

First Parish UU, Bridgewater
Worship Service – Soul Matters Theme: “Curiosity”
Sunday, May 5, 2019 10:30am

Thought for Contemplation:

“I suppose without curiosity a [person] would be a tortoise.
Very comfortable life, a tortoise has.” ~Agatha Christie

Sermon “The Curious Case of Quillen Shinn” Rev. Paul Sprecher

We pause our service this morning for a brief commercial message from our sponsor. This sermon is brought to you by David Tedesco in fulfillment of one of my donations to last years’ service auction – and just in the nick of time! You, too, will have an opportunity to sponsor a sermon at our auction next Saturday – and by the way, if you haven’t yet submitted *your* items for this year’s auction, do it today. We now return to our regular programming. [Hey, it’s world laughter day – take advantage!]

Quillen Shinn was the most energetic and productive evangelist of our Universalist faith in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries. He came to be known as the “grasshopper missionary” because he travelled all around the country and into parts of Canada to tell the good news of Universalism – that God is Love, and Love Wins. He was criticized by some for “scattering too much” – for throwing his seeds of good news everywhere and in too many places where it might not take sufficient root to last. He retorted this way:

“If the declaration is correct, there is not lesson for us in Christ’s parable of the sower, nor in the history which we have been making, for almost every church we have come from seed that fell in good ground from the hand of some

brave pioneer sower, who ‘scattered too much.’ [But] churches are springing up all through the South, as a result.”

He was unendingly curious about what lay around the next corner, in the next town, just around the bend. Truly he was an exemplar of Whitman’s wanderer on the Open Road. Just as Johnny Appleseed planted apple trees wherever he travelled, so Quillen Shinn scattered seeds and planted new churches in every state of the Union as well as in Canada. He founded at least forty churches, won thousands to Universalism, and inspired dozens of young men to become ministers. I say “evangelist” because – while the meaning of the term has become identified with a particularly narrow notion of Christianity in our time, its original designation is of someone who spreads Good News. In Shinn’s case, the Good Tidings were that the earth is good, that each person is good, that there is “no hell outside ourselves,”¹ that God is Love and that Love Wins.

As the brief excerpt from Shinn that I used in the call to worship shows, he believed that everything, whether good or bad, favorable or unfavorable, everything points to the triumph of good over evil in each life and in all of human life. In a world too often full of suffering and strife and sorrow, Shinn’s message was truly Good News. As McKayla goes about the work of “Building Bridges” among our congregations here in our Ballou Channing District, I’ve referring to her as an evangelist of the good news about a more vibrant future for the congregations all around us. [Stoughton]

Quillen Shinn's optimism is reflected in the hymn Tony used for the offertory, Woyaya. "We'll get there, heaven knows how we will get there, but we know we will. It will be hard, we know, and the road will be muddy and rough, but we'll get there." Whatever the sorrows and miseries any person may face in life, Love Wins. The world is good and beautiful and here for us to enjoy and admire. Each person is good and holy and we can open ourselves – exercise our own curiosity – to know more and more about all the good people around us. Everyone is welcome in our Universalist faith. The Welcoming Congregation Renewal program we are embarking on as well as the work we are doing in studying white supremacy and our Black Lives Matter film series – all of these are ways of equipping ourselves to ensure that all are welcome, ways of empowering us to share our own good news. Love wins. We proclaim that we stand on the side of love, we answer the call of love.

Quillen Shinn was born in 1845 in Bingamon, Virginia – in the part of Virginia that supported the Union cause and in 1863 seceded from the secession to become West Virginia. He served in the Civil War, participated in the Battle of Appomattox among others, and witnessed the surrender of Robert E. Lee to U.S. Grant in April of 1865. He was converted to Universalism by reading some of the most inspiring writings of Universalist ministers of the era and in 1867 set off to study for the ministry at the Universalist seminary in St. Lawrence, NY.

On the way, he stopped off at the Universalist General Convention in Baltimore only to find the delegates preoccupied with minor theological quarrels

over their profession of faith. Russell Miller in his history of Universalism reports that Shinn “violated parliamentary protocol by speaking extemporaneously and vigorously from the floor without delegate status. He is reported to have said that ‘the Universalist ministers could write better than they could talk,’ and that he was tempted to give up on the spot his plans to prepare for the ministry and return to West Virginia. The ‘Baltimore Bedlam’ was then reported to have turned suddenly into ‘a love feast’ as a result of Shinn’s plea for harmony.”² That set the style for the rest of his life – he was never inclined to be silent when the occasion came for speaking out.

His ambition to spread the good news of Universalism was boundless. He started his ministry with a series of brief postings in MA, NH, VT and ME – in most of what is now the New England Region of our UUA. Already he was wandering around in the areas where he was the settled minister and creating new preaching stations near his church. During his brief tenure as minister in Plymouth, NH, he set up fourteen preaching stations in the area, often travelling by horseback, as his many times during of his life.

