

“The Oliver Dean Story”
A Sermon preached on February 20, 2011
By the Reverend Carol Rosine
At the First Universalist Society in Franklin, Massachusetts

Most of you know that I’ve recently returned from a Minister’s Conference in Monterey. In the past these conferences were always a chance to reconnect with old friends, but I’m finding that this has shifted as the ministers in my generation and the generation preceding mine have either retired or died off. What I see now is a sea of unfamiliar faces, new ministers who are very talented, very smart, wise beyond their years, and, many of them, very young. I got to meet a lot of these new colleagues while I was there which left me feeling that this faith of ours is in very good hands as we move toward the future. But I was also taken aback a bit because when I would introduce myself and mention how long I’d been serving this congregation, inevitably the response was, “Wow, that must be some kind of record!” Most of them didn’t know that here in New England, many of our churches have histories of long ministries and the 24 years I’ve been here is not that unusual, including this church in Franklin.

I love having been here so long, as I hope you know, but one of the challenges has been that I started repeating myself a long time ago. There are general themes, of course, that I need to keep preaching about and there are also stories that I need to keep repeating, especially stories about this church. The story I’m going to tell this morning has been told before—the first time when I was new in my ministry here and then again after we moved into this meetinghouse. But it needs to be told again if those of you who’ve come in more recently are going to find *your* place in our history.

I’m aware that some of you may not know that during 13 of the years in which this congregation was homeless, we worshipped on the Dean College Campus. We’d go in early each Sunday to transform college classrooms into RE space for our children. We’d bring out some of our sacred objects and transform Marvin Chapel into worship space that made it feel like it was ours which wasn’t really hard to do because our Universalist roots were deep in that place—going back even before the founding of the college. During our years there it seemed, sometimes, that the spirits of our Universalist ancestors were present, blessing us, as we went about re-establishing the church that they had founded so long ago. And so it was with a little sadness that we left there ten years ago in order to move into our meetinghouse here.

Hanging at the back of Marvin Chapel was a portrait of this man, Dr. Oliver Dean, who was one of the founders of this church in 1856 and the founder a few years later of what would become Dean College. You need to know about him, because without his conversion into Universalism, and without his generosity, there’s a very good possibility that we would not be here today.

Dr. Dean was born in Franklin in 1783 and died in 1871 at the age of 88. His father was a farmer here in town, uneducated, a frugal man. Oliver didn’t want to be a farmer like his father. He wanted to go to school, however, this was something that his father couldn’t understand and certainly wouldn’t support and so Oliver taught school for a while in order to earn enough money to attend Framingham Academy. From there he did medical apprenticeships with doctors in Wrentham and Boston and finally received his medical degree in 1809 when he was 26. He practiced medicine in Boston and then in Medway, working so hard caring for his patients that his own health suffered. So he gave up his medical practice and for the next 17 years he managed cotton mills in Medway and in New Hampshire. It was during this time that he accumulated the fortune that enabled him to purchase a farm in Franklin which had belonged to Dr. Nathaniel Emmons.

When Dr. Dean retired he moved back to Franklin and remained here, on the Emmons’s farm, until his death.

These are the facts in a nutshell. But a life is much more than just an accumulation of

facts, much more than a recitation of how one earned one's money. Well, we know a lot more about Dr. Dean, primarily because he loved to tell stories, especially to the students at Dean Academy. He'd invite them to his home for tea and then, while they were held captive, he would tell them stories from when he was a youth. The faculty at the school heard these stories so often that some of them could recite the stories word for word.

One of these stories concerned Oliver Dean's romance with Delia Emmons and how her father, the infamous Dr. Nathaniel Emmons, opposed the match on the grounds that Oliver was an infidel and not good enough for his daughter. Oliver's pride was wounded and his response was, "So, Dr. Emmons does not think me good enough to associate with his family, does he. I'll just show him that I can associate with people more aristocratic, wealthier, and higher up in the world than he." You wouldn't think that Franklin back then would have had much aristocracy at the beginning of the 19th Century, however, lo and behold there was a French nobleman who had fled during the French Revolution and somehow ended up out here. Well Oliver started dating his daughter, Caroline Francoeur, and shortly after Oliver & Caroline were married, poor Delia Emmons died. From her deathbed, Delia sent a message to Oliver telling him that she loved him and would meet him in heaven. Oliver's marriage to Caroline lasted until her death 55 years later, but throughout all those years he continued to idolize Delia Emmons. This is one reason why he bought the Emmons farm when it came on the market. He thought Delia would want it that way. Poor Caroline. How do you compete with a ghost—one who always remains young and beautiful?

