

“To save yourself without damning another is a wonderful thing.” ~ Forrest Church

### **Sermon**

So here’s my dilemma. I’ve chosen to speak to you today about salvation. But I don’t believe in Salvation, at least not as it is typically defined. At least not in Salvation with a capital S...you know, the Salvation from Sin (with a capital S) that only comes with a Belief (with a capital B) in Christ.

I don’t believe in that Salvation. And I figure, since I’m speaking to you about salvation today, you need to know.

But I do believe in another kind of salvation, or at least in the possibility of salvation. And this salvation that I do believe in demands that I don’t cling too desperately to my own understandings and that I don’t deny the truth and power of Salvation with a capital S for the millions of humans for whom Salvation with a capital S is a real, motivational, dynamic force in their lives.

The salvation I do believe in demands that I tell you what I think, while acknowledging that you can and often will see reality differently than I do. Even more, my understanding of salvation demands that I try, that I really try, to relate to other views of reality. Not so that I can build up ammunition to shoot those views down where they don’t match my own, but so that I can better understand (if not translate or transform) my own understanding into a more universally useful perspective.

So, knowing that my understanding of salvation demands thoughtful interaction with others, requires, in fact, an endless cycle of interpersonal give and take, how can I effectively preach on salvation when I am the only one talking? And therein lies my dilemma.

Nevertheless, I trust that you will forgive me for focusing our time together on what I believe, and that you will take what you need from what I say today and integrate it, blend it, or translate it into your own understandings that will work for you. After all, the goal of the sermon in a UU congregation, indeed the objective of our entire Unitarian Universalist religious endeavor as I see it, and the salvation I do believe in, is not to impart final Truths (with a capital T), but to keep stirring the pot of our individual and collective understandings and invite the realization of continuous revelation that is our human birthright.

With that confession and/or disclaimer out of the way, let’s get down to it.

So, why don’t I believe in the most common notion of salvation...the Salvation with a capital S?

This Salvation presupposes human depravity, assumes a brokenness from birth, and suggests a destination of eternal suffering awaits all of us who do not choose to be “saved” through a specific religious belief, a belief that may have little to do with one’s cultural heritage, worldview, or even ability to make self-determined choices. I accept that this is just one definition of Salvation, even among Christians. Clearly there are other ways to think about the concept. But, since it is a common understanding, I’ll use it as a starting point.

I have certainly had my doubts about innate human depravity, a brokenness bestowed upon us at birth. I remember, for example, my frustration with the unison confession reading we shared in the Presbyterian church of my youth. Together we would recite, as part of our weekly worship, a paragraph-long litany of how awful we all were. “But Mom,” I remember saying, “I haven’t done all this stuff.” Still, for the sake of this salvation conversation, I’m willing to roll with the idea of a deficient humanity. Maybe we are inherently broken. Maybe when I first held my daughter moments after she was born, I was holding in my hands an innately depraved, spiritually challenged being. Even as I doubt it, I suppose it’s possible. After all, I know I feel broken (or at least on the verge of breaking!) much of the time, as though no matter how hard I try to meet my own standards, not to mention the standards of those around me, I inevitably falter. And my observations of the human

condition suggest that even the most righteous among us can be as capable of wickedness (or at least recklessness) as the next person, given the right circumstances. It can seem as though we humans are almost destined to screw up, to fall down, to miss the mark. If this is what it means to be innately broken, I can buy it. After all, I live it. Don't we all?

Furthermore, I appreciate how, in his book *Thank God for Evolution*, the Rev. Michael Dowd, has reframed this concept of innate brokenness, known in his Christian tradition as original sin. Using the emerging understandings of evolutionary brain science and evolutionary psychology, Dowd suggests that the more we learn about the workings of the human brain, the more we see the truth of our brokenness (or better said, our primordial predispositions for actions born out of fear, hostility, and defensiveness, among others), the more we see that we humans are far from perfect creatures, still evolving, and given to drives and impulses that are a product not only of the environments in which we were raised, but also of the environments of our ancestors from the earliest times of human history. For example, even across boundaries of oceans, cultures or beliefs, our human struggles with certain tendencies or addictions that can lead us to harm others and ourselves may have more to do with our genetic predispositions, our "lizard legacy" as he calls it, passed down through evolutionary processes, than any intention we might claim to have or choice we might hope to make. These proclivities to fight, flight, or freeze when we are faced with perceived threats to our safety or security, have ultimately served our human adventure well, in that they enabled our ancestors to survive so that many thousands of years later we could be together in this room considering all this! But our reptilian tendencies have also often overwhelmed or undermined the redemptive possibilities of our still-developing thinking brains. Dowd suggests if we learn to see how these reptilian proclivities (our lizard legacy) are still working in us, particularly in ways our thinking brains would deplore, we will be less inclined to righteously denounce our so-called sinful nature and disregard the drives that lead to the so-called sinful behavior, the drives, that in evolutionary terms, in one way or another, we all share. Simply put, from an evolutionary perspective, the deck of our genetic makeup often can be stacked against us, no matter how much we wish it were otherwise. Dowd contends that rather than leaving us despondent, these emerging discoveries of our evolutionary heritage could enable us to be less focused on unrealistic expectations of human perfection and more willing to grapple honestly and realistically with our human proclivities, especially those tendencies and drives that are considered to be culturally inappropriate and dangerous, but that keep emerging in us anyway (everything from sexual promiscuity to over-indulgence in food and drink, to our seemingly insatiable drive to war). We could move beyond denial of the human condition and start seeing ourselves as we really are: a still-evolving species living through some base tendencies driven, in part, by our animalistic instincts.

Again, if by "brokenness" we mean our genetic predispositions, not bestowed upon us not as some punishment by an angry, jealous, or frustrated God, but emerging as a natural evolution of our human species, I can definitely get on board. I have no doubt that I could be just as broken and/or genetically predisposed towards brokenness as the next guy.

Still, the eternal punishment part of the salvation equation always gets in my way. Our Universalist ancestors also struggled with it. They didn't deny that we were inherently flawed creatures. They did, however, question the idea of eternal punishment for those flaws, in particular the prevalent Calvinist views of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, that some of us are elected by God to be "saved" no matter what we do, while the rest of us are destined for damnation. Many of the early Universalists were willing to accept that some of us would be punished for our wrongdoings after death, at least for a time. However, a foundational component of their emerging theology was that humanity's ultimate destination, the one we all share no matter who we are or what we have done, was not punishment, but reconciliation with a loving God, in other words, salvation, for everyone.

I know there are many who question this perspective, believing there must be a price paid when we miss the mark. Certainly, we might say, the people guilty of the most heinous crimes against humanity, at least, would have to face some kind of eternal punishment. The logic of this perspective seems to be, if you'll pardon my over-simplification, if we won't face punishment, then what is to keep us from being bad? As we heard in our readings today, the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Universalist Hosea Ballou found this line of reasoning to be faulty. In a quote from an address from

1851, Ballou dealt with the question by asking his audience to imagine themselves as God. He said, “Your child has fallen into the mire, and its body and its garments are defiled. You cleanse it, and array it in clean robes. The query is, ‘Do you love your child because you have washed it?’ or ‘Did you wash it because you loved it?’” To Ballou and his fellow Universalists, there could be no question: God saves all because God loves all.

So, the question remains, if not in the hereafter, where do we experience the consequences of our wrongdoing? Ballou preached that the penalties of our sin were experienced in this life, and that at death, our loving parent, God, would have no need to punish us. We would all be saved, right away. He argued that eternal punishment suggested infinite sin which suggested a God who was less than infinite, which, would not be possible, assuming God was, in fact, God.

It’s right about now, in theological conversations, that I begin to shut down. When we start talking about God as though we all know what that means, with no real accounting for the diversity of perceptions and belief systems of our neighbors, without acknowledging that God is defined or denied in so many different ways with varying degrees of devotion by so many people, I believe we are creating unnecessary distractions from what could be possible between us if we were to willing to at least temporarily let go of our certainties and see the world through the eyes of our sisters and brothers.

It’s not that I want to deny your personal understanding of God. I have no interest in that. After all, what do I, or any of us, truly know about the mysteries of the universe? My perception is just as inherently limited as anyone else’s. However, a cursory examination of human history suggests that too much emphasis on any one theological perspective (or lack thereof), is itself sinful (if you’ll allow me that expression) because it inhibits the growth of understanding across cultures, and builds walls between us that keep us from directly dealing with the things that we can empirically see and experience.

Similarly, I don’t want to deny an afterlife. While I find concepts of heaven and hell so confusing and confounding that they eliminate the very motivation for my behavior in this life that I must suppose the concepts are intended to provide, I wouldn’t want to remove the possibility of heaven or hell for you, as though I even could.

Again, my religious quest and my calling as a UU minister are not bound in denying anyone else’s religious perspective. In fact, my religion demands a willingness to open myself to the experiences and perceptions of others as a means to the salvation I do believe in, the salvation that is less connected to the specifics of our individual beliefs on speculative matters (like what happens when we die), and more focused on the process of how to grow our understandings of life itself so that we might improve conditions in the here and now.

My quest and calling, therefore, are to search with honesty, integrity, compassion and enough forgiveness to cover myself and my fellow humans for the brokenness we did not choose, in pursuit of the answer to the question so well-articulated by the 20<sup>th</sup> century liberal theologian Henry Nelson Wieman:

“What operates in human life with such character and power that it will transform men and women as they cannot transform themselves, saving them from evil and leading them to the best that human life can ever reach, provided they meet the required conditions?”<sup>1</sup>

Wieman believed the answer to this question would rightly be the “source of human good”, and therefore worthy of our faith, or put another way, our ultimate commitment.

The answer he spent more than fifty years developing wasn’t a static belief, but rather a description of a process, a process that requires curiosity, engagement, and humility. A process that asks of us not certainty in things unseen, but a willingness to question all things seen and experienced in search of ever-evolving understandings. A process that acknowledges our brokenness by asking us

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Southworth, *At Home in Creativity*, (Boston: Skinner House, 1995), p. 7.

to not ignore it, but to engage with it as we pursue greater consideration of and compassion for our neighbors.

For Wieman and for me, our religious endeavor is to pursue salvation.

But the question remains, salvation **from** what, **by** what and **for** what? I pursue salvation:

**From** closed-mindedness, tribe-based, self-affirming ignorance, and lack of curiosity about our common humanity that leads us to enforce our inherently limited notions of truth at the expense of the possibility of greater understanding and growth of community.

Salvation **by** the commitment not to a particular way of belief, but to the creative process, itself, which will tap us into the possibility of ever-expanding awareness and understanding. Wieman called this process **creative interchange** and described it as having four sub-events. First, we engage with others with the expectation that greater awareness is possible. Second, we seek to integrate new awareness into our understanding. Third our increasing awareness expands our appreciation of the world we share and what is possible in it. And fourth, we see the need to widen and deepen community so that we can expand the opportunities for more creative interchange. The religious community I seek, therefore, is one that not only provides opportunities for creative interchange, and builds the capacity of its members to participate in its four-fold process, but that models for the larger community the redemptive possibilities of that process. Our own congregation, institutionally speaking, has only begun this work. But I believe it should be the guiding principle of all that we do.

Salvation **for** an expansion of our understanding of community to include the interdependent web of existence of which we are all a part. As long as we can not or will not see ourselves as inextricably linked, each to the other, even with those with whom we may vehemently disagree, we will resist the transformational possibility of encounter, and we will limit the possibilities for redemption in and among our human family, thereby keeping us from living up to our potential as a species, broken as we are.

Unitarian Universalism, this religion we try to practice together, each in our way, in this oh-so-very human community, has been a saving faith for me. It has requested of me a willingness to engage with others and expand my religious vocabulary, to develop disciplines of and commitment to empathy as a religious practice, to walk in another's shoes, allowing myself to feel the ground they walk on, and let those experiences alter my own experience of the ground. It has asked me to see the religious endeavor as a never-ending journey of individual and communal discovery, an adventure that refuses simple answers and leaves no one out. And it has provided me with a multi-generational community in which to search, to question, and to believe without expectations that my quest for understanding will ever be complete.

Unitarian Universalism has asked more of me than I could ever have asked of myself. And Hallelujah for that! How about you?