

What is Saving You Now?

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A sermon by Rev. Randall Spaulding

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society, Madison, CT

Are you saved? Are you sure of your salvation? Do you know where you're going? Those were some of the questions that inevitably popped up each week during worship and from the pulpit in my childhood church. Being saved was imperative. It was the goal of the Christian life. To be "unsaved" was to be doomed, to be condemned to a life without God, without love, without a place in that heaven light years away. And it was our duty to help save others. A few years ago, I was on an airplane flight-I don't remember where I was going. What I do remember was the young man in front of me. He didn't speak a word to anyone during the entire flight, not even the person sitting right next to him. After the plane landed, and we were all getting up from our seats and grabbing our bags, the young man reached in his pocket, took out a Bible tract on salvation and handed it to his seat mate. "Here, this is for you," were his only words. His seat mate just stared at the tract as the young man fled down the aisle and disappeared in the crowd of passengers. I suppose he felt he did his job and presented salvation to a stranger. His seatmate rolled his eyes, tossed his "salvation" onto his seat and walked away. I felt sad for the tract-toting guy, but also angry. Salvation for many, many folk is about the next world, and it carries with it the baggage of judgment and discrimination. Theologian and author Marcus Borg says that salvation is also a concept that creates distinctions between who's "in" and who's "out" when applied in a narrow theological context of getting to heaven.

So in good UU tradition, let's liberalize salvation. Let's free it from its fundamentalist fetters and look at what it means to have salvation here and now, in this life. What is saving you... now?

The root word for salvation comes from a Latin word that suggests "wholeness" or "healing." It's where we get our word "salve," which is a healing agent, a balm. Borg says that salvation really means "becoming whole and being healed. The language of 'wholeness' suggests movement beyond fragmentation, and the language of 'healing' suggests being healed of the wounds of existence." Salvation for our human condition means light in our darkness, sight to the blind, liberation for the captives, the return from exile, food and drink, healing of what ails us in body, mind and spirit.

I think this is the type of salvation that civil rights leader, theologian and author Howard Thurman saw embodied in Jesus of Nazareth. For Thurman, Jesus was not a prophet who came to rapture good Christian folk away from the world, but a person who pointed to a different and liberating way, a higher truth and a better life for the oppressed and the underprivileged, here and now. Thurman and many like him grew tired of an escapist form of religion, tying salvation into the act of boarding the gospel train and hightailing it out of here, leaving this wicked, sinful world behind. The powers-that-be tend too often to encourage this theology. They say *Just think of heaven and forgiveness and love, and keep*

ignoring your present plight. You'll be healed, you'll be saved, but, sorry, just not in this world. There's nothing you can do in this world to be saved, you'll find no healing salve for your existence here, just accept that nothing can change your poverty, your inequality, your injustice- but riches and equality and justice are waiting for you in the next world.

Thurman rejected this form of spiritual abuse, and he called this distortion of salvation the “Christian Church’s betrayal of his faith.” In our reading today, he says that “the underprivileged... have long since abandoned any hope that [heavenly salvation] deals with the crucial issues by which their days are turned into despair without consolation.” For, “Wherever his spirit appears, the oppressed gather fresh courage; for he announced the good news that fear, hypocrisy, and hatred—the three hounds of hell that track the trail of the disinherited—need have no dominion over them.”

We may give thanks to our Universalist forebears for helping to begin the theological journey away from discriminatory salvation, in other words salvation for the “in group” and hell for the “out group.” Salvation, healing, complete relationship with Ultimate Reality is for all persons. And it’s not consigned to a heaven light years away. Today, salvation is here, when we but pause to acknowledge, recognize and embrace it. Today, I would like to share with you some of what is saving my life now, and invite you to consider what is saving you now.

