

SALVATION AND UU'S

Are you saved?

I was in my 50's the first time I was asked that question.

“Am I saved?”

I repeated the question, stalling, as I tried to find a polite response.

You see, where I had lived most of my life, asking someone what *church* they attended, if any, was considered rude.

So, faced with this *even more* specific faith based question, I was somewhat non-plussed.

“Am I saved?”

“Saved from what?” I asked.

“Why, hell, of course.” came the response.

“Well”, I said, “I can't go to your hell because I don't believe in it.”

Apparently, that's not a common response, because it stopped the conversation in its tracks.

Our third principle is “Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.”

So, I want to say now that I accept that not every UU would respond to the question “Are you saved?” as I did.

For some of us, the word “salvation” conjures up negative images or feelings from past experiences.

Others of us have dropped that word from our personal lexicon as not applicable to our lives.

Yet others of us are confused or conflicted about what salvation really is.

Today what I ask is that we open our minds to renew our acquaintance with the concept of salvation.

“Am I saved?”

Let's start with a sports analogy:

“Which of the following – baseball, basketball, tennis, or golf – is best at scoring runs?”

The answer of course is baseball,

because *runs* is a term foreign to basketball, tennis and golf alike. . .

So, if you ask which sport is best at scoring runs, you have privileged baseball from the start.

To criticize a basketball team for failing to score runs is not to besmirch them.”

This is Stephen Prothero’s point, in his new book “God is not One”.
If you see sin as the human predicament,
it follows that you could see salvation as the solution.
So, the question of salvation is a specifically Christian one.
And, the question, “Are you saved?” then makes sense
from the point of view of a Christian.

Despite Prothero’s analogy, Eknath Easwaran, in his commentary on his translations of The Upanishads, [Hindu wisdom literature], and The Dhammapada, [a collection of the Buddha’s teachings], uses the word “save” in reference to the Buddha.

“Vitality, a sublime self-confidence, an emphasis on direct experience in meditation
without reference to any outside authority,
and a passionate trust in truth, in the oneness of life,
and in our human capacity to take our destiny into our own hands
– all these are the very spirit of the Upanishads,
and no one embodies it better than the Buddha.
Yet, the Buddha brings to this spirit a genius all his own.
The sages of the Upanishads sought to **know**,
and their testaments sing with the joy of Self-realization.
The Buddha sought to **save**,
and the joy in his message is the joy of knowing that he has found a
way for everyone,
not just great sages, to put an end to sorrow.”

According to the modern writer Eckhart Tolle,
“True salvation is fulfillment, peace, life in all its fullness.
It is to be who you are, to feel within you the good that has no
opposite,
the joy of Being that depends on nothing outside itself . . .
True salvation is to know yourself as an inseparable part
of the timeless and formless One Life
from which all that exists derives its being.”

In both Easwaran's and Tolle's comments, we see that sin is not the driving force.

And, salvation is a personal, internal process.

“Am I saved?”

I find it interesting that when I asked “Saved from what?” the answer was hell, not sin.

Sin isn't in the dynamic of salvation for Danny Broyles, a colleague of mine. His recent book “Creation to Revelation” expands on his view that Jesus' death provided forgiveness for all sins.

That's all sins past, present and future; all sins of all people; those who know of Christianity and those who don't; believers, non-believers and skeptics alike.

So, sin, having already been forgiven, is outside of, separate from, the question of salvation.

This is not fundamentalist Christian theology, though he attends a local Baptist church.

Broyles writes that salvation is attained by belief in Jesus which allows the saved to be in the presence of God – now and in an after-life.

His book did not flesh out what happens if one does not have that belief, so I asked him.

He said he's unwilling to say what the alternative of being in God's presence is other than to say it is the absence of God's presence.

How that plays out, he doesn't know because he hasn't died and therefore doesn't know what happens to people after death.

But, he has faith that he will be, and currently is, in God's presence because of his belief.

So, he would not suggest that I need to be saved from sin, which is already forgiven by Jesus' atonement, or to avoid hell, because he doesn't know what awaits the unbeliever.

Rather, his answer to the question “Saved from what?” is that you would be saved from being separated from God.

I mentioned to Danny that this was incredibly close to the Universalist view that God is too good to damn anyone to hell.

“Give them not hell,” advised Universalist pioneer John Murray, “but hope and courage.”

In *Intersections*, we've been discussing the book "A House for Hope". Rev. John Buehrens, co-author with Rev. Rebecca Ann Parker, writes about what *he* thinks we need to be saved from – "From ourselves.

From our self-involvement,
and the mess we make when we forget 'right relationship'
with one another, with the creation, and with the Creator."

He quotes Gandhi to illustrate the most deadly sins:

"There are seven sins in the world:

Wealth without work,
Pleasure without conscience,
Knowledge without character,
Commerce without morality,
Science without humanity,
Worship without sacrifice
and politics without principle."

"Am I saved?"

The English word "salvation" comes from the Latin "salvatus" which is derived from the Latin "salus", meaning health, safety, or whole.

Personally, I like the health and healing source of this word.

It resonates with me.

In 1968, Webster's dictionary gives the definitions of salvation as:

- 1) preservation from destruction; rescue
- 2) means of preservation or rescue
- 3) in theology, spiritual rescue from sin and death

By the 1980 version of Webster's dictionary,
the theological definition was listed first

and preservation from destruction or rescue was moved from first to second.

That focus on the theological definition continues to the current online Merriam-Webster dictionary.

This is revealing of a shift in our culture and the use of language to reflect such a shift.

In the Christian Bible's Old Testament, the Hebrew word "yasa" is used and salvation deals primarily with concrete real life situations.

This would be the definition of salvation as preservation from destruction or rescue.

A person or nation is in distress.

There's a storm, or people are in bondage, or some other threat exists.

God, either directly or acting through someone, takes action on behalf of the sufferers.

As a result, the person or nation is released from suffering.

Salvation portrays a movement – from distress to safety.

Unlike Easwaran's commentary on the Buddha or Tolle's definition, in this context, salvation, and its means, are very physical and observable.

In the Christian Bible's New Testament, the Greek word "sozo" or "soteria" is used

and is translated as salvation, deliverance, preservation and release.

Soteriology is the theology of salvation.

The core concept of physical threats established in the Old Testament is carried into the New Testament.

But in the New Testament, the threats are not only physical but also threats to the prospect of eternal life.

After we die.

Heaven.

Hell.

Out there.

Broyles would define this as being in God's presence or the absence thereof.

Not as observable.

"Am I saved?"

In the *first* thousand years of Christian history,

paradise was the dominant image of early Christian sanctuaries.

Not the crucifixion.

This was not heaven-out-there, instead

this "was this world, permeated and blessed by the Spirit of God."

Rita Nakshima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, in their UU World article

"This Present Paradise"

contend that "the Bible's Hebrew prophets invoked the Garden of Eden to challenge the exploitation and carnage of empires"

and that "Jesus's teachings and the practices of the early church affirmed life in **this** world as the place of salvation."

Life in **this** world as the place of salvation

This is a grounding for liberal religion's belief in this world as the Garden of Eden and our salvation as coming from our work to restore it and all in it.

However, in the Christian theology which has dominated much of the *past* one thousand years of Western Christian history, Rev. Rebecca Ann Parker, in the book "A House for Hope", explains that the salvation story begins with a source of evil which is outside of human beings. Humans are led astray by this evil