

## **“Love in All and Final Things”**

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The great twentieth century theologian Jurgen Moltmann writes, “God and suffering are no longer contradictions . . . God’s being is in suffering and the suffering is in God’s being itself because God is love.”<sup>1</sup> God is love. This is the language of Universalism.

Historically the Universalists believed in both human and divine goodness demonstrated through love. God was too loving to send humans to hell; hence our forbearers believed in “universal salvation,” that all souls are saved. This may sound like plodding Protestant theology today, but for two thousand years it has been and continues to be a radical, heretical, hopeful theology.

In 545 C.E. universal salvation was declared a heresy by the developing Catholic Church. Critics of universalism said it is a theology for the morally lax, that without fear of eternal damnation and punishment humans would engage in licentious behavior. This critique represents a negative or weak view of humans. It assumes that humans do not have the potential or desire to serve others, work for the common good, see that all people are treated well. It presupposes that only God has morality, and turns responsibility for morality over to God, thereby disempowering humans. Of course, this is my belief, not that of the Council of 545 C. E.

Even the Protestant Reformation that occurred one thousand years after this council, with all its theological and social upheaval, did not change ideas about universal salvation. Rather, developing Protestant theologies, such as Calvinism, were deeply infused with a sense of human moral depravity and a reliance on hell. As Charles Howe writes about universalist ideas in 18<sup>th</sup> century America

People migrating from Europe to the New World brought with them religious traditions that included, for the most part, beliefs in hellfire and eternal damnation. Anxiety about one’s own fate and that of one’s family and friends weighed heavily on many minds, and it was generally conceded that many people were hellbound, whether by God’s judgment or exclusion from election.<sup>2</sup>

Imagine then the shock of Universalist theology, spreading the good news that God is love and God is loving and that people can love and love saves. It’s was like the dawning of the Age of Aquarius. In 1770, Jonathan Murray came from England and began spreading the good news of universal salvation in the American colonies. He was heavily influenced by the theology of another universalist, James Relyly and yet, Murray, believing this good news, had not had an easy life. He was excommunicated from the

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<sup>1</sup> Moltmann, *Crucified God* (1972)

<sup>2</sup> Charles Howe, *The Larger Faith*, 5.

Methodist church, his wife and young son died, and he spent time in a debtor's prison. All of this as a young man who finally came to America for a new start. And out of the doubt, loss, and deprivation of his life he preached words like these

Go out into the highways and byways of America, your new country. Give the people, blanketed with a decaying and crumbling Calvinism, something of your new vision. 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. Give them, not hell, but hope and courage. Do not push them deeper into their theological despair, but preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.<sup>3</sup>

If you have signed the membership book in the last nine years you may recognize these words. They are words that I used to close every membership signing ceremony, an affirmation of hope and life in the face of adversity and death.

I was reminded of our Universalist roots when I recently listened to a lecture by the German theologian, Jurgen Moltmann. Moltmann is one of the most unique, prolific, and well respected theologians of the twentieth century. I heard him speak on a web cast through Trinity Institute at Christ Church Cathedral in Cincinnati. Trinity Institute sponsors an annual theological conference with the best theological minds the world has to offer, and thanks to the miracles of modern technology, it broadcasts its conference lectures all over the world. For me it was like going back to Harvard Divinity School and listening to the most brilliant theologians discussing issues that will trickle into public consciousness ten years from now. And in the space of one web cast I could see how Moltmann earned his reputation. I was also shocked to realize that Moltmann believes in universal salvation, all souls saved. When someone says "God is love," a phrase still found in old Universalist churches, like the one in Montgomery, he or she is speaking the language of universalism

All theology is personal, as is Moltmann's. He is a fascinating figure in modern theology. He was born into a secular German family in 1928. At the age of 17, in 1943, he was drafted into the German army. An educated young man considering a future in mathematics, he took Goethe and Nietzsche with him for comfort. But these writings were no match for the perils of war. Sent to fight in Belgium, Moltmann surrendered to British soldiers early in 1945 and spent the next two years as a prisoner of war.

Speaking today of his time as a soldier and prisoner of war Moltmann quotes Psalm 39 "I am numb with silence." While serving as a front-line soldier he stood next to others who were torn apart in bombings. While in the camps he and his fellow prisoners were confronted with photographs from German concentration camps. He lost all hope in Germany and himself. He wondered why he was alive; why he had not died.

While in the camps he met an American chaplain who gave him a copy of the *New Testament* and this changed his life. After his release he went on to study theology, serving as a minister ("to more cows than people") and eventually becoming the Professor of Systematic Theology in Tubingen, Germany. He has written over 15 books on theology, several of them considered theological landmarks, particularly his first book, *Theology of Hope*, published in 1964. His wife, Elisabeth is also a theologian, a feminist theologian, and this too has influenced his works.

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Howe, 9.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Moltmann has chosen to live and write with full awareness of war, Nazism, and anti-Semitism. I have great admiration for someone who can honestly speak of his participation in destruction, speak of his loss of self in that destruction, and then find a way to move towards love and hope. In this way his experience, choices, and ministry are similar to that of the founder of Universalism in America, Jonathan Murray.

Today Moltmann is a quiet, assured man who speaks with conviction and humility. When asked about God he replied “Without Christ I would be an atheist. I believe in a person with a personal name.” This is not the traditional position of a world famous theologian. When asked about personal faith, few would claim a belief in Jesus because he has a personal name. This is more what we would associate with a “simple” faith,” so I liked that fact that he just puts it out there. And this has a lot to do with Moltmann’s suffering and his reflections on others who suffered worse than him. I also like that Moltmann refers to Jesus as a person, and this is a fundamental part of Moltmann’s theology, through Jesus God is human with us.

As I quoted at the beginning of the sermon, Moltmann believes that “God and suffering are no longer contradictions . . . God’s being is in suffering and the suffering is in God’s being itself because God is love.” According to Moltmann God is not above suffering, God is with us in our suffering because God is too loving to leave us (or send us to hell). The power of this theology is immediate, real, and extraordinary. Instead of denying suffering, or falsely believing that the good do not suffer (as in the Calvinistic theology of predestination), Moltmann addresses the randomness of suffering and finds God inside.

The question of suffering has long troubled theologians, and they have come up with many substandard explanations for it. While in seminary I took a class on theodicy, a term that means “the justification of God in the face of suffering.” The most powerful moment in that class was when our speaker quoted from Elie Wiesel’s experience in the concentration camps. While watching a fellow prisoner being hung one of the inmates in the camp whispered, “Where is God?” And another responded “Up there.” Up there with us being hung. God with us in our suffering. Like Moltmann, Murray, and Wiesel, I can only be a theist if God is with me and others when we suffer.

Perhaps Moltmann’s greatest recent theological contribution has been his 1995 book *The Coming of God*, universalism’s response to apocalyptic thinking. Most of us are somehow familiar with the American “Left Behind” series (both book and film) that presupposes the coming of Jesus, the ascension of the faithful, and everyone else who is “left behind.” The series grew out of Protestant evangelical notions of the end time and millennialist thinking, either you are saved or you are going to hell. Again we return to the terrain of universalism. Are all souls saved?

Now, I have had these conversations with my neighbors and family members. I know you have to. You are asked “Do you believe that Jesus is your savior?” The response “Yes” brings a sigh of relief and the presupposition that “we” will be in heaven together. The response “No” brings shock, some loathing, wonder about your sinful nature, sometimes pleading, and a fear that “we” will never see one another again after death.

This is an “us” vs. “them” mentality that Moltmann abhors. He explains (and I paraphrase as these are my notes from his lecture) “In expecting the future division of

saved/unsaved we will live that way now. We don't trust the unsaved now so we are safe to kill them. The expectation of exclusive final judgment allows us to be against those who are 'against us.' Moltmann notes that American Christian fundamentalist thought has an end time terrorist emphasis on millennialism. Wow.

And you thought theology was irrelevant. Moltmann is riveting from here on. He has summed up that American optimism of upward and onward forever which is theological (with its "Risen" Christian undertones). He sees that it is exclusive so that if anything keeps us from going "upward," if there is any criticism or dampening of enthusiasm, then the critics are "against us," whoever "us" is. At this point "they" can be detained or have their rights denied, etc. Again we see how politics is driven by theology, as American colonist Benjamin Rush noted in our call to worship this morning. Moltmann noted that when Americans feared Armageddon in the 1980's they received, instead, Mikhail Gorbachev. Perhaps it is time for us to "stand down" a bit from our end time fears.

Moltmann's point is that how we view the end time shapes how we view our present, so Moltmann suggests that instead of us vs. them, the final judgment is actually a fire of God's love, healing, and beginning. In his lecture Moltmann said (again I paraphrase)

No one will recognize Jesus if he has not suffered. Jesus will bring creative justice. The victims will receive their rights and the perpetrators will be aware of their [the victims'] rights. All will do this together until the perpetrators die to the evil acts against their victims. The image of fire is the consuming love of God not the wrath of God. It is not about rewards and punishment but about reunion and reconciliation on earth, all tears of suffering and remorse are dried.

Moltmann sees the final judgment as a corrective and healing justice that begins the creation of all things. Death or the final judgment is not the end, not the end of the world, but just the beginning. Moltmann contends that if his vision of the final judgment was our world view today things would be different. He explains (again I paraphrase)

We would have love with a preferential option for the oppressed. It would be wrong to persecute unbelievers. We would respect and see every human being embraced by God and for God's sake we would not be against them because the Holy Spirit is in them. The all embracing mercy of God is greater than all. There would be a universalism of hope in God's future.

Let's just begin with his idea that it would be wrong to persecute "unbelievers" because the Holy Spirit is everywhere and the embracing mercy of God is greater than all and consider what he suggests. If this were part of our faith, then no one would "go to hell." The faith test on belief in Jesus Christ would become irrelevant. Christianity would be one among many faiths, not the only doorway to salvation. Everyone's journey and faith would be of interest and not to be feared. No one would get "left behind." We would be equal expect for our preferential option for the oppressed. We would live the "kingdom of heaven" here on earth now by caring for the oppressed and suffering instead of ignoring them.

We would not warehouse people in prison without re-education, reform, and release when possible. There would be work opportunities for former inmates who earn release. There would be drug treatment on demand. As a country we just wouldn't be so mean. When I hear that over half the homeless population in America is made up of children I wonder what kind of fire we are actually living in now.

I was and am completely taken with Moltmann's notion that in the final judgment victims will receive their rights and perpetrators will be aware of those rights. That would be justice. Justice. And the tears of suffering and remorse will be burnt away in God's love. In this vision humans are honestly reconciled, something I have never considered possible. But what if? And if we believed this was inevitable, how would we live life now?

For two thousand years universalism has been criticized as weak, lax, unjust. What if it is just the opposite? What if universalism calls us to be stronger, more honest, caring, and responsible now? Universalism does not rely on God to separate people, but calls on us to do positive things together now. It is easier to believe in us vs. them, damnation, and God's wrath because it removes human responsibility and compassion from our actions. Universalism is what calls us to greater love and humanity.

Universalism acknowledges loss and cruelty while bringing justice, compassion, and healing. More than anything Universalism affirms that there remains a loving kindness that will not dim, and calls us to live this love and kindness now. May it always be so.