

Wisdom Circle – Salvation

April 2016

PREPARATION

Words of Wisdom

“Human salvation lies in the hands of the creatively maladjusted.”

~ Martin Luther King, Jr.

“Once you fully apprehend the vacuity of a life without struggle, you are equipped with the basic means of salvation.”

~ Tennessee Williams

“The salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human meekness and human responsibility.”

~ Vaclav Havel

“Work is and always has been my salvation and I thank the Lord for it.”

~ Louisa May Alcott

“I firmly believe that our salvation depends on the poor.”

~ Dorothy Day

“Three things are necessary for the salvation of man: to know what he ought to believe; to know what he ought to desire; and to know what he ought to do.”

~ Thomas Aquinas

“Agape, the love of each one of us for the other, from the closest to the furthest, is in fact the only way that Jesus has given us to find the way of salvation and of the Beatitudes.”

~ Pope Francis

“There is never time in the future in which we will work out our salvation. The challenge is in the moment; the time is always now.”

~ James A. Baldwin

Readings:

The following are two readings from 20th Century UU theologians. Do you agree with their statements? Do you think their views encompass the topic of salvation in Unitarian Universalism, or is there more you would add?

“There Is No Hell,” By Forrest Church, in The Cathedral of the World

The difference between Universalists and Unitarians (the old joke has it) is that Universalists believe that God is too good to damn them, whereas Unitarians believe that they're too good to be damned. By that measure, I am a Universalist.

For all my many failings, the day I wake up dead I won't be in a cattle car on the fast train to Satan's fiery pit. Nor will you. And neither will Old Scratch himself. If he actually exists, the devil, too, will be saved—after, according to second-century universalist theologian Origen, a tempering intermission in purgatory. In the good news of universalism, God is a loving God who will not rest until the entire creation is redeemed. All creatures will be saved. There is no hell.

It's easy to understand why hell was invented (if quite late in the biblical record). Eternal damnation solves the sticky part of the problem of evil: why do good things happen to bad people? Reserving a corner of hell for all who escape well-deserved punishment here on earth balances the moral ledger sheet. Justice is done. Otherwise, not only is life unfair; the afterlife becomes unfair as well.

The problem is, when we project our retributive logic onto a cosmic screen, we pervert the divine image. We predicate hell on the irreverent presumption that God's appetite for vengeance (an all-voracious version of our own nagging hunger) must be satisfied. “She'll get hers in hell,” we say. That balances our ledger, but it turns God into a jailer.

The idea of purgatory makes perfectly good sense. I can imagine the utility of corrective punishment. But eternal hellfire demeans everything I believe about God. More important, it eviscerates the heart of Jesus' gospel.

Jesus was anything but a biblical literalist. He teaches by parable, not by citing chapter and verse, and gets into holy mischief by repeatedly breaking the letter of scripture. Love is the sum and substance of all the law and the prophets, he teaches. He enjoins us to forgive and love our enemies. “Your enemy be damned,” is no part of his gospel.

“Be perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect,” Jesus instructs his disciples. That perfection can be summed up in three words, each an expression of divine love: justice, mercy and forgiveness. Standing alone, justice might allow for the creation of hell, but mercy and forgiveness render it morally impossible. We can sift a spoonful of evidence for hell from the scriptures, even as we can ladle out dozens of arguments for slavery. Neither, however, meets the requirements of the biblical Spirit, whose imperative is love.

It's no wonder that hell is the watchword for religious terror. By tempting the darker [angels](#) of our nature, the very idea of it undermines the principles of mercy and forgiveness. You don't have to be a terrorist to be crippled by the idea of hell, however. Couple “Not to worry, for God will punish her eternally” to the sound adage, “Hate the sin and love the sinner,” and it becomes a noxious bromide.

It is impossible to hate a person and pray for him at the same time. Visualize in your mind someone who causes you profound pain. Remind yourself that your enemy is a child of God. If that doesn't break the spell, remember (and not with a smirk on your face) that he too will die one day. Then do something truly godlike. Pray that before your enemy dies, he will experience a taste of true peace and happiness.

Loving our enemies demands sacrifice (a word that means, "to make sacred"). We sacrifice self-righteousness, bitterness, and pride, knowing that such an act will cleanse our souls and make our lives right with all that is holy. At our most reverent, having resisted the temptation to damn our enemy to hell, we go one step further and pray for her immortal soul. We try to be perfect, as God in heaven is perfect.

