

May 28, 2017

Sermon: “Saving Souls”

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This sermon started out as a filler on our worship matrix. Since I was sure that candidating week would be this week, I put Universalist revival as an almost a joke in the worship matrix. This idea is sort of an oxymoron and I don't have the faintest idea what a universalist revival would be. In the mid-19th century, universalism was the fifth largest denomination in the United States. It was in almost every town in the west which at that time was New York state, Ohio and most of the new agricultural states east of the Mississippi. It had grown in opposition to the fundamentalist Calvinist idea that people were predestined to go to either heaven or hell. There's an old joke that says the Universalist believe that God is too good to condemn any one and the Unitarians thought they were too good to be condemned. In the 19th century, universalism was very much what you see in the stained glass behind me. The living Spirit of Jesus that was very much the center of universalist theology. In 19th century male language, the Universalists believed in the fatherhood of God, the Brotherhood of Jesus and fellowship of man.

One paradox this theology yields is the place of Jesus in a theology that has no concept of Hell. With no hell, you don't need Jesus as a saving figure since there was nothing to be saved from. So during the 19th century the Universalist camp or revival meetings were different from most of their Protestant colleagues.

In light of this theology, there is a story about a small Ohio town that had three's churches; Methodist, Baptist, Universalist. The ministers would meet every week or every other week for breakfast. They would discuss their relative churches and ways that they could help the community. At one breakfast, the Methodist minister suggested that the churches should have town-wide revival on a Summer Sunday. The Methodist of the 19th-century were very good at camp or tent meetings especially in the summer. The Baptist minister thought it was a great idea. For obvious reasons universalist minister didn't think too highly of the idea, but went along with it in the spirit of ecumenicalism. As the Sunday approached, the town had seen the posters. It was the most exciting thing that happened in their town since the memorial day parade. The Methodist minister had even procured a revival

tent and he had it erected behind his church.

He had the sides rolled up and there was a wonderful breeze through the Sunday meeting. Anyway, all the churches were filled for this revival Sunday. The ministers met for breakfast the week after and everyone was enthusiastic even the not so keen Universalist minister. The Methodist minister beamed as he announced he had gotten eight new parishioners with this tent. The Baptist minister was almost as enthusiastic and announced he is gotten seven new members. Finally, the Universalist Minister beamed as he announced he got rid of 15 of his worst.

When we speak of a revivals, we speak of saving souls. So, what is the soul. The Greek word for soul is psyche, the essence of who you are as humans. The soul is not a something ephemeral or otherworldly, it is what makes us wholly alive, and fully human. Universally, in all cultures the abbreviation SOS, or save our souls tells people that there is someone that needs help. Ships at sea broadcast SOS, in Morse code; dot, dot, dot, dash dash, dash, dot, dot, dot . Universally when an Aircraft or a ship experiences distress it broadcasts may-day, may-day, may-day, then stating it's emergency and declaring the number of souls on board.

For these souls, no one is talking about any theological condition, but everyone is using the term souls to describe the physical and spiritual nature of individuals.

What are we doing here? What is the business the Universal Church of West Hartford? It is simply we are in the business of saving souls. You heard me right: what we are about is saving souls. If we listen to evangelist religion the idea of saving souls probably affects you negatively. Saving souls? That's their business, but not ours. But don't be mistaken. As Universalists, we are here to rescue women and men not from some mythical afterlife some called hell, but from the tragedies of our current lives, from those private Hells that humans find themselves. We save each other from those personal hells of loneliness, and meaninglessness, of guilt, of shame, and of loss. There as many kinds of personal hells as the Muslims have for names of God. There are as many kinds of personal hells as there are people who live with them. And from these personal Hells, we as a Universalist Church provide salvation, support or maybe just a respite of this hour. We universalists are in the business of combating a society that imposes personal hell on its people, be it poverty of the body or the spirit.

