

“Salvation”
The Reverend Bill Clark

The first time I did a sermon on Salvation it was in mid-January and we had just had a huge snowstorm on Saturday night. There turned out to be so much snow that we the governor advised to stay off the roads so we cancelled church and I postponed my sermon for another Sunday. And I thought, you know, only in a UU church could we postpone Salvation!!

The idea for this sermon came to mind after I helped facilitate a New UU class a few years back. In the session on beliefs and values we had some lively discussions on a variety of theological beliefs and values. It was during these discussions that the idea of this sermon topic and series came to mind. I may have even said something like, “sounds like a sermon to me.”

And now here it is: Salvation.

Just to remind those who did attend that class and for the others here today as well, salvation was, hmm, how do I say this? Well lets just say that salvation was not exactly a belief or value that anyone had high on their priority list. “Salvation from what,” was the typical response. “What am I to be saved from?”

Now salvation plays a very important role in our Unitarian Universalist history. One of the basic values in Universalism was this notion of universal

salvation – that all are saved – and none are condemned to eternal damnation. Historically this is where the term Universalism/ist derived from – universal salvation. Joke.) And yet one of the many things I love about this faith is that its revelation are on-going – they are not fixed. This faith can and does continue to change.

So this morning I want to take this theological concept/value/belief of salvation and examine it from two perspectives in the hopes that by the end the term salvation may hold new meaning for all of us and we don't decide to just throw it out or toss it aside as a value those "other" religions hold up.

Salvation! Now when you first heard the word, I invite you to register what kind of reaction you may have had to it. Did you bristle at its concept? Did you think about staying away this morning because, after all, what does salvation have to do with me? Again, this notion of being saved from what? Did you think this was a Christian concept and unrelated to anything you honor in religion? Whatever your reaction this morning I invite you to simply, stop, look and listen to what salvation has meant, can mean and does mean to us religious liberals.

Now from our first reading this morning we get, what is called the formula for salvation. "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your

household.” Such a statement made by Paul has been the doctrine of Christianity for decades. Believing, accepting Jesus is the one and only road to salvation. This is the formula. This is the doctrine. It is plain and simple and rather easy on many levels; believing, accepting are pretty passive acts. Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved. **I believe! Saved!** I accept Jesus as my Lord and savior! **I accept! Saved!** I would imagine this would be the bristling point for many.

Yet in another story taken from the Christian scriptures a wealthy and deeply troubled young man comes to Jesus with a similar question. “Rabbi, what must I do to inherit eternal life.” Jesus did not answer, “Believe in me and you will be saved.” **I believe! Saved!** No! Instead Jesus encourages the man to guide his life by the ethical teachings of the prophets. Live your life a certain way; with kindness, generosity, compassion. Forget about your wealth and possessions and bring riches to the lives of others.

Now in this story we are told the man walks away crestfallen. Why? He was a wealthy man. He had a lot of possessions. And he was told he actually had to do something. He had to do some work. He had to live his life a certain way. He was not given a passive formula for salvation. He had some actions he had to do. Maybe he would have been better off talking to Paul first. It would have been easier for him.

This to me is where even the doctrinal formula for salvation gets all confused. A passive response is given to the question of salvation. When in fact there is nothing passive about the work of salvation. The prophet Jesus was not a passive prophet. He lived a life a certain way. The expectation is to live that life – to live the life of kindness, compassion, generosity and love. Man, this takes a lot of work – a lot of hard, mindful work.

In this way we move from the doctrine of salvation as a passive formula into the second perspective of salvation as a way of life.

Our second reading this morning gives us insight into this perspective. “You are neither salvaged nor saved, but salved, anointed by gentle hands where you are most tender.” For me this speaks of salvation in terms of wholeness. In the broken places of our bodies, mind, heart, and spirits, in the most tender of places, with gentleness, kindness and compassion, with loving hands, you are made whole and holy – beautiful without exception.

The word salvation comes from the same Latin root as the word *salve*; it refers to a healthy kind of wholeness.

Salvation as wholeness changes the concept in dramatic ways. Now it is not about being saved from anything. It is not about eternal life in some blissful paradise above the clouds. It is not about the next life at all. Salvation as

wholeness thus becomes about this life. Salvation as wholeness becomes about healing, holiness and wholeness in this life.

We all have broken places in this life – cracks, if you will, that make us feel at times, separated, unworthy, unhealthy, unwanted, unwilling. Salvation as wholeness allows for those cracks to be recognized, revealed, and revered as the place where the light is permitted to shine through.