By 1891 he was no longer able to be content to stay in one place and became the nomad missionary we now remember. As his biography *Faith with Power* reports, he was “identified with every important Universalist movement of his time – the mission to Japan, the Twentieth Century Fund, the Young People’s Christian Union and others – he was ever planning new methods for furthering the faith. ‘A man,’ he says, ‘like to wear a different suit of clothes occasionally,

even if it be no better than the one exchanged, and it lends a little zest to activities if the work be done in new ways.”³ He would preach anywhere there were people to listen. Russel Miller’s history mentions one of the more striking: “In 1902, while in Banner, Mississippi, he held two Easter services in a blacksmith shop, using a turning lathe covered with newspapers as an altar. The congregation sat on planks freshly milled for framing a Universalist church yet to be built.”⁴ Miller reports his most audacious plan to spread the good news: “He produced ... [a] grandiose plan in 1900 to organize ‘a missionary skirmish line’ marching from the Atlantic to the Pacific by holding at least one Universalist meeting in every precinct or neighborhood in the United States.”⁵

One of the most important limitations undermining the success of the new churches Shinn planted was the lack of new ministers who could be sent to all of the congregations he founded in such far-flung regions. He also mistrusted the growing liberalism among ministers coming out of the seminaries. He said, “no longer should we disguise the fact that many of our young ministers are lacking in several essentials. First, they are not Bible students; they may know about the higher criticism, they may study *about* the Bible and hear lectures *on* the Bible, but they do not give sufficient time to the study of the Book itself.... A preacher’s power depends largely upon his acquaintance with the spiritual treasures of the Book of Books. In the second place [he continued], many of our young ministers do not preach Universalism; they preach evolution, or what they call the larger hope or Liberalism. Neither of these is Universalism.”⁶

Shinn was not fond of Unitarianism, which he described as the “go as you please church.” This again from Miller’s history:

“He expressed his dislike of Unitarians in even stronger language on another occasion. Noting in 1897 that the so-called liberal society in Yankton, South Dakota, contained both Universalists and Unitarians, he labelled it a ‘mongrel movement,’ and part of a conspiracy on the part of Unitarians to preempt a field properly belonging to Universalists. Unitarians had allegedly canvassed Universalists and had explained that there was no real difference between the two denominations. This is what Unitarians ‘always do when they want our people.’”⁷

Needless to say, Shinn would not have been a fan of the consolidations of our two denominations almost sixty years ago!

Quillen Shinn led several efforts to establish summer gatherings of Universalists, among which the most successful were The Weirs in Winnepesaukee, NH, and Ferry Beach in Saco, Maine, right on the ocean. “Twas in the year of nineteen one, nineteen one, that Ferry Beach was first begun, first begun.” When he arrived at Ferry Beach in 1904, he put his address down as “Everywhere.” Ever the nomad, he was always curious to know what lay in the next town over, in the next state, across the line in Canada. “Everywhere” is a good description of where he lived and where he wanted to be as he spread the good news of Universalism.

Quillen Shinn was an evangelist of a simple faith, a saving faith, a faith that claimed that ultimately none of us will be left behind. Some of his language is not language we often use today, but his message is the one we still preach today: Love wins, and no one will be left behind. Among the “Affirmations of Universalism” that he proclaimed at a summer gathering at Saratoga Springs in 1899 were these:

“We believe in this world, in the book of nature. All the laws of nature are God’s laws, and are working out his purposes. They point to fulfillment, to victory, and not to defeat.”⁸

“Universalism affirms human nature, another book whose writings point to victory We stand for the worth of man.”⁹

Shinn evangelized a joyful gospel, a gospel of hope and possibility.

Whatever stumbling blocks might be before us, whatever sorrow or pain we suffer, however hopeless our lives may seem, Love Wins, and there is joy to be had in nature, in the wonders of this earth, and in the wonders of each and every person.

He ends his “Affirmations of Universalism” with an exultant invocation of the good news that he spread so faithfully and so widely and with such energy:

“Oh! friends, stand on these heights, catch this vision, sing this song, this glad new song; voice it with the paeans of angelic choirs; let your glad and joyous strains blend with the music of the stars. Come down and sing it with the

prophets of a larger day; sing it with the poets of a sweeter tune; chant it in
the strains of Tennyson:

" Oh yet we trust that somehow good
Will be the final goal of ill,
To pangs of nature, sins of will,
Defects of doubt, and taints of blood;

That nothing walks with aimless feet;
That not one life shall be destroyed,
Or cast as rubbish to the void,
When God hath made the pile complete.

Behold, we know not anything;
I can but trust that good shall fall
At last — far off — at last, to all,
And every winter change to spring."¹⁰

Love Wins!

Amen, and may it always be so.

¹ Charles A. Howe, "Quillen Shinn," Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography, <http://uudb.org/articles/quillenhamiltonshinn.html>

² Russell Miller, *The Larger Hope: The Second Century of the Universalist Church in America, 1870-1970*, Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1985 pp. 342-343.

³ William H. McGlaulin, D.D., *Faith with Power: A Life Story of Quillen Hamilton Shinn, D.D.*, Boston & Chicago: Universalist Publishing House, 1912, p. 118

⁴ Miller, p. 350

⁵ Miller, p. 346

⁶ McGlaulin, pp. 116-117

⁷ Miller, p. 352

⁸ Quillen Shinn, "Affirmations of Universalism," in *Glad Tidings*, Boston & Chicago, Universalist Publishing House, 1900 p. 73

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 74

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89