



The Unitarian Church in Westport

SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

Be The Change

By Rev. Dr. John T. Morehouse, Senior Minister

Sunday, November 13, 2022

John Murray began his early career in the early 1700s as an Anglican priest in England. An avid reader, and critical thinker Murray was greatly influenced by his first wife who believed that a good God would never condemn anyone to an everlasting damnation. With a critical eye to reading the bible, Murray agreed and started preaching Universalism, that is a belief that if God is love, as Jesus proclaims, then no God of love would send anyone to hell. In fact, that there wasn't even a hell to be sent to. Everyone goes to heaven.

Things went badly for Murray. He lost his post as rector, then his only child died, followed closely by his wife. Grief stricken Murray knew he needed to make a change. He left for America to work for his brother, a printer in New York. He was certain that his Universalism was a mistake and vowed to never preach this again.

As the ship approached New York, a fierce storm blew it off course and ran aground in Point Good Luck, NJ. The tide was low and the passengers were able to wade ashore on to the farm of one Thomas Potter. Potter put the crew and passengers up for the night. Over the fire, Potter asked Murray why he left England. "Ah sir, I was a preacher but I found that vocation unlucky, so I am going to New York to take up the printing trade." Potter thought for a while and then said "Such is the pity. I have just built a little chapel for the use of our village and we are in need of a preacher. Especially, someone who can preach the ever-lasting love of God". Murray chuckled and looked up to the heavens. Was this a sign? Hedging his bets, he said "Mr. Potter, if the ship is still aground in the morning, I will preach in your chapel. If it floats I am bound for New York" The next morning even at high tide the ship was still aground and John Murray preached God's everlasting love, a Universalism for all in Potter's chapel. Today, the Murray Retreat Center for UUs sits on that very spot.

John Murray would travel up the East Coast preaching Universalism to large audiences, finally settling in Gloucester MA settling as the first Universalist Church in America which stands there to this day. His Universalism was so unsettling he was barred from belonging to the town's clergy. Seems that without the threat of hell, most of the other preachers felt very threatened

by his message. Apparently, he was a very dynamic preacher and quick on his feet. One Sunday, a stone was thrown through the window of the church during worship. Murray picked the stone up and examined it. He then said to his shocked congregation, “while this stone has weight, God’s Universal Love is far the weightier”.

I tell you this story for several reasons. The first is that change can lead to new life. Even if we think we know where the change will take us, we are usually very surprised at the doors that open. Has this ever happened to you? You finally decide to make the change, but the change you thought you were making was not the one you intended. Happened to any of you?

The other reason I tell you this story is that I feel like I am piloting a two-engine plane with one engine not working. We are the Unitarian Church in Westport, a name we have had since before the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church in America merged in 1961 to become the Unitarian Universalist Association. We are a dues paying member of the UUA. We have ordained 18 ministers to the UUA. I stand before you having served as a Unitarian Universalist minister for 32 years. Universalism is at the heart of our faith and that engine has been all but silent in our name. I believe the time has come to change this. To embrace our calling as John Murray did, to not be afraid of the stones of doubt and fear. Now more than ever, we are called to preach everlasting love. If not us then who my friends, if not now when. We are no different from our Universalist forebears, embracing love over hate, hope over fear. Yes, we will always embrace our Unitarian heritage, our rich history of rational thought, of Emerson’s transcendentalism, of critical thinking. But if Unitarianism speaks to our minds, Universalism speaks to our heart, intellectual and emotional, we are whole people in a whole world despite the criticism of this fractured age.

Isn’t it time for us to be that change, starting with our name? Isn’t it time to be our whole faithful selves as a congregation? A Unitarian, with a faith in the unity of humanity, Universalist, a faith that love does actually matter after all. A Unitarian Universalist Congregation that stands for reason and love, civility and curiosity. Isn’t that us? Do you hear me? I am here because I believe you are that congregation, you are not only capable of change, you are the change you are becoming in this fractured and exhausted world.

It was heartening to see so many Americans vote for some balance and sanity, and yes, truth, Making Truth Matter Again as one hat put it. But we have work to do my beloveds. The world is hurting, we are hurting. We need a religion like ours that says Love is here. And heaven is here. Tim Ryan the Ohio Democratic Congressman who ran against J.D. Vance, a Trump Republican, said this in his concession speech:

“What I said, I meant. That in this country we have too much hate, we have too much anger, there’s way too much fear, there’s way too much division and that we need more love, more

compassion, we need more concern for each other. These are important things. We need forgiveness, we need grace, we need reconciliation, we do have to leave the age of stupidity behind us.” Can I get an Amen!