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen is a physician who works with patients who are struggling with life threatening illnesses – broken – if you will, leaving them feeling separated and unworthy. What she offers is nothing short of salvation – wholeness and healing. She tells the story of working with a man who had bone cancer. His leg was removed, she writes, at the hip to save his life. He was 24 years old when I started working with him and he was an angry man with a lot of bitterness. He felt a deep sense of injustice and very deep hatred of well people, because it seemed so unfair to him that he had suffered a terrible loss so early in life.

I worked with this man through his grief and his rage and pain using painting, imagery and deep psychotherapy. After working with him for more than two years there came a profound shift. He began “coming out of himself”.

A year later we sat down to review our work together. He talked about what was significant to him and then I shared what was significant in our process. As we were reviewing our two years of work together I opened his file and there discovered several drawings he had made early on. I handed them to him. He looked at them and said, “Oh, look at this” He showed me one of his earliest drawings.

I had suggested to him that he draw a picture of his body. He had drawn a picture of a vase, and running through the vase was a deep black crack. This was the image of his body and he had taken a black crayon and drawn the crack over and over again. He was grinding his teeth with rage at the time. It was very, very painful because it seemed to him that this vase could never function again as a vase. It could never hold water. It could never be whole. Now several years later he came to the picture and looked at it and said, “Oh this one isn’t finished.”

And I said, extending the box of crayons, “Why don’t you finish it?” He picked up a yellow crayon and putting his finger on the crack he said, “You see, here – where it is broken – this is where the light comes through.” And with the yellow crayon he drew light streaming through the crack in his body. We can all grow strong at the broken places. (Kitchen Table Wisdom)

This is salvation as wholeness. Not necessarily binding up the broken but living with the cracks and brokenness as part and parcel of the characteristics that make us human.

In many Unitarian Universalist writings they call this salvation by character. Salvation comes from deep within us. Jack Mendelsohn, UU minister Emeritus at the Bedford Church states it this way. “This is what we mean when we say salvation by character; it is ethical striving and moral growth; respect for personalities and experiences of others; faith in human dignity and potentiality; reverence for the gift of life; confidence in a true harmony of mind and spirit; of nature and human nature; faith in the ability to give and receive love; and a quest for broad, encompassing religious expression – spiritual yet practical, personal yet communal.” (Being Liberal in An Illiberal Age)

Whether you call it salvation as wholeness or salvation by character to this Unitarian Universalist, salvation comes (wholeness, healing and holiness) comes through my recognition and revelations of who I am and what I can offer this world here and now. It is about acceptance, yes! But not acceptance of some doctrine of salvation or savior from salvation, who will do the work for me. No! It is acceptance of the gifts I have to offer at this time and at this place.

It is like the story of Yitzhak Perlman. On November 18, 1995 he came on stage to a concert. Now if any of you have seen a Perlman concert you know that getting on stage is no small achievement for him. He was stricken with polio as a child so now has braces on both his legs and walks with the aid of two crutches. He walks painfully, yet majestically onto the stage until he reaches his chair. He, then sits down, slowly places his crutches on the floor, undoes the clasps on his legs, tucks one foot back and extends the other one forward. He then bends down slowly, picks up his violin, places it under his chin, nods to the conductor and proceeds to play.

Audiences are used to this ritual. They sit quietly while he makes his way across the stage to his chair and settles in.

However, on this occasion, something went wrong. Just as he finished the first few bars, one of the strings on his violin broke. You could literally hear it snap. It went off like gunfire across the room. There was no mistaking what that sound meant. There was no mistaking what he had to do.

People there that night thought, we figured he would have to get up, put on the clasps, pick up his crutches and limps back off stage to find another violin.

But he didn't move. Instead he waited a moment, closed his eyes and then signaled to the conductor to begin again. The orchestra began and he played

from where he had left off. And he played with such passion and such power and such purity as never heard before.

Now anyone knows that it is impossible to play a symphonic work with just three strings. I know that. You know that. But that night Itzhak Perlman refused to know that. You could see him modulating, changing recompassing the piece in his head. At one point it sounded like he was de-tuning the strings to get whole new sounds from them that they had never heard before.

When he finished, there was an awesome silence in the room. No one moved or made a sound. And then people rose and cheered. All were on their feet, screaming and cheering, acknowledging the extraordinary music they had just heard.

He smiled, wiped his sweat from his brow, raised his bow to quiet all and said in a quiet, pensive and reverent tone; “You know sometimes it is the artist task to make music with what you have left.”

This is salvation – wholeness. To do in this life with what we have left. My friends, we all have cracks and places of brokenness – places where we are most tender. Our salvation lies in allowing the light to shine through and making the most miraculous music with what we have left. Our salvation

lies in our wholeness as humans, our healing as humans and our hope that in our humanness we strive to live a more ethical, moral and compassionate life. Our salvation is in the here and now. It is in this life! Hallelujah! We are all saved!! Blessed Be.