

Are We Saved?
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The Unitarian Church in Summit
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Opening Reading:

from *The Minister's Wooing* by Harriet Beecher Stowe:

[F]or ... every leaf and every flower there is an ideal to which the growth of the plant is constantly urging, so is there an ideal to every human being, -- a perfect form in which it might appear, were every defect removed and every characteristic excellence stimulated to the highest point. Once in an age, God sends to some of us a friend who loves in us, not a false imagining, an unreal character, but looking through all the rubbish of our imperfections, loves in us the divine ideal of our nature ... the angel we might be.¹

Spoken Words and Silence

Are we saved, the preacher asks, and everyone asks themselves, "Saved by what, for what, from what?"

For some, I am sure the question is met with certainty, about a God that could not let them go, or perhaps a God they are sure could not stand to hold them close. For others, it seems irrelevant talk from a long-forgotten world of myth.

Yet surely all of us have something we want to be saved from.

Would we have wanted to be saved from a moment's anger, years in the making and teaching, unleashed on someone who didn't deserve it; from cruelty regretted, but beyond recall? Perhaps we want to be saved from a present truth -- a hardened heart, afraid to love, or that loves so begrudgingly that love is rarely returned except with the same parsimony. Do we want to be saved from sadness, regret, fear? Is there something that stands between us and feeling somehow saved?

We know how it *feels* to be saved. We know the moments of forgiveness that came even though we didn't expect them, ones that made a friendship possible again or revived a marriage. We know the person who saw in us what seemed impossible to believe in, until they insisted long enough that we finally saw what they did. We know the saving grace of a courage that makes justice possible and dreams, too. Perhaps we even know the saving that comes out of nowhere, on cat's feet, moving between our legs, brushing up against us, leaving us blessed by no one or nothing we could name.

¹ *The Minister's Wooing* (Stowe-Day Foundation, 1978), p.130.

Are we saved? I wonder if first we need to ask what it is we yearn to be saved from and to what ends. Because I imagine the world, and the forces our hearts set into motion in it, are waiting to be partners in *this* salvation.

In the quiet, to ourselves, can we name it?

We hold the meditations of our hearts and minds in the embrace of shared silence.

Sermon

At a recent conference I attended, we were asked to critique each other's sermons. One preacher who served a congregation in Texas regularly began his critique with, "Well, I asked myself as you preached, 'Have I been saved?'" Now, if this were a preacher of a Baptist tradition or an evangelical stripe, I would get the origins of his question (or think I did), but this man was a Unitarian Universalist. And I wondered what it meant as a Unitarian Universalist to hold that standard up to each of us and the sermons we preached.

Amid the busyness of our conference, I never got to ask this preacher himself, though I will someday. Out of curiosity, since then I have listened to at least one of his sermons online, which, to be honest, put me no closer to the answer. Still, the question got me thinking. What does it mean for us as Unitarian Universalists to talk about whether we are saved and how and what that means, or has it no meaning or relevance at all?

In our history, and the history of Christianity in particular, that question has lots of clear and varied meanings. The first hymn we sang together this morning, "Amazing Grace," is a hymn that is grounded in one man's dramatic story of salvation -- of being saved. The man was John Newton.

Newton was born in London in 1725 to a father who commanded a merchant ship. Newton's mother died when he was a child, and he started sailing with his father at 11 years old. At 19, he was impressed into service on a man-of-war and later asked to be exchanged into service on a slave ship, under a brutal captain. Newton would continue his work as a sailor, later becoming captain of his own ship, one that also was involved in the slave trade.

Newton had long ago given up any religious convictions, but on one voyage home, he and his ship encountered a violent storm and he experienced what he would call his "great deliverance." He prayed for mercy and felt God speak to him through the storm. Now, I always thought the story after this was that Newton's deliverance resulted in his immediately abandoning the slave trade. That's not actually how it goes. He did immediately, we are told, begin treating the slaves on board more humanely, but it was a serious illness later in life that made him leave behind his captain's duties. We only know of his life experience because he would later be ordained into ministry and write more than 280 hymns, "Amazing Grace" being one of them.

