



Reading: *The Social Implications of Universalism* (1915), Clarence Skinner

"At the turn of the 20th century, America was a country of hope and optimism. With the Civil War behind them, an economic boom that seemed never ending, and a technological explosion that seemed unstoppable, many saw no limit to the possibilities of human advancement. Many religious people wanted to connect their faith to this optimism and possibility, and Universalist minister Clarence Skinner was no exception. He was part of the radical religious left, often called the Social Gospel. This excerpt is from his groundbreaking 1915 publication, *The Social Implications of Universalism*:

Let us meet the issues of our time with intellectual frankness and moral courage. Let us recognize the challenging facts of our day, and answer them with truth and with reason.

The fact is that the traditional Protestant church is dying. It ought to be so. The theology on which it is built is dying; the social order which it expressed is dying.

[This] does not mean that man ceases to be a religious animal; it means that he is more religious, and that he wants his religion in bigger and more vital terms...

There is no danger that religion should pass out of life. There is a danger that the Church may cease to be the voice of religion. The challenge of our day to the Christian Church is evidence of society's need of religion, but of religion in terms of contemporary life, a religion which will be founded on a twentieth century psychology and theology.... which is throbbing with ... democracy, a spirituality which expresses itself in terms of humanism, rather than ... individualism.

Universalism meets the demands of the new age because it is a product of the forces which created it. It does not send its roots down into a mediaeval civilization... It does not come ... weighted down with incrustations of traditionalism or formalism, which inhibits spontaneous and contemporary action. Its theology expresses the modern conception of the nature of God and man. Its motive power arises out of humanism. Its axioms are the assumptions of the great social and psychical movements of the twentieth century. It is the real religion which the masses consciously or unconsciously are adopting. It is the philosophy and the power which under one name or another the multitudes are laying hold upon to swing this old earth nearer to the Kingdom of Heaven. It is the religion of the people, for the people, by the people. It is the faith of the new world, sweeping upward toward spiritual expression."

Sermon

In last week's sermon, I talked about Unitarian Universalist theologian Rebecca Parker and her theology of love first, that when you live love first instead of love after, your whole understanding of your place in the world changes. I talked about how much of what passes for love is really charity. When millions of Americans donated money to the relief effort in New Orleans



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after Hurricane Katrina, it was wonderful, but it was love after the roof caved in, rather than love first. Rebecca Parker is not the first theologian to make love first the foundation of her theology. Her theology is the deepening of a theological idea called the Social Gospel, that was birthed by progressive religious people in the late 1800s. I’m going to do some story telling today about that time in American history, and I hope as I tell this story that you will be able to make connections between what was happening then and what we see happening now, and what that calls us to as progressive religious people who want to do right by our world.

When Clarence Skinner was born in 1881 in Brooklyn New York, the United States was in a unique place. Many people felt that their country was finally moving out of the trauma of the Civil War. That war had ripped so many things apart - death and violence, broken loyalties, shattered trust, crumbling political institutions, a destroyed economy. And when the war ended, not only was there the staggering reality of a damaged national psyche and thousands of dead and wounded, but inflation skyrocketed because there was a shortage of most of the basic things people needed. Then, wages fell because all those freed slaves started looking for work, and all those soldiers came home looking for work and there wasn’t enough work. So you have emotional trauma and economic trauma, hand in hand. It was pretty rocky. It took a long time for things to find their new normal. But by the 1880s, people were starting to breathe again, with a cautious sense of relief, and the tender hope of the possibility of a better way forward.

This is the world that Clarence Skinner was born into in 1881, and as he reached his tenth year, it’s like his country broke through this plateau. Nothing could stop the march of progress, science and technology. Agriculture grew. Cities grew. Universities grew. Factories couldn’t meet demand. Jobs were plentiful and easy to come by. Roads were built, railroads were expanded. And then there were the communication breakthroughs - electricity, the telegraph, the telephone! We’re so fond of saying that we’re in the information age, as if that is something unique to us. They were saying the same thing in the 1890s. The result of this growth was unbridled optimism. Something big was happening and that the human race was on an unstoppable journey of progress and possibility.

