

“SAVED BY BEAUTY”

A Sermon offered by Rev. Tim Kutzmark
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Unitarian Universalist Church of Reading

Living in the South it would inevitably happen. Someone would step in a little too close, get up in your face and ask, ever so sweetly: “Are you saved?” That short, three-word question packed quite a punch. It could become a dividing line between neighbors, friends, family and co-workers. Some of my families at the church I was serving in Richmond, Virginia, told how neighbors shunned them—outright wouldn’t talk to them—because they hadn’t accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. One of the big issues our younger parents dealt with was harassment of their kids on the playground because, as Unitarian Universalists, they didn’t go to “a Godly church.” I remember providing pastoral care for a sweet faced first grader who was traumatized because his friend’s mother, who was that day’s car-pool driver, turned around to him sitting in the back seat and said: “You go to the devil’s church. You are going to burn in hell forever.”

In moments like those, I often thought: we don’t need to be saved from hell; we need to be saved from rude people.

Are you saved? Are we saved?

The roots of being saved reach back into ancient history. In ancient times it was typical for animal (or human) sacrifices to be made to a God or Goddess in exchange for the granting of some favor: rain, a bountiful harvest, a child, or recovery of health. In the ancient Jewish tradition, animal sacrifice evolved into a ritualized way to wash away unintentional human wrongdoing. An animal—from dove to lamb to bull—would be brought to the Temple in Jerusalem. The animal was a stand-in for the human being who had sinned and who should have been killed for their wrongdoing. The animal’s throat was cut; its life-blood flowed out over the altar. The animal died on behalf of the human, as a substitute for the human sinner, and all wrongdoing was forgiven. This was the religious context in which Jesus of Nazareth grew up and practiced his Jewish faith. After Jesus was crucified—a barbarous and hideous form of execution—Jesus’ followers tried to make sense of the fact that the guy they were calling their teacher and leader had been executed. What had happened to their plans for a coming Kingdom of God on earth? What good to them was a dead Jesus? Some of these Jesus followers hit upon the idea that Jesus’s death was tied to the Temple and was actually a sacrifice that wiped away sin. Rather than needing individual animal sacrifices in the Temple, Jesus became the Uber-Animal...He became the “Lamb of God” who takes away the sins of the world. Some early Jesus followers thought that we need simply accept Jesus’ sacrifice and we would be saved from all sin.

Not all the early Christians accepted this interpretation of Jesus’ death. Some actually thought it was rather ghastly to worship a God that demanded human torture and death in order to give forgiveness. Some recoiled at the idea that Divine love came with a cost.

They believed that God was a loving God who would never condemn anyone to eternal damnation. These folks eventually became the Universalists, given that name because they believed in *universal salvation*. Their answer to the question “Are you saved?” would be an unqualified “yes!” Everyone was saved and would be returned to the never-ending love of God.

But there is more to it—there is more to us—than that.

Our *Unitarian* forebears—that’s the other half of our Unitarian Universalist name—believed that we *did* need to be saved. But not saved in that larger cosmic, eternal life sense. They believed that humanity could be saved here and now in this lifetime. They believed we could be saved from the unskillful and uneducated choices that humans often make. They believed that we could be saved from that which was base, coarse, ignorant, vulgar, self-centered, vengeful, violent, and animalistic. These were the people who first advocated for prison reform, where prisoners would be offered a second chance through rehabilitation. These Unitarians went into the inner city slums and advocated for kindergarten education, access to healthcare, and strong primary school education. They saw factories exploiting children as cheap labor and said “no” to a child’s inconsequentiality and “yes” to its human dignity and worth. These Unitarians worked for compassionate care for the mentally ill, who were otherwise locked away and forgotten. These Unitarians went onto the battlefields of the Civil War to rescue the injured, an early precursor to what eventually evolved into The Red Cross. Yes, these Unitarians said, all these people deserve to be “saved.”

But it was even more multi-faceted than that. These Unitarians taught that we could be saved, here and now, by beauty. They believed that human beings had within them the ability to become aware of the world’s beauty, and that by nurturing that capacity, we could elevate ourselves and live from our full human potential. Beauty, they said, was everywhere. Beauty could be found in nature, in forests and streams, in landscapes, in cultivated gardens, in education, in architecture, in literature, in poetry, in discoveries of science, in rules of mathematics, in cultivated learning, in fine music, in paintings and sculptures, in human kindness, in loving relationships, in the human creative impulse.

At times, the power of beauty was awesome, such as in a newly constructed metal and glass skyscraper that glimmered in the sun and drew our eyes up, up into the clouds. At times, the power of beauty was intensely small and personal. Roderick McIver recalls his saving moment of beauty, saying:

I was sitting beside a lake that was shrouded in a gray, pre-dawn fog. I had gotten up in the dark, packed my canoe, and was sitting out at the shore sipping tea. Two loons drifted in and out of view. One stretched and called that haunting call of the wild.