For Newton, like Paul on the road to Damascus (whose light saved him from a life of persecuting Jews, which had been his profession), being saved was as much about righting one's distorted relationship with human beings as righting one's wrong-headed relationship with God. It was about changing the way you lived your life so that it served the Larger Life in ways you could be proud of. It is also fair to say that for each, his salvation experience wasn't the *end* of his salvation, but the dramatic reorientation of his spirit that commenced a life of being saved.

It is not easy to know, when we talk of salvation as UUs, what it is we are talking about or whether it fits that Newtonian/Pauline mode. It probably doesn't in some ways and does in others. For us, you can be sure that the crucial first question is: Who is saving us in all this talk of salvation? By what or whom do the preachers refer in all this talk of being saved? Are they asking if we are saved by *God* -- by that great unknowable mystery that possesses and leaves us and sometimes possesses us again? By the God that many of us know only in nature's overpowering beauty or the outstretched hand of a stranger?

Or are they asking if we are saved by *faith*? By what, faith in life itself? In its power to move on past devastation, crawling over burned-down villages or walking from the intensive care unit of a hospital to forget unspeakable loss and go on living and birthing new life that will never know by what a tentative thread such faith in life sometimes hangs?

By *what* are we saved? By *whom*? And *from* what are we being saved? *For* what?

I think in many ways the Universalists, who among our forebears are the ones who thought the most about these particular theological questions, are the ones who can best help us navigate this theological terrain. And I think if we start with the latter questions -- what we are being saved from and for -- the former questions about who or what saves us will answer themselves.

I have in my possession an old Universalist book, called *A Pocket Cyclopaedia*. Its subtitle is *Brief Explanations of Religious Terms as Understood by Universalists*. The book is written half as an aid to newcomers and half as a guide to apologia -- or explaining your wildly leftist Christian faith to your friends who think you are batty and want to dismiss your beliefs. It was published in 1892, shortly after the Universalists had gathered for their 100th anniversary of life in the United States, and were still hotly debating the fine points of universal salvation in its newer and more challenging iterations.

As a result, this book is filled with great words like "eternal fire" and "damnation," "Satan" and "Heaven." The book is filled with fascinating explanations of these saucy words. Fred Muir, our minister in Annapolis, Md., wrote a more modern version of this same kind of dictionary of faith language, called *Heretic's Faith: A Vocabulary for Religious Liberals*. You'll be happy to know that none of those words same words appears. It seems we'd long since laid them to rest.

"Give them hope, not hell," John Murray had urged his early Universalists, and by our time, he has succeeded. But in 1892, the faith was leaning into a world in which hell and heaven, sin and salvation were being actively recast, and those theological words and concepts

were being recast around radical hope and unbounded forgiveness because they were grounded in a vision of God as benevolent benefactor and cheerleader for humanity. In this world, Jesus wasn't sent to reconcile God to humankind. God already loved humankind unconditionally. In this vision, Jesus wasn't sent to die to vicariously take on human sin, but to lead humanity home to itself and God through his example.

The fear of sin in their world was not that God, like a mad father, would beat you for your bad choices, but that poor choices, if you made them, put you at odds with the actively good life that not only was what made you holy but what made you happy. Those two things, holiness and happiness, were almost indistinguishable, inseparable for the Universalists. And in this world, all the God of their understanding wanted for each of us was to see us both holy and happy.

This may not all be as wrenching or trenchant a theological concern to us now as it was to Universalists and their detractors even a hundred years ago, but it is a lovely notion of God and the way God beckons humanity to a reunion of mutual adoration. I thought of this as I read something this week. I was taking a break from work and escaping to my version of People magazine, The Harvard Business Review. (We all have our weaknesses.) Anyhow, in this month's edition, there is an article on leadership by a Professor Joseph Nye Jr. of Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. In the article, titled "Smart Power," Nye talks about the need to blend what he calls "hard power" and "soft power" in leadership.

Hard power, by Nye's definition, is the stick, the threat of military power, of punishment. Soft power is the power of persuasion, of attraction, of inspiring others to follow your dream. In this framework, the old Christianity of hell and damnation and a God who rewarded the good and tortured the bad *forever* -- that was hard power at its worst, attracting followers through fear and emotional and spiritual coercion.

That vision distrusted what the Universalists believed, which was that the God of their experience wasn't like that at all; that she drew humanity to her (and would in droves as they came to understand her nature) by the power of her unbounded, generous, spacious and self-forgetting love. They believed she would lead us not to be saved, exactly, but to act in ways that saved ourselves and others from sadness, despair, lives of hobbled meaning and brokenness, drawn to do so in part by this God who dreamed nothing less for us than this. This was a soft-power religion and a soft-power God.

Moreover, this vision changed the whole notion of salvation for many, and their whole spiritual orientation. No longer was your salvation about the threat of vengeance, because your God wanted no vengeance, nor would she take it if offered. There was no fear of punishment. The afterlife faded in importance. In some sense, now you weren't being saved from anything, but *for* something -- and what you were being saved for was to be the whole of what you might be and for how happy it would make you and how it might bless the world.

"[F]or...every leaf and every flower there is an ideal," wrote Harriet Beecher Stowe in her 1859 novel *The Minister's Wooing*, "there is an ideal to which the growth of the plant is constantly urging, so is there an ideal to every human being, -- a perfect form in which it might

appear, were every defect removed and every characteristic excellence stimulated to the highest point.”² Salvation, in this vision of human life, was about living into the natural unfolding of beauty and service that we were born to inhabit. And part of our work was not just to save ourselves, though it was so delicious to do so, but because it was so wonderful to try to help save others. To be, as Beecher describes, those friends who see beyond the dust and imperfections to a work of art in the making, and hold it up to one another to see and to tend to.

In this theological reordering, salvation looks a lot like the many ways that we, in fact, experience it.

It looks and feels like all those times we get rescued from being less than we dream of being; yanked up from despair; given a first and a second chance. It is the teacher who sees our gift; the friend who tells us we are better than this, whatever “this” is at that moment. And it is more than that.

Sometimes it is the check that arrives in the mail just in time so we don’t give up our search for the dream job. It can be the book that blows our world wide open or anchors it to a safe port from which we forever orient our emotional lives. It has been for me the nurse who tends to a vulnerable body in a way that preserves our humanity or the humanity of those we love. It can be the social worker who does her job that day or every day, and looks close enough to see the signs of abuse and report it, though the system doesn’t want to see and be responsible for one more hurting child. This salvation can be hitting bottom and the friends you make at your first meeting *and*, in a story one member once told me, it can be the bartender who mishears you and brings you a Coke and not a beer the night you intend to break your sobriety. It is serendipity and grace, transcendent beauty and ugliness, luck and all those who, one day or every day, make it their business to love the world enough to try to save it.

All the times we are pulled back to center, given a chance to blossom, rescued from scarring circumstance, healed from scarring circumstance, allowed to hear the gorgeous strains of music that yearn to be played in the symphony that is our lives or forced to hear the dissonance we have too long let be that symphony and then been moved to change it -- all of this is part and parcel of our salvation.

So, are we saved? Like John Newton and St. Paul, I would say yes, we are saved, but not once in our lives. Salvation is not a destination we scale, like a mountain to stick a flag in and claim as our own for all time. Salvation is constant attentiveness to soul.

If we are saved, we are, each of us, saved a thousand times our whole life long. We are like the plane on autopilot that, if it makes it to its destination, makes it having been slightly off target 95 percent of the time. We are constantly blown off our course by the complicated nuance of moral life, by the winds of life circumstances, by the professional hazard of sometimes falling asleep at the wheel. Salvation is about a thousand moments, some more dramatic, some less, of being pulled back to the mark.

² *The Minister’s Wooing* (Stowe-Day Foundation, 1978), p.130.

I actually think that this is the primary reason why we gather in places like this, though we so rarely use this language. We gather here to be saved. All the things we talk about -- how to love, how to forgive, what courage looks like, how to live in community, what ideals to hold ourselves up to, what to demand of our world, how to raise our kids, treat our elderly parents, keep ourselves centered, renew our strength and hope -- all of that is ultimately about this saving work. It is about pulling ourselves and each other back to the mark.

So, are we saved? A thousand times and a thousand times again, yes. By life, by each other, by the sweet yearnings of our hearts ("Let the soft animal of your body love what it loves," the poet says), by the call to goodness that echoes in our quiet hours, by the knowledge that breaks through our ignorance, by God, by grace, by serendipity, by chance, by courage, by faith, by love, we are saved a thousand times in our lives.

And we save what we can. May holiness and happiness await us each and every moment we succeed.

Amen.