

## **Fear Fact and Faith**

### **Easter Sunday 2010**

We are no strangers to fear. We live it in many forms and shapes. As children the dark is a biggie, or being served lima beans and expected to eat them all, or that kids in school might make fun of us because our ears are big or our slim fit wranglers aren't the required baggy britches that slip below the "safety zone!" As adults we carry a heavy load of fear that matches the responsibilities that are the burden we choose, or have been placed upon us. As elders, fear can become a daily practice as bodies fail and caregivers move away. Fear is a very present aspect of our living, and is the very reason why we have come together this Easter Sunday to recognize its power and meaning to this congregation, and to those who filed our incorporation papers exactly 150 years ago today on April 4<sup>th</sup> 1860. It could not fall at a more appropriate time than on Easter Sunday, as it is the story of death of Jesus, his rising from the tomb and the interpretations of the meaning of his death, "to save all men from their sins" that spawned the necessity for a Universalist Church in Syracuse.

John Calvin had made his mark on the theology of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in this country with his belief in double predestination; in short all men were either damned or saved by God's choice and there was nothing we could do about it. It was believed that there were a limited number of places in heaven so the weeding out began at birth. It professed the doctrine of total depravity (or total inability) which as a consequence of Eve eating the apple and sharing it with Adam, that all men are born morally corrupt, enslaved to sin, at odds with God, and unable to please Him or to turn to Jesus for salvation.

The Calvinist influence that had filtered into New York from New England raised the hackles of a few who had heard of the British Theologian, John Murray who founded the first Universalist Church in America in 1774. From 1817 to 1860 there were a number of false starts for Universalism in Syracuse, until it took hold, and the third church was founded, its doctrine of universal salvation for all stuck like glue for the free thinkers of

this community. The Universalists back then, looked at consequences of Easter Sunday very differently, instead of a random curse imposed upon the unsuspecting public by the Calvinists, they saw a loving God and his Son from which all men and women alike could be saved from damnation, not by any sin imposed in childbirth, but by their good deeds in this life. It was a constant process of re-birth and renewal that Universalists believed were the blessings bestowed upon us by God, that caused, among popular thought of the day, a label of heresy to be attached to the fledgling Universalist faith.

The Universalists of Syracuse were very specific in their beliefs in their Love of God, leadership of Jesus, the teachings of the Bible.

150 years ago that was our truth, which evolved through fear, was aimed at offering to the world a new way to view God and Jesus as a loving, kind and caring presence rather than as angry judgmental entities capable of destroying the human spirit at will. The ministries that followed were to add to the scope of the definitions of Universalism as it changed with the times, from an exclusively God centered religion to that which encompassed the most inspiring thoughts and writings from other religious traditions, from those who have many other names and definitions for God than just one.

The events of our long history were told by David Blanchard, minister from 1989 to 2005, in his booklet the One Hundred and Forty Fruitful years. He carefully, factually and painstakingly documented 18 of those ministries.

Two of whom, Frederick Betts and Ellsworth Reamon, who served for 81 years between them both spearheaded the building of new churches. Fredrick Betts served from 1889-1932, born to a Calvinist family and emotionally decimated by their teachings, he became a strong and devoted advocate of Universalism and an effective leader who led his congregation to building a new Universalist church at the corner of Adams and South Warren Streets. After his death it was renamed Betts Memorial. Among his many accomplishments as a respected civic leader were his revolutionary efforts to 'address the problem of prostitution, not blaming women but to chastise an economic system that

placed them in that position.' He wrote that "perhaps the deepest tragedy of modern life is that the church and social radicalism were so far apart." Ellsworth Reamon succeeded Betts and served from 1932 to 1970. During the depression years when money was tight, Betts instituted the maple sugar supper, where he became a member of the "snow search Committee" to hunt down the best and whitest snow. W.H. Smith the manufacturer of typewriters, later known as Smith Corona offered the funds and printing of the first newsletter. In the late 30's and 40's Universalism was greatly influenced by the rise of humanism that spoke to the validity of all religious thought not just Christianity.

As a Liberal Christian Reamon rejected the impending merger with the Unitarians and had a distaste for their intellectual humanist leanings and he wrote of his conservatism: *"I am not opposed to the union of science and religion, I favor it, but it must do more than that if it is to satisfy human need. When reason alone becomes God, the people in the pews are apt to suffer from frostbite."*

With parking at a premium at the inner city location of Betts Memorial, Reamon found a new location on Nottingham and Waring Roads.

The cornerstone of this church was laid on Easter Sunday in 1960. To add to the beauty of the sanctuary, the stained glass window above represented every major world faith and was dedicated on April 2, in 1961. It has become a living symbol of our diversity of religious identity here at first UU. How many of you here today, were present when the cornerstone was laid? ( note: *George Tennant and His wife and Trudy Tedford stood*)

The Easter story I really want to tell this morning is not about the accomplishments of the ministers, or their civic activities or their writings and sermons and varied religious leanings. Rather the history that really mattered came from the congregations of each and every era. They rose up from the false starts and failures, the split over slavery, the horror of a minister who dared to join the Labor Party and the Civil war controversy.

They struggled with bringing a woman minister into the pulpit in 1989, the same year my professor of theology at Oxford told my all male class, *“A woman preaching is like a dog walking on his hind legs, it is not done well, but one is surprised to see it done at all.”*

With each and every lapse into the darkness and despair, when money was scarce, life was hard and the church was poor, the congregation rose up once more like the phoenix of legend and moved forward. We can speak highly or accusingly of ministers in the past, but regardless it was those who remained and took on the tasks that truly defined us; who believed in the potential that religion has to offer alternatives for spiritual growth, and who remained through the good and bad like many of you here today that are responsible for each and every rebirth this church has experienced because you never gave up. The facts of our becoming speak for themselves. It is obvious that we have come a long way, from the early doctrines of Universal salvation we have evolved into the inclusiveness of the 7 Unitarian Universalist principles that guide our worship and our living.

We came from a time of when the congregation was divided over slavery, to embracing what justice means by endorsing the equal rights of gays and lesbians.

Fear! fact and faith are the three historical pieces of our history. We conquered the fear of eternal punishment, invited many forms of insight into our worship and embraced the living of our lives as a blessing which we have some control over, not as a punishment for a humanly conjured evil. We struggled for the right to speak of the facts about our existence, treasuring knowledge as a gift, and honoring the wisdom from many sources.

On this Easter Sunday we are so much a part of the Easter message as we have dropped deeply into the darkness, been re-born, and arisen up into the light more than once.

Each era has brought us new ideas and challenges, yet the message, the faith of our forefathers and mothers should not be forgotten, as within its doctrines and teaching

have come the roots of our own beliefs. As we have welcomed many, from every faith tradition, we have not declared that God is dead, nor have we disclaimed the beauty of Pagan traditions from which the Easter celebrations were created.

In the coming years we will change again, however as we have heard about the ministries that have come and gone, lived the issues that have divided us or brought us together, there is one message given to us by our ancestors that will never change... that God is love, inspiration can come from many sources, both religious and secular, and salvation in whatever form one chooses to embrace, is for all to achieve.

That is who we have been and who we are...and in my time with you I hope that each and every one of you will find in this gathering, a source of strength, be it in the love of God, or the glory of nature, or in the heartfelt touch of a human hand.

We will always embrace the mysteries, cherish them, look forward to them as they touch our lives and know that another sitting beside us will welcome our experience and insight as we do theirs.

Happy Birthday first UU and Happy Easter... may we continue to gather in love, find strength in the wisdom of the ages and purpose in the principles of this congregation that we embrace, now and in the days to come.

So be it Amen

Historical References: David Blanchard "One Hundred and Forty Fruitful Years" 2005