But alas, it is not Oliver Dean's love life that makes him of continued interest to us but instead it's the journey he took from the Calvinism of his youth into the Universalism of his adult years. This is the story I'd like you to know.

You've heard me make reference to Delia's father from time to time because he was a well-known Calvinist, a powerful preacher on a par with the famous Jonathan Edwards. Dr. Emmons was the minister of the congregational church here in Franklin, a position that he held officially for 54 years. However, after he retired he stayed on here in Franklin and so for an additional 13 years he continued to exert a powerful influence not only on the church itself but on the whole town. For 67 years!

When Oliver was a boy, his family attended Dr. Emmons church. They were not strict Calvinists but this was the only church in town and at that time the expectation was that you would be in church each Sunday or suffer dire consequences. Dr. Dean recalls that "sometimes have hearing Dr. Emmons preach, I would feel alarmed at the thought that I perhaps should go to hell. I remember distinctly one sermon about endless punishment, and the smoke of torment ascending forever and ever. And heaven was a plain close by hell, and the blest were rendered all the happier by witnessing the anguish of the wicked. I thought a good deal about it for two or three days, and finally I said to my mother, 'If I should die now, I suppose I should go straight to hell.'

'No,' said my mother, 'I don't think you would.'

'Why, Dr. Emmons said in his sermon last Sunday that hell was the portion of all the impenitent, and I have never met with any change.'

'Dr. Emmons no doubt preaches what he believes to be the truth,' was my mother's reply, 'but I think he is mistaken sometimes. I believe that God is far more merciful and forgiving than mortals are; and what earthly parent would send a child to the endless torture of hell, however deeply that child had sinned?'

I felt more at ease in my mind after that and whenever at other times I heard anything in a sermon that troubled me, I would talk with my mother about it, and she always took very cheerful views. However eloquent and forcible Dr. Emmons might be, somehow my mother's words always had more weight with me. She was a woman of excellent judgment and sound common sense, and she was almost always right in her opinions."

Oliver Dean doesn't say this, however, my suspicion is that his mother was already familiar with Universalist teachings when he was a boy. There were Universalist churches around Franklin at the time. The church in Milford was founded back in 1785, shortly after Oliver was born. And I'll bet you anything that Oliver Dean's mother had either heard some of the preaching that was going on there or had read some of the Universalist tracts because what she told Oliver about God being far more merciful and forgiving than mortals are was Universalism in its purest form.

One of Oliver Dean's contemporaries, Horace Mann, who became the great American

educator, was not as fortunate because his mother was a faithful member of Dr. Emmons's church and believed whole-heartedly in everything he said. Horace Mann writes, "It took the blue out of the sky, and threw a dark shadow over all innocent pleasures. I used to lie awake at night and cry, as my imagination vividly pictured the terrors of the hell towards which I was convinced that I and my brother were hastening. I felt that I could endure it, if my brother could only be saved." But then tragedy struck.. One Sunday, his brother skipped church and went swimming with some friends instead. He drowned that morning and later, during the funeral oration, Dr. Emmons did not console the family but instead described in detail what happens when someone sins and then dies unconverted. It is said that Horace Mann's mother was never seen to smile again.

A side note to this is that eventually Horace Mann became a Unitarian and founded the church in West Newton that ordained me. One of the stained glass windows in that cathedral-like church is dedicated to public education and depicts Horace Mann.

Oliver Dean, of course, was at that funeral and was devastated by what he heard. How could he accept a creed that demanded belief in, love for, and submission to a God who would punish a boy by plunging him into the fires of hell? His faith was shattered and chaos reigned for a while. But shortly after, another incident happened that was even more shattering for Oliver.

"Most believers in endless punishment," he said, "believe in hell for their neighbors and heaven for themselves and their families and when an Orthodox church member loses a near and dear friend, who has not met with the requisite change of heart, he generally finds some loophole whereby his friend may escape hell and win heaven. But Dr. Emmons was more consistent than that. He believed in hell as emphatically for his own family as for anybody else..."

Delia Emmons had a long illness before she died which gave her father enough time to ensure that she was converted and would not end up in hell. It was a different story with his son, Erastus. Erastus was older and served as a role model for many of the young men in town. He wasn't as haughty and aristocratic as his father and was friendly to everyone. He was also devoted to his parents and remained in Franklin so that he could care for them as they got older. He was a Major in the military and while reviewing troops on the Boston Common, he caught cold and in a short time died of consumption.