But there was also a shadow side to all this growth, and that was an explosion of poverty. People followed the jobs into the cities in droves, and most cities couldn’t accommodate the massive growth. They had no sewer systems or building codes or water filtration systems, so overcrowded slums sprung up everywhere. Have you ever heard the phrase, “The great unwashed.” Well that was literal. It’s hard to wash when your water’s contaminated and your front yard is a sewer. The mortality rate among the working class was unbelievable. Then there were their housing conditions – overcrowded and decrepit. Building fires were common and could leave whole city blocks and hundreds dead. The working conditions were no better. 80 hour work weeks with ridiculously low pay, out of control rents, child labor, dangerous working conditions, bad schools or no schools, and no access to health care in case of illness or injury. It became clear to some that the economic boom was built on human suffering. Formal slavery may have ended, but this was a new kind of slavery. There was this great big disconnect, with all this growth and so many people making so much money, and then this huge class of really poor people working themselves to the bone.



Truth be told, the prevalent Christian theology had no answer for this. The most prevalent theology at that time was that God rewards the good and punishes the bad. Wealth and comfort indicated you were favored by God. Poverty and pain was a sign that morally you weren't cutting it. This theology said that there had always been poverty and wealth, and there was no need to change that because this was the moral order of things. You know the saying, "The Lord helps those that help themselves?" It fits into this world view and it gives a moral authority to inequality. There's only one problem. No where in the Bible does it say "The Lord helps those that help themselves." We've made it up. It doesn't exist.

In the late 1890s, just as Clarence Skinner graduated high school and went to college, a theological movement called the Social Gospel exploded into the Christian scene. This theology looked at the problems in society, looked at Christianity as it was being practiced and said, this doesn't add up. The Christian faith has become all about personal salvation. What a selfish small way to live! What if salvation isn't personal? What if it's not about having Jesus Christ as your personal savior? What if salvation is social? What if salvation is finding Christ in the suffering of the world, and Jesus' resurrection happens every time you take a step forward in love and justice? They combed through the Gospel and concluded that Jesus didn't come to save souls for eternity, he came to save lives for the world. All of his teachings were about doing unto others as you would have them do unto you. And when he said, "Follow me," he meant follow my teachings.

The Social Gospel also challenged the predominant Christian assumption that the earth was a place of sin and hardship. They looked at all the scientific advances, all the technological breakthroughs, and saw them as signs of God's evolutionary work in and through humanity. Might I add Social Gospel theologians loved Darwin and saw no reason why Christianity and evolution couldn't fit like a glove. To use the words of Clarence Skinner, these were the tools of God for "the transformation of this old earth into the Kingdom of Heaven." And that is the crux of Social Gospel theology. The Kingdom isn't an otherworldly place. The Kingdom is here.

No denomination took the Social Gospel to heart like Universalism. Most major Protestant denominations split over the Social Gospel. Traditionalists said making this world into the location of the Kingdom of Heaven was pure heresy and idolatry. Social Gospellers told traditionalists to get with it and step up to the plate or they would leave. Most mainline denominations today are a result of theological splits over the Social Gospel. But this did not happen in the Universalist or Unitarian churches. These denominations had always been on the edge anyway, ridiculed and dismissed by many, so they had nothing to lose. They took to Social Gospel like a duck to water which means that Clarence Skinner, born to Universalist parents, would have been steeped in the Social Gospel at home and at church. This was the Christianity he grew up with – a Christianity of hope and promise that had high expectations for every single human being.

Just to give you a sense of what this theology looked like, here is a reading from an early twentieth century Universalist hymnal. You'll have to excuse the gendered language. I'd rather read it in its original so you can get the real feel of it: "We men of earth have here the stuff of paradise. We have enough. We need no other stones to build the stairs into the Unfulfilled.



