

*Heretics Sermon Series—UU Notions About Salvation*

Easter Sunday, April 11, 2004

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During the last four days in our community, a new baby was born, a couple married, and one of our dear members died—all rites of passage that can happen at any time in a family or group. But when they happen around this season of rebirth and renewal, they remind us what it means to be a true community, about our saving grace—as in the words from the poem, *Salvation* by Lynn Ungar—

“By what are you saved? And how?  
Saved like a bit of string,  
tucked away in a drawer?  
Saved like a child rushed from  
a burning building, already  
singed and coughing smoke?  
Or are you salvaged  
like a car part—the one good door  
when the rest is wrecked?”

Do you believe me when I say  
you are neither salvaged nor saved,  
but salved, anointed by gentle hands  
where you are most tender.  
Haven't you seen the way snow curls down  
like a fresh sheet, how it  
covers everything, makes everything  
beautiful without exception.”

This is one Unitarian Universalist's notion of salvation—that we have no need of salvation *per se*, but we do need to be “anointed”, to be gentle and tender with one another. We are all beautiful—**WITHOUT EXCEPTION!**

“Blessing the blend” referred to Unitarian Universalist congregations and our dilemma at Easter. Let's think about our community here for just a minute! Some among us communicate they don't want to hear the familiar words associated with Easter—words like the crucifixion, the resurrection, and salvation, not much about Jesus or God at all. While others tell me with equal fervor that they feel marginalized and left out if Easter services don't focus on these words that are central to their lives as Unitarian Universalist Christians. And it's a mighty dilemma how to address these seemingly opposing viewpoints.

As I thought about Unitarian Universalist ideas about salvation one thought kept reemerging—how are we saved and what are we saved from? Maybe salvation comes when we choose to listen, to

care deeply for each other, to let one another speak the truth from deep inside—respectfully and with full recognition of one another’s humanity and theological views. Our salvation perhaps lies in “blessing the blend”.

On this Easter morning, we honor the life, teachings and gifts that Jesus gave and gives to the world. Jesus, as we all know, was himself a poor Jew, who loved, worked with, and taught sinners, all the despised and rejected. All kinds of people came together to hear his words, to follow his simple teachings of love and forgiveness. His followers often didn’t even understand how he could bring together all of those people without pure anarchy. He cultivated another kind of “blessing the blend”.

But we don’t get to that place of blessing without looking at the words we choose and how we act in relation to those words. Yesterday a small group of Unitarian Universalists and one Quaker made the annual Easter pilgrimage to the County jail to sing Easter hymns to those spending this season in jail. We sang traditional words like—“Jesus Christ Is Risen Today—Halleluia!” We exchanged glances through bars and across overcrowded cells—many of the men and women having to sleep on the floor. Some of them turned their backs to us and tried to continue sleeping. I don’t blame them—after all, it was early on a Saturday morning. Others watched intently—some with tears in their eyes as tears welled up in our eyes too.

Most of us didn’t really believe the theology behind those words, but that didn’t really seem to matter. As in the poem, Salvation—what matters is that not only are we “salved” and “anointed by gentle hands” —we can return that tenderness to others—reaching into the places where others and ourselves are wounded and aching. Unitarian Universalism is, after all, an embodied faith—knowing that our actions are the salve that heals and renews.

Historically those hymns reflected the theology of our predecessors. The Unitarian side of our faith included New England Puritans who believed in Calvinism and double predestination. Double predestination is the premise that God decided long before any of us were born, who would be saved and enjoy eternal life. Of course, the flip side meant that others were to perish in eternal flames. With Calvinism, there is no getting around it—nothing you could do in this lifetime would save you if God had preordained that you were not of the Elect. There are some wonderful things about Calvinism. Our early forebears formed the Cambridge Platform, an early covenant of how people wanted to live together as a faith community. It’s just so difficult to get past the doctrines of original sin and predestination.

The doctrine of original sin holds that sin is an unavoidable part of human nature. And because sin is always with us, Jesus came to save people from their sins by voluntarily dying on the cross and

then rising from the dead. His resurrection redeemed humankind from the cost of sin. Most Christians believe they are saved by faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Universalists had a lot of doubts about some of these notions. They never stomached eternal damnation well. They believed God was too good to damn people forever. Some Universalists believed we might be punished for a while but ultimately all will be saved. This understanding of universal salvation gave us half of our name and the heart of our faith—an understanding that we are all worthy and that God’s love for us—however we understand God, as a higher power or something greater than ourselves, or a million other ways—God’s love knows no boundaries. Likewise, aspiring to love others is our true religious calling.

Several weeks ago, I was talking to one of the charter members of the Fellowship, Hazel Wells. Hazel can’t make it to our services any more but reads the Beacon, our newsletter, from cover to cover. Another member, Janet Adams, who just died peacefully yesterday as you heard in Joys and Concerns, was sick for most of her life but she always prompted us through her words and example to lead full lives, refusing to squander a single precious moment available to us. There is a connection between Hazel and Janet. Several months ago, Janet talked to me about her desire to do a Beacon article on Hazel. She never got the chance to write that article, but I want to tell a piece of Hazel’s story, remembering Janet’s wishes.

When Hazel was a young girl, her family was quite poor, living in rural North Carolina—not far from here. The Universalists helped her family with the basic necessities of life. She doesn’t think her family could have survived if they had not helped them materially and spiritually. Hazel and many of her siblings went to a school sponsored by the Universalists. Most of them grew up as Unitarian Universalists. Hazel recalled how someone once asked her sister if she had been saved. Her sister replied, “Saved from what?”

One of our historical 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian figures, James Freeman Clarke, might have asked “Saved for what?” As a Unitarian Christian, who also studied the world’s religions, he was interested in pinpointing the relevance of the teachings and example of Jesus in an evolving modern society. Clarke was a contemporary of famous Transcendentalists like Channing, Emerson and Parker. He was a staunch social reformer and educator who developed a new brand of Unitarian church. He posited “five points of the New Theology” in contrast to the five points of Calvinism.

His fourth point was Salvation by Character. Here are some of Clarke’s words: “Salvation means the highest peace and joy of which the soul is capable... We speak of going to heaven, as if we could be made happy solely by being put in a happy place. But the true heaven, the only heaven which

Jesus knew, is a state of the soul. It is inward goodness. It is Christ found within. It is the love of God in the heart, going out into the life and character. The first words which Jesus spoke indicated this belief. The poor in spirit already possess the kingdom of heaven. The pure in heart already see God.”

Think about the famous words of Martin Luther King and his dream that someday his children would be judged—“not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character”. This is a theology most of us could stand behind—that we are saved by what we do with our lives and how we live and love. This gracious theology, primarily Christian in character, has often been turned around. People still question, “what will motivate people to be good if they don’t have the threat of punishment hanging over their heads?” Severe punishment rarely keeps a child from misbehaving—it only intimidates them. Likewise, the threat of damnation may not be the supreme motivator in human existence either.

Religious liberals are sometimes bombarded with the threat of eternal damnation and derision of our understanding of common Christian language. I was shocked to find that the North American Board of Southern Baptists has a web site that educates its members how to talk to Unitarian Universalist friends and show them the way to the light and the truth. Evangelism can be aggravating or amusing. Last week, as I walked by the riverfront, someone handed me this free admission ticket “to drink from the fountain of youth” or be a “loser” for eternity, never experiencing “the era of universal peace”. What a choice—to enjoy eternal life or be admitted “into the burning aftermath of the Sun”! How do we hold onto our own beliefs and yet open ourselves up to listening closely to the strong opinions of others? This is probably most difficult when the other person represents a faith we rejected or one where others rejected us.

Yet that is what happens within and without these four walls. That is the purpose of “blessing the blend”—that “we bring ourselves and our stories to church this morning and consider the blend a blessing”. What if Unitarian Universalist Christians, Buddhists, pagans, humanists and non-hyphenated Unitarian Universalists among us joined hands and sang and truly listened to one another? Let us resolve to anoint one another, realizing that we are indeed “beautiful without exception”. May we all be as blessed as Hazel by a liberating and generous faith, transformed and resurrected like Timmy, and inspired to new understandings of our diversity and roots as Clarke. May we roll away the stone of our limitations and know the peace and comfort of living and loving well as did Janet. May it be so.