-ling-a-ling for you but not for me.” Friendly and full of love and compassion and mercy, isn’t it? Or perhaps, more than Jesus’ encouragement to love our neighbors as ourselves, you hear the 7<sup>th</sup> century Pope Gregory the Great affirm with confidence that “the bliss of the saved in heaven would be incomplete unless they would gaze across the abyss and behold the sinners tormented in hellfire.”

David Rankin, a Unitarian Universalist minister, once observed “I was never assigned to Hell until I moved to western Michigan. I have since been told by clerks, colleagues, waitresses, shoe salesmen, and numerous high-school fanatics that it is a virtual certainty. All my children have also been informed, so we will be traveling as a family. Perhaps the rates will be reduced.”

Universalist ministers often used humor to pop the pompous balloons of orthodoxy. But don’t let that fool you, our 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Universalist ancestors wanted to get the Hell out of people’s lives and deaths. How we could call such pleasure at the sufferings of others saintly in heaven, they asked, when it should appall us on earth? Our Universalist grandparents experienced God as Love. They believed all people are born in love and not in sin. A loving God could not, would not condemn anyone to eternal damnation. Everyone eventually gets to heaven! Universal Salvation. We were known as the No Hell Church—and worse! It was scandalous, of course to not believe in Hell. It was a long established Christian heresy. What would make people be good if they didn’t risk eternal damnation for being bad?

The Universalist commitment to God as Love informs and feeds our contemporary Unitarian Universalist principle to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. The same spirit of cosmic love, of the value every person and of each individual as equally and rightly part and particle of Creation flows through our religious ancestors and us today.

We may not believe in Hell, but we certainly know it is a real abuse of the human spirit, a means of controlling and demeaning people, leading to lives of fear and self-loathing, distorted by punitive and unforgiving attitudes toward others. Hell is a deep seated spiritual disease. Hell is a threat. It’s a bludgeon held over our heads, a sword of Damocles that shadows all brightness with fear and trembling.

When Elizabeth Kubler-Ross studied dying patients, she discovered many wonderful things. One sad thing she reported however, is that among people of faith, the people who believed in Hell more often than non-believers had trouble coming to accept their own mortality. The threat of inferno chased them to their graves.

I am thinking of the dear and wonderful people in my life who have died, and the many people whose lives I have celebrated and bodies buried. None of them, I assure you was perfect. In truth some were not all that wonderful, but the idea that they now writhe in agony is an insult to their lives.

Some of my saddest hours in the ministry involve ministering to heart broken people who fear that their beloved deceased is or might be in Hell. I remember one family in particular. Their 27 year old daughter died in a car accident. The death of a child is always hard, but their grief was compounded by the fact that the daughter had chosen to terminate a pregnancy when she was in college. Her family supported her in her decision, yet now the specter of hell that lurks in our culture and fed by a faith they did not embrace, grated on their hearts like a cruel rasp. Even though at a rational level they didn't believe the mythology of Hell, still they felt the judgement deeply and images of their beloved daughter in Hell haunted them.

We, in our relative spiritual health, may believe ourselves above and beyond the possibilities of Hell. Yet it deserves our attention and our opposition lest we come to fulfill the 19<sup>th</sup> century quip the Universalists think God too good to damn them and Unitarians think themselves too good to be damned.

And, to be honest, sometimes the devil in me grumbles and I find myself thinking like Pope Gregory and enjoying the notion that certain individuals or groups of people with whose inherent worth and dignity are less self-evident to me might get their sorry butts hoisted on their own bigoted petards, might suffer the consequences of their own hateful or stupid choices. I'm sometimes not as compassionate or loving or forgiving as I might like to imagine myself, which is really deflating to the ego because it means that I'm thinking and reacting just like the people I apparently think I am better than. And so, even though I don't believe in Hell, I don't always adhere either to the first principle of our Unitarian Universalist faith: to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. This is a damn hard value to live out daily and consistently. It's not easy to, as the Quakers say, "go for the God in the other person."

The early Universalist leader Hosea Ballou used to talk about God wanting to "happify" people. All God wants is for people to be happy. And what makes us truly happy, asked Ballou? It isn't power over others or vast vaults of gold, or fame or fancy clothes, or the security of walls and guns. It's not even seeing our nemesis get flayed in Hell. What truly deeply fills the soul with holiness and happiness is kindness and love and living in right relationships with others. What passes for wealth does not make life rich. The truest values in life are experienced through living with principle and purpose and in ways that heal the wounds of the world and bring justice and peace to people's lives. Friendship and community and embracing one's place in the family of things. Nurturing Heaven on Earth...that is what makes life worth living. That's what brings happiness and wholeness to our lives and the world.

Are we loving, just and moral because we're afraid of some nasty punishment or because being loving, just and moral is more satisfying to the soul? We love kindness and do justice because it is sweeter and more creative and life giving than doing evil. Love because love heals, transforms and unites all it touches. Seek justice because justice increases the world's equity and joy and soothes its sorrows.

Healthy religion draws us to heaven rather than drives us from Hell. We choose love because love is a more reliable value than fear. We choose hope because hope is more creative

than dread. We choose kindness and respect and liberality of the heart and mind, because these things are pathways to creating the beloved community here on earth. Such faith and values pull and invite us to become our better, fuller selves.

“It is fatal to love a God who does not love you,” writes Alice Walker. “All people deserve to worship a God who also worships them.” This is the spirit of Universalism, proclaiming that God is Love and that we are born loved and able to love. This religious and spiritual heritage feeds our souls and helps us experience this great embracing creation as our home. Whatever the circumstances of our birth, we are born in love, not in sin. We are part and particle of this creation.

Hell is misbegotten, not humanity, not creation. As liberal religious people let us speak out against Hell wherever we meet it. When others want to use religion as a cudgel or sword, say that religion is loving and healing and accepting. Say that your faith is kind, inclusive and expansive. When others want to use religion to oppress and punish, say that all people possess inherent worth and dignity and that faith communities ought to be open minded and open hearted, safe spaces for adventures of the spirit. When others carve truth in immutable stone, say that we are made to be joyous, trusting, creative, questioning and ever-growing souls.

John Murray, another 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century leading Universalist, urged his contemporaries to use their faith “to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of the people. Give them not Hell, but hope and courage and the everlasting love of God.”

I began this morning’s sermon talking about bells. I will round it off with a story about church bells. Gertrude Sneller, a Universalist, wrote a recollection of her childhood entitled A Vanished World. In it she reflects on the church bells in town and how they rang on Sundays. “All these bells had individual tones, easily identified.” she writes. “The loungers on the hotel steps who never went to church, not only recognized the notes of each but were able to identify what they said. According to their insights, the Methodist bell shouted, ‘Repent! Repent!’ The Presbyterian bell urged, ‘Church time! Church time!’ Only the Universalist bell held out a hopeful promise, ‘No hell! No hell!’ And it is said that is why the loungers felt safe staying where they were.”

I am glad you are here this morning rather than lounging about, though I would not condemn you for doing so, and admit to being rather good at it myself. And I am especially appreciative for the privilege of speaking this morning—far better than grumbling to myself.

As we prepare, good people, to set forth into the wide and wonderful and wounded world, let us share the bell we here ring, inviting people to lay down the unhealthy burden of hell, to be free, free to celebrate the gift of life, free to share the gift of life with others and free to make our world a better home for all people.

This day and every day may love flow over you and lift you, even as the breeze dries your tears. Amen. Shalom. Salaam. Namaste. And Blessed Be.