The very next Sunday, Dr. Emmons preached that his son had been blinded by sin, and had lived stupidly and thoughtlessly. He said Erastus's voice may have sounded pleasant to his companion's ears at one time, but now his woeful voice was calling out from the abyss and warning them to repent and be wiser and better than he had been.

Oliver Dean had come back to Franklin for the funeral, and he reports that after church that day, he looked around and was surprised to see the others milling around, smiling and chatting with each other. He was puzzled as to how they could listen to Dr. Emmons, believe what he had said about his son, and still look so cheerful. When he asked his mother about it she said: "Oh, we are accustomed to it. It would not seem so harsh to you, if you had been to church here all the time."

One of the things that's interesting about this is that Oliver Dean took all of this very seriously. He actually listened to Dr. Emmons and what he heard was deeply disturbing to him. There was no way that he could just sit there in the pew and ignore it like a lot of people appeared to be doing. It was too important to him. And so he went church shopping. He tried some other Congregational churches and even worshipped with the Methodists for a while. It was his mother, which is no surprise, who first introduced him to Universalism. Now what you have to remember is that at that time, in this town, this was quite a radical thing for her to do because the Calvinists were condemning the Universalists as being the vilest of all sinners—they were even worse than atheists. One of the stories that Dr. Dean loved to tell was about an incident that happened after Dr. Emmons had stopped preaching.

At that time the whole town was the parish and everyone paid taxes to support the church whether or not they were members of the church or not. Well, some of the people in the parish wanted to hear a Universalist minister preach, so they presented a petition asking

to use the church occasionally during the week. At the parish meeting in which this petition was to be considered, an "influential member of the parish was speaking in favor of it, when to the surprise of all, Dr. Emmons walked in. The gentleman speaking abruptly closed his remarks and sat down. A deathlike silence ensued, which was broken by Dr. Emmons asking what the question was that was before the meeting. On being informed, he immediately entered an indignant and emphatic protest against allowing the church which had been his church to be opened for Universalist preaching. If they could entertain such an idea for a moment, he said as he sat down, they did little credit to the teaching they had received for the past fifty years." Not a single vote was cast in favor of letting a Universalist minister preach in Franklin.

When you consider that this was the environment in which Oliver Dean had grown up, it's no wonder that he protested when his mother suggested that he read a sermon of that great Universalist, Hosea Ballou. But finally he agreed and when he did, he found that some of the things that had "troubled him for years were treated very clearly and fully and reasonable too, in the sermon.... I thought that Universalists might not be such a bad class of people after all." After learning more about Universalism, Oliver Dean embraced this new faith wholeheartedly and from then on he was an earnest supporter and an outspoken advocate.

I mentioned earlier that when Nathaniel Emmons died, Oliver Dean purchased his farm. It was this farm that he donated to the Universalists, first to build a church and later to establish Dean Academy, a Universalist school. You might suspect that Dr. Dean had an ulterior motive in purchasing this farm and then turning it over to the Universalists. That perhaps this was a way for him to settle some scores with his old pastor and the father of the woman he always loved. But Oliver Dean always spoke of Dr. Emmons with the utmost respect and considered him a great, a good, a conscientious, and a very remarkable man. When one of Dr. Emmons's sons learned that Oliver Dean intended to donate his father's land to the Universalists, he protested that his father would have found this obnoxious. Oliver Dean replied, "Don't feel troubled by it. If your father could express his opinion to us, I feel sure that he would not object, for I don't doubt but that he is more enlightened now." What a good Universalist Dr. Dean was!

It's important that those of us in this church know this part of our history. That Universalists were not always welcome here in Franklin. That instead they were condemned as being the worse kind of sinners—worse even than atheists! Those Universalists, however, back in the 1850's brought a spirit into Franklin that was very different from the Calvinism that had been preached here for so long. They brought the good news that God is a loving God who would not condemn his children to the eternal fires of hell. They brought the good news that human beings are not vile creatures but have been created in the image of God and have the potential for infinite goodness. What good news this was. What good news this is. The message we spread doesn't use the same words or images that were used back then. But our UU message is still one of hope, of possibility, and of love. May each of us help to keep this message alive and well, not only here in Franklin, but in all the places where we dwell.