Four years later, I had to spend one week every couple of months in a hospital getting experimental chemotherapy. I would lie in the hospital bed, close my eyes, and see and hear that lake and those loons. The actual

experience lasted perhaps twenty seconds, but it sustained me through hours and months.

Perhaps each human life is fed by the underground spring of . . . experiences of beauty. When we are there, we touch something beyond words.

The great English poet Shelley writes:

[Beauty] visits . . .
Each human heart and countenance;
Like hues and harmonies of evening, -
Like clouds in starlight widely spread, -
Like memory of music fled, -
Like aught [anything] that for its grace may be
Dear, and yet dearer for its mystery.

Two-and-a-half years ago, when I was in Afghanistan, I shared lunch with Amir, a middle-aged man, who had lived all his life in the Afghani capital city of Kabul. Amir remembers how, during the time after the fundamentalist Taliban took over the city, all beauty came under attack. “Anything that was beautiful was covered, destroyed or forbidden,” he said, “Exquisite Buddhist statues in the Kabul museum were smashed. Art was ripped off walls and burned. All music was banned, except for the chanting of the Qu’ran. Music was such a large part of who we are. . . we have songs we have sung for generations. Those songs sustain us, and connect us to those who came before us, to those who have loved us and taught us and now are no more. One beautiful note of music can open your heart. One beautiful note of music expertly sung can illuminate the stars of the heavens. Now, it was all forbidden. Song grew silent. Beauty was silent.” Amir paused again, and then sighed, “One of the most beautiful things in Kabul is the sight of hundreds of colored kites dancing in the wind above the city. Kite flying is our national passion and pastime. It brings pleasure, no, it brings joy to everyone, we just to look up and smiles brighten. It is like we are painting the sky with color and light—reds, blues, yellows, purples, greens, and oranges. So many colors floating, darting and dancing. But the Taliban forbade our kites. They told us we could not fly our colors. We would be killed if we dared release one morsel of color into the expectant breeze. The Taliban ripped every opportunity for beauty from our lives.” Amir caught his breath and ended by saying: “In the worst of times you need beautiful things the most. But the Taliban made sure that beauty was banished.”

John O’Donohue writes: “In the midst of fragmentation and distress beauty draws the soul into an experience where an elegant order prevails. This brings a lovely tranquility and satisfies the desire of the soul . . . the soul is strengthened.” (The Call of Beauty, p 14)

I think is what poet Mary Oliver captures in her poem *Snow Geese*:

One fall day I heard
above me, and above the sting of the wind, a sound
I did not know, and my look shot upward; it was
a flock of snow geese, winging it
faster than the ones we usually see,
and, being the color of snow, catching the sun
so they were, in part at least, golden. I
held my breath
as we do
sometimes
to stop time
when something wonderful
has touched us
as with a match,
which is lit, and bright,
but does not hurt
in the common way,
but delightfully,
as if delight
were the most serious thing
you ever felt.
The geese
flew on,
I have never seen them again.
Maybe I will, someday, somewhere.
Maybe I won't.
It doesn't matter.
What matters
is that, when I saw them,
I saw them
as through the veil, secretly, joyfully, clearly.

Seeing, hearing, touching, tasting the world—this is our spiritual task. Taking in beauty, allowing ourselves to be transformed by it is what allows us to experience wholeness.

Noticing ordinary moments and finding the miracle in them is how we stay sane, how we stay alive, in our fast-paced, fragmented, electronic age.

Poet Lynn Ungar asks us:

And you — what of your rushed
and useful life? Imagine setting it all down —
papers, plans, appointments, everything —
leaving only a note: "Gone

to the fields to be lovely. Be back
when I'm through with blooming."

My friends, we live in a world that is broken and beautiful. We cannot ignore the brokenness. We cannot ignore our brokenness. But let us not forget the beautiful. Like a blossom, let us open to what is around us. Let us open to what is within us.

Let this be our spiritual practice to allow us to be saved by beauty: Sometime today—between now and bedtime—notice and savor two moments of beauty. Sometime today—between now and bedtime—notice and savor two moments of beauty.

Look for them. Claim them. Experience them. Savor them.

It can be as small as the smile from the sweet bagger boy at the Market Basket supermarket...or as complex and eternal as the glorious November sunset at the Middlesex Fells, full of red and orange and yellow and blue and swipes of white.

May we open our eyes and hearts and souls and see the beauty in nature, in forests and streams, in landscapes, in cultivated gardens, in education, in architecture, in literature, in poetry, in discoveries of science, in rules of mathematics, in cultivated learning, in fine music, in paintings and sculptures, in human kindness, in loving relationships, in the human creative impulse.

Are you saved? Are we saved?

Yes, yes, may it be so, a thousand times over. May we be saved by beauty.

Blessed Be. Amen.

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