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No other ivory for the doors, no other marble for the floors, no other cedar for the beam and dome of man's immortal dream. Here on the common, human way is all the stuff to build a heaven. Ours the task sublime to build eternity in time!" What is this saying? No longer is the Kingdom of Heaven something you have to die for, the Social Gospel asked you to live for it.

Clarence Skinner made this theology his life's calling. He transformed his whole life into doing his part for the building of the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. He had a strong personal mystical and humanist theology that worked something like this. The spirit of a personal loving God moved in and through everything, but especially through the human spirit. The mystical moving of God was a movement for justice grounded in an all encompassing love. The religious journey was about connecting to that mystical yearning and love, and when you did, God's yearnings and God's love would flood through you. You would become painfully, beautifully, mystically aware of the great unity of all things, and when you felt this unity, you would feel the call to bring your mind and your body into the service of God in order to release the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. .And Skinner had a very specific understanding of that Kingdom. In the Kingdom of Heaven the law is love, and this law tells us that moral order is nothing like what exists right now. This moral order is a radical equality of all persons that gives every human being an equal share in the common gifts of God.

So this is what Social Gospellers like Clarence Skinner did with their new theology: Sewage systems and building codes and water treatment facilities and public fire departments became religious issues. Hospitals and schools became religious issues. Birth control, scandalous at that time, was a religious issue. In fact Skinner was one of the few ministers who would support Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood. Planned Parenthood is a creation of the Social Gospel. Labor laws limiting hours worked and setting minimum wage and worker safety standards were religious issues. Health insurance was a religious issue. Strong unions were a religious issue. Social Gospellers worked hand in hand with the union movement believing they were key to creation of the Kingdom of Heaven. Racial equality was a religious issue. For Social Gospellers, if you opened your heart to the presence of God, you could not resist the call to making that kingdom of heaven real on earth. To use the words of a quintessential Social Gospel hymn, "Forward through the ages in unbroken line, move the faithful spirits at the call divine. Not alone we conquer, not alone we fall. In each loss or triumph, lose or triumph all. Bound by God's far purpose, in one living whole, move we on together to the shining goal." Skinner sought to be a faithful spirit at the call divine and he, more than any other Universalist, gave the Social Gospel a form that would leave our denomination changed forever.

This was when we really broke from engaging the concept of heaven as an afterlife issue. We had always been very this earth focused, but the Social Gospel sealed the deal. The kingdom of heaven is solidly here. And it's not like we're wearing rose coloured glasses about our ability to fix the world and march off into a heavenly sunset. Skinner and his people faced uphill battles. He was labelled a communist and a socialist. His second church sent him packing because they found him too radical. Many of the professors at the seminary where he worked would rather he wasn't there. His passion for justice made them uncomfortable. He was ostracized from polite society. Then World War I erupted, and the Russian Revolution began, and many people lost faith in humankind's goodness. As with the Civil War, a cynicism came to prevail in the general culture, and



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many theologians gave upon the Social Gospel as a childish dream and returned to traditional beliefs. But Skinner never gave up and the Universalists never turned away from their faith in the ability of humankind to merge their path with God's path.

We too are in a cynical time. Many have lost faith in our economic system. A small few continue to become very wealthy while more are struggling to get by. The federal level of government seems to have ground to a halt. We can't seem to get something as important as health care reform passed. And we're still in two wars with the numbers of dead slowly inching up. There are some parallels between our world and Skinner's world. We're coming out of a difficult time that has rocked our faith in the economy and in those who were supposed to be working for our best interests. Their failure has exposed the fault lines of an economic system that is woefully unfair and often incompetent.

We're back to the question of love first. For Clarence Skinner love first was city infrastructure, labor legislation, birth control, and building codes. What is love first for you? What is love first going to be for this congregation? There are many of you who really want our congregation to be more active in living love first, and I'm going to challenge us to start working on this in an intentional way. I have a sign-up sheet in the hearth room. We're going to start a group called Love First, and if you're interested in building a voice for this congregation in our world, I invite you to add your name to the list and in early March, we'll meet and begin to discern where the spirit of the holy is calling us at this time.

May it be so.