In a society which categorizes and isolates part of humanity, we are in the business of offering universal salvation, and affirming universal goodness. For 196 years, this universalist church has been in greater Hartford area for those people who are not looking for Unitarian Universalist religion, who are not looking for a place to dedicate their money and their time, but are looking for a place that would not reject them for who they are. They come through our doors when they feel hurt, or lost, or lonely inside while their exterior shells tell the world they are okay. They come through our doors many times with no interest in religion or God, but because the world of self-help books, or workaholicism, or addictions to alcohol or drugs doesn't meet their needs. And we are here to save their souls, we are here for their salvation.

Now the word "salvation," probably gives a few of us goose bumps. But the late Forest Church tells us "If that word (salvation) makes us flinch, it is because we've allowed other people to steal the original meaning away from us. We have forgotten what salvation originally meant. "Salvation is really a state of wholeness, of health. It occurs in this lifetime when we are at peace with ourselves, united with one another, and in harmony with nature."

So every other Monday morning they come to the Fern St. Kitchen to fill their bellies, but more importantly to fill their souls with the faces of people who care. They come for salvation.

When we memorialize people like we did with Janet Serfinski and remind the world of a life well lived, when we hold up lives like Janet's and help the family with their loss and grieving, we are saving souls. When we dedicate ourselves to setting examples for our children like we did this morning with Ryan, we are saving souls.

On Tuesday, my daughter's best friend in college committed suicide by jumping off the George Washington Bridge. She was an ESL teacher in a community college. She was a person who had survived the previous 37 years of her life as a schizophrenic. Erika had talked to her on the weekend and found out that her roommate had left because of the ramifications her disease. Erika asked to come visit her, but Joanna put her off. My daughter was devastated by this loss. Johanna's parents were devastated. My other daughter has a college friend whose husband is a police officer, who had a friend police officer who was in the New York Police Department working from a police boat last Tuesday and was devastated that there was nothing he could do. These are the hells that life exposes us. Now I don't know that the

presence of a Unitarian Universalist Church in her life could've saved Johanna. But it could have accepted Johanna for the goodness within her heart. We are in the business of saving souls.

Most people coming through our doors have no idea what they're seeking. They don't even know what they're looking for, or if they're looking for anything but they do come seeking something, a little more to life. It is not the fear of death that brings people over our threshold on Sunday morning but they come looking for something more in life and they can get from the Sunday New York Times or CNN. That something more in life is the community of acceptance that is here in this congregation.

Each Sunday we invite our children forward and share the message that they matter, that they are part of our community and their understanding of the world and its limitations is important. We are saving souls. Each Sunday, when we hold members of this congregation in our hearts and prayers because of some physical illness, we are helping to lessen their burden and saving some souls.

We were saving souls when we became a welcoming congregation. We are saving soul when we marry lovers who evangelical churches won't.

We are saving souls in our youth group when they find each other and a place that will accept them for who they are. We are saving souls and offering salvation when we accepted the proposition of black lives mattering. We are saving souls when we accept the proposition that we are living in a bubble and are not able to see the other Hells that people may be living. We are saving souls when our music, the choirs, our bells, our organ and our piano lift people up each Sunday. We are saving souls when we stand on the side of love for those refugees that want to get into this country and escape a Hell in their native country.

This is my last Time in the pulpit with you. I didn't plan it this way but there are not enough Sundays in June. Two months from now I will have been here for two years and I will be moving on to different country, to a different capital, in a different Governmental structure and healthcare system in Ottawa. Now, I've taken a few things out of my pocket and shared them with you these past two years and I thank you for the opportunity to do that and the trust that you have shared with me.

But you are ready to call another whose pockets are full of wonderful things he would like to share with you. I ask you to give the same moral support and trust to Adam that you have given me. But if I've learned one last lesson these last two years, it is that conflict is essential for growth, and the grace which the conflict is handled is more important than anything you may disagree about. For love is the spirit.

In an ever evolving and never-ending world, Amen.