Anyone who is not a hermit living in a cave knows the daily onslaught of bad news, disturbing tweets, injustice, corruption, continued violence at home and around the world. I don’t know about you, but it’s really starting to take its toll. Can you hear the braying, the barking of Thurman’s three hounds of hell? Fear. Hypocrisy. Hatred. Do you know when Thurman wrote those words? Fifty-eight years ago. His prophetic words are, unfortunately, as fresh as if he wrote them last week. The hound of Fear is unleashed today to justify increasing military spending and to impose unconstitutional coercion on local police to become deportation agents or lose federal aid. The hound of Hypocrisy howls its claims of freedom, healthcare and safety for all when in reality it’s only for a few at the expense of most. The hound of Hatred snaps its teeth to defend white supremacy, religious intolerance, and violence to defend our “way of life.” When I think of all of this I’m in need of a healing salve for my wounded spirit.

Of course, as I preach this, I am reflective of how I, personally, participate in feeding the hounds of hell, through my own thoughts and actions, in the ways I, too, engage in white privilege and supremacy, in my inaction in speaking out for those who have no voice, in the ways that I engage in fear, hypocrisy and hatred. It’s a cliché, but what is saving me is remembering with humility that when I point my finger there are three pointing right back at me. What is saving me now is being part of a larger faith community—Unitarian Universalism—that, with all of its own faults and injustices, is working hard to engage the call of our principles to work to dismantle fear, hypocrisy, and hatred and to send the hounds of hell back from whence they came.

When I was a Mennonite, we never engaged or participated in Patriotic holiday observances.

As a Unitarian Universalist Mennonite, I'm being saved now by appreciating days such as Memorial Day as a day originally set aside by Congress as a day to pray for peace. The 1950 Joint Resolution of Congress which created Memorial Day says: Requesting the President to issue a proclamation designating... Memorial Day, as a day for a Nation-wide prayer for permanent peace. (64 Stat.158). Peace today is a nearly impossible challenge for the United States. The U.S. is far and away the most militarized country in the world and the most aggressive. The U.S. spends over \$600 billion annually on our military, more than China, Saudi Arabia, Russia, United Kingdom, India, France, and Japan combined. I'm being saved now by adding my energy and prayers and actions to thousands and thousands of others in calling for the U.S. to dramatically reduce its emphasis on global military action, so that during patriotic observances we may remember those who have died but also pray and work that we may not have more families grieving on future days of remembrance.

I'm being saved now by my work as an oncology chaplain at Smilow Cancer Hospital. I offered support to a patient recently who was searching for her own salvation. "Nelly" was frustrated and tearful when I came into her hospital room. "A battle. Why do people say that they're battling cancer? I hate that phrase. Everyone tells me, you have to fight, you're a fighter; you're strong; you're going to win the battle. I hate looking at it as a battle. And, I'm tired of fighting; I'm not strong, I'm not a fighter, and I don't think I'm going to win the battle. That's what I don't like about seeing my cancer struggle as a battle. There's always a loser in a battle. And I don't think my body or modern medicine has the weapons to save me." And so over the course of many visits, when Nelly was receiving chemo treatments in the outpatient clinic or when she had to be admitted for infection and complications from her treatments, we talked about other ways to imagine her reality and her experience with terminal illness. Eventually, she found it more meaningful to see her experience as a journey, rather than as a battle. "I'm not fighting a losing battle anymore, I'm walking a journey, and my family, my children, my friends, my dogs—they're all right beside me, walking with me. I don't feel so alone anymore. I can let myself feel lousy when I need to; I don't feel like I have to be strong or in battle mode for everybody all the time." For Nelly, her faith in God was important to her, as well, and she came to accept that God was walking alongside her with everyone else, and would walk beside her when she finally made her transition from this world. And for Nelly, she didn't wait to be saved and healed in a next world; she was already being saved in this world, through the rejection of violent metaphors for her experience and reality, and through the beloved presence of courageous friends and loved ones.

"Salvation begins with the courage of witnesses whose gaze is steady" say Rita Brock and Rebecca Parker in their book "Proverbs of Ashes." To be a steady witness means not to run away and hide my eyes in horror, or offer consolation with unhelpful words, like, "Just be positive. Something good will come of this." Salvation and healing began for Nelly in transforming the language of violence into peaceful, healing presence, and to be a steady witness is to accompany one another on the journey of healing, looking reality right in the eye— but refusing to see our experience as an enemy to be beaten or by which we are

beaten. Instead, we lock arms and find courage in one another's presence. When we engage in the present moment with a steady gaze, it becomes a sacred space, a place of courage, safety and salvation.