This is why we need to call ourselves a Unitarian Universalist Congregation. Because we need to leave the age of stupidity behind us, and we need to embrace love, compassion and care for one another, even if we don't agree with the other person. That my dear ones is Universalism!

Murray never let those who hated him slow him down. He showed equal regard for all. If we stand for anything at all here, we stand for equal regard for all. We stand for the change we want to become. No, we are not yet the beloved community we dream of. We are not yet, deeply diverse in ethnicities, abilities, genders and age but we aspire to that change. And we can start by believing we are that change in order to be that change. Starting with our name. That is why this next vote we are asking you to take is so important. It speaks to the new reality we want to be; to move beyond exhaustion to compunction.

When I came here almost eight years ago, this was a very different congregation than it is now. You had a rich history of in the ministry of Frank Hall. Music was and still is very important. And yes, there were more people. As these years have progressed, many of our founding generation have passed on in body or in place and we have lost some giving. The pandemic further changed us. More and more people are on line. We have had to let go of some staff positions, and change our expectations of service.

But we are becoming something else along the way. We are becoming more diverse, we are welcoming new families in, we have made improvements to our aging facilities, and we are more open to the spirit of participation. We are moving away from seeing Sunday worship as transactional (I come, and you give me something) to participatory (I come and participate with others). Friends, that is a huge deal: Not perfection but participation means we aren't going to be performing for you, we are going to be inviting you into our mission, to inspire those in need of inspiration, to connect to those in need of community, and to act in the service of justice and love. My vision is that we will be a Unitarian Universalist Congregation dedicated to one another, and the families that find their way in, that we embrace ministry wherever it finds expression and that we are engaged and strong as a flagship midsize congregation, still the largest UU congregation in CT. This is my dream. This is where I am going. I believe we are all going.

Part of the change I am asking us to be, is how we see ourselves not as a church, which is primarily a Christian designation but as a congregation, which embraces all faiths who are looking to find us. Truly, there are many who would come here tomorrow if we changed that part of our name. But more importantly, being a congregation speaks to the totality of our

identity as Unitarian Universalists. It reflects the pact we made as congregationalist all the way back to the Puritan in the Cambridge Platform of 1648 in which we covenanted to walk together in the path of love. We are not a creedal church, we are a covenanted congregation of people bound together by love and service (as we say each week) and civilly in community as our covenant of right relations in the foyer reminds us. Being a covenanted congregation means you don't always get what you want but you do get what you need. The Rolling Stones had it right. It means we may not agree but we do try to understand.

Our vote for a name means we are being invited into community of dialogue. Growing into community. We are part of a community which means we consider other values. So, you are being asked to rank vote because it asks us to consider other names even if you don't agree with the other names. The process has been democratic from the start.

And if the name we select is not your first choice consider this as a spiritual exercise in understanding and change. You don't have to leave but you might have to change. That is what it means to be the change.

After John Murray was settled in Gloucester he met the second love of his life, Judith Sargent. This is the same Sargent family that would inter marry with the Kennedy's in ages to come. Judith, who deserves her own sermon, was as much the preacher as her husband to the Gloucester congregation. She was, along with Abigail Adams, part of a colonial sisterhood that urged the founding fathers to at least "consider the ladies". Not that they did. What was particularly powerful about Judith was the effect she had on her husband to change from a firebrand to one who lit the fires of love underneath his congregation. John and Judith together became the change that heralded the founding of the Universalist Church in America, a denomination that once boasted three million members.

The world needs Judith Sargent and John Murray in its ranks. The world needs both prophetic preaching and compassionate poetry. The world, our world needs a Unitarian Universalist Congregation that can change lives. Our lives, the lives of our children, the lives of our neighbors, our exhausted friends who are trying so hard to make sense of this world. Among Judith Sargent Murray's many talents was as a poet, not known until my friend and colleague Gordon Gibson uncovered these poems in the attic in her mother's family home in Natchez MS.

This is her poem, *Light at the End of the Tunnel*:

We march through this tunnel
This dark, everlasting tunnel
But I wonder
I wonder if the sun is rising
I wonder if the light is coming

This is for the best
That once we have marched through the tunnel to get to where we need to be
Maybe the sun will shine on our beautiful faces
Maybe this was the journey that we needed to reach our destination
That destination where everyone is beautiful
That destination where everyone is free
Where we can say, "I love you" without anyone saying "no"
Where my children and your children can be friends without people separating them
Where you can walk outside without being shot
Where people choose love over appearance
That is the light at the end of the tunnel