If, following Jesus' lead, we open ourselves to the workings of grace when we forgive our enemies, how could God imaginably entertain a plan of selective redemption based on a retributive justice system with no possibility for parole? If we, mere humans, can unlock our hearts by praying for someone who has inflicted unforgettable damage on us, would God damn to eternal hellfire every creature who has failed life's course?

God may not actually be love—the mystery of creation is too deep for human equivalents to approximate—but we know from experience and the spirit of the scriptures that love is divine.

None of us is too good to be damned, but God is too good and too loving to damn us. There is no hell.

Excerpt from "Getting from Sunday to Monday," Jack Mendelsohn, in *Being Liberal in an Illiberal Age*

"What must I do to be saved?" That was the question the jailer asked the apostle Paul. His answer, as recorded in the Book of Acts, was crucial. One might say it marked a point of no return for orthodox Christianity. Recall this biblical incident: In the city of Philippi, in the Roman colony of Macedonia, Paul and his associate, Silas, were brought before the local magistrate for preaching religious doctrines frowned upon by the empire. After some manhandling by the mob, they were unceremoniously thrown into a prison cell where they immediately began praying and singing hymns. In the midst of this informal service, a violent earthquake shook the cell door open and split the prisoners' chains. The jailer, a sound sleeper who had evidently dozed through both the singing and the earthquake, thus proving himself to be a person of tolerably quiet conscience, awoke to find the prison doors open. Panic-stricken that he had permitted his prisoners to escape, he drew his sword to commit suicide. In the nick of time, Paul cried out: "Do not harm yourself. We are here." Overcome with gratitude, the jailer rushed toward Paul and Silas, pleading: "What must I do to be saved? And Paul replied: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."

I want to be fair to Paul, whose hymn to love and "When I was a child..." both in I Corinthians, are among the most sublime of religious writings. What we have is a story *about* Paul, not *by* Paul. But be that as it may, whenever I read this story I think of all the answers Paul might have given. He might even have asked some questions of his own: "What do you mean *saved*? Do you mean how can you live a juster, kinder, more faithful life, or do you mean how can you get to heaven?"

Paul simply assumed, according to the story, as so many clergy have gone assuming ever since, that the jailer was only interested in getting his endangered soul into celestial safekeeping. He further assumed that no desire could be dearer to the jailer's heart than to escape this wicked world. No consideration was apparently given to the possibility that life is an exceedingly precious gift, that it is a great privilege to be alive and to have opportunities to do better with a life than one has done. Nothing of that. Paul, we are told, simply blurted out a formula. And not merely a formula, but, from his point of view, *the* formula: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."

Here was the track of authoritarianism on which orthodox Christianity would run from the days of the Book of Acts to our own. Did it occur to Paul that the jailer might have some thoughts and insights of his own worth probing and nurturing? There is nothing of this in the story. Paul, it would seem, saw no reason to encourage the jailer to reflect on his traumatic experience, to ponder in his heart and conscience what might be found there. No words are attributed to Paul that might have moved Christianity in the direction of freedom and deepened accountability. Instead, a dogma is uttered, saying, in effect, this is not something to examine, to weigh, to test by experience. No, this is something you simply accept.

Unitarian Universalists don't buy it. The kind of religion that commands our allegiance is the kind that respects our ability to make considered religious decisions. In this sense, we feel much more at home with certain biblical portrayals of Jesus than with this depiction of Paul. The jailer asked a heartfelt question. He had been through a shattering experience. It made him think of ultimate things: "What must I do to be saved?" What a glorious opportunity for Paul to tell of Jesus's approach to the art of living. But there is not one word of the teachings of Jesus. All that is offered is a theological doctrine; nothing about love, nothing about an aspiring morality, nothing about bold goodwill.

Compare this with a similar recorded experience in the life of Jesus. A wealthy and deeply troubled young man came to Jesus with a question. "Rabbi," he asked, in more cultivated tones than the jailer's, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus did not answer, "Believe in me and you will walk heaven's golden streets." Instead, we are told, Jesus encouraged the young man to guide his life by the great ethical teachings of the prophets. Forget about your wealth and bring riches to the lives of others!