I resonate well with teacher, Episcopal minister and author Barbara Brown Taylor's words. She says that she remembers a wise, old priest who asked her to come speak at his church. "What do you want me to speak about?" she asked him. "Come tell us what is saving your life now," he answered. And Brown Taylor said that it was as if he had swept his arm across a dusty table and brushed all the fine china to the ground. "I didn't have to use theological language that conformed to the historical teachings of the church. All I had to do was figure out what my life depended on... and then find some way to talk about it that helped my listeners figure out those same things for themselves."

What is saving you now? For Brown Taylor, what is saving her now is "the conviction that there is no spiritual treasure to be found apart from the bodily experience of life on earth. My life depends on engaging in the most ordinary physical activities with the most exquisite attention I can give them. My life depends on ignoring all touted distinctions between the secular and the sacred, the physical and the spiritual, the body and the soul. What is saving my life now is becoming more fully human, trusting that there is no way to God apart from real life in the real world." Amen and amen to that! What is saving my life now are the everyday connections I make with others: with my family, my husband, my faith community, my patients and colleagues, my dogs, even my pesky cat. The insert in your printed bulletin is a work of paper art titled "The Best Supper" by poet Jan Richardson. It's a favorite image for me of a completely welcoming table, with amazing diversity and food for all. At times it serves as an image to meditate on, offering hope of what is possible.

What is saving my life now is praying in tongues with a Pentecostal patient with Sickle Cell disease, listening to the rich, life stories of a Humanist patient with leukemia, and sharing a Muslim patient's lunch at his insistence as an act of deep hospitality—all in the same day. What is saving my life now, is, like Brown Taylor and Thurman, affirming that salvation, healing for our every ill, light in the darkness and liberation for what holds me captive is not confined to a universe light years away, but is here, today, in this place. It is now.

What is saving you now? Whatever it is, may it indeed be light, liberation and healing for what ails you in body, mind and spirit. May love guide us through the hard night. I honor the spirit of salvation in each of you today. Amen and Blessed Be.

Resources:

- ~Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity* (2003 HarperCollins)
- ~Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes* (2002 Beacon Press, Boston)
- ~Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1976 Beacon)
- ~Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World* (2009 HarperCollins)
- ~Jan Richardson, *In Wisdom's Path*, (2000 The Pilgrim Press)
- ~ Memorial Day Proclamation <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/STATUTE-69/pdf/STATUTE-69-PgC34-2.pdf>

The Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society

First Reading:

Our first reading today comes from African-American theologian, prophet and author Howard Thurman, from his book, "Jesus and the Disinherited." Thurman challenged society's issues of poverty, racism and spiritual disengagement, and his words helped shape the civil rights movement in the 20th century. He says:

"The solution which Jesus found for himself and for Israel, as they faced the hostility of the Greco-Roman world, becomes the word and the work of redemption for all the cast-down people in every generation and in every age. I mean this quite literally. I do not ignore the theological and metaphysical interpretation of the Christian doctrine of salvation. But the underprivileged everywhere have long since abandoned any hope that this type of salvation deals with the crucial issues by which their days are turned into despair without consolation. ...Wherever [Jesus'] spirit appears, the oppressed gather fresh courage; for he announced the good news that fear, hypocrisy, and hatred, the three hounds of hell that track the trail of the disinherited, need have no dominion over them."

~Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1976 Beacon)

Second Reading:

Our second reading is from one of the best known preachers in the U.S. Priest, professor and theologian Barbara Brown Taylor's book, "An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith, suggests concrete ways to discover the sacred in the ordinary. She writes:

"What is saving my life now is the conviction that there is no spiritual treasure to be found apart from the bodily experience of life on earth. My life depends on engaging in the most ordinary physical activities with the most exquisite attention I can give them. My life depends on ignoring all touted distinctions between the secular and the sacred, the physical and the spiritual, the body and the soul. What is saving my life now is becoming more fully human, trusting that there is no way to God apart from real life in the real world."

~Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World* (2009 HarperCollins)