The young man went away crestfallen, for he had great possessions. He wanted a formula. He would have liked talking with Paul much better. Perhaps this is why traditional Christianity became a religion *about* Jesus rather than a religion *of* Jesus. Yet, who knows what transformation might have occurred in the young man when, in the privacy of his thoughts, he began to reflect on the moral challenge the strange rabbi had given him.

For us, salvation is not an otherworldly journey, flown on wings of dogma. It is ethical striving and moral growth: respect for the personalities and experiences of others; faith in human dignity and potentiality; aversion to sanctimony and bigotry; 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 and communal.

This is what we mean when we say we believe in salvation by character. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that we believe salvation *is* character, for we do not mean that character saves us from the flames of hell or takes us to the bliss of heaven. We do not profess to know, as a community of faith, the precise dimensions of immortality. But we are sure of this: The inner life, shaped by the power of

high and sane ideals, brings to human souls the finest, most enduring satisfactions and makes of our humanity a source of strength, even in utmost tribulation. This is what we mean by salvation, and what serves so well in life could not possibly serve less well in afterlife.

We believe that our humanness is punished *by* our sins, not *for* them, and that the evil we do lives with us. By the same token, we believe that we are enriched by our virtues, and that the good we do lives with us and beyond us as a benediction for peace in our own lives and in the life of humanity.

We believe that corporate religion—the church—has no higher object than helping us to get from Sunday to Monday, taking our Sunday processions into our Monday behavior; in short, when we talk of salvation, we talk of making religion a sustained and sustaining force in our daily lives, we do not say that religion has nothing to do with the afterlife, but we do say that it has everything to do with this life.

Spiritual Exercise –

In his essay, Forrest Church suggests the following spiritual exercise:

“It is impossible to hate a person and pray for them at the same time. Visualize in your mind someone who causes you profound pain. Remind yourself that your enemy is a child of God. If that doesn’t break the spell, remember (and not with a smirk on your face) that they too will die one day. Then do something truly godlike. Pray that before your enemy dies, they will experience a taste of true peace and happiness.”

Questions for Reflection:

- What does the word “salvation” bring up for you?
- From what do you think people most need saving?
- Have you experienced salvation in your own life?

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Session Plan

This session plan is a suggested guide, not a rigid set of rules. You may adjust this plan as you feel is appropriate in your group.

Gathering & Welcome (~5 min)

Chalice Lighting (~2 min)

Optional Chalice Lighting Song:

*There is more love somewhere
There is more love somewhere
I'm gonna keep on
'til I find it
There is more love somewhere*

(Singing the Living Tradition #95)

Check-In (20-30 minutes)

As you feel comfortable, take 2-3 minutes to share one thing that is lifting your spirits, and one thing that is weighing you down. This is a time for sharing, but not for discussion.

Business (10 minutes)

Use this time for any new business: Welcoming new members; Scheduling future meetings; Revisiting the Covenant; Answering questions about Wisdom Circle processes; Etc...

Discussion (60 minutes)

Introduce Topic. Take Turns Reading aloud the "Words of Wisdom."

- What does the word "salvation" bring up for you?
- From what do you think people most need saving?
- Have you experienced salvation in your own life?

Silent Reflection (~2 minutes)

First Responses (Share in the order you feel moved)

Cross-Conversation (Ask questions that invite deeper reflection; Speak from personal experience, and use "I statements"; Avoid explaining or judging)

Final Thoughts (Share in the order you feel moved)

Gratitude (5-10 minutes)

Share 1-2 things that have been meaningful to you from this session.

Closing

Optional Chalice Extinguishing Reading:

Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime,
Therefore, we are saved by hope.

Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history;
Therefore, we are saved by faith.

Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone.
Therefore, we are saved by love.

No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own;
Therefore, we are saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.

- Reinhold Niebuhr

95 There Is More Love Somewhere

1. There is more love some - where. There is
 2. There is more hope some - where. There is
 3. There is more peace some - where. There is
 4. There is more joy some - where. There is

more love some - where. I'm gon-na keep on 'til I
 more hope some - where. I'm gon-na keep on 'til I
 more peace some - where. I'm gon-na keep on 'til I
 more joy some - where. I'm gon-na keep on 'til I

find it. There is more love some - where.
 find it. There is more hope some - where.
 find it. There is more peace some - where.
 find it. There is more joy some - where.

lyrics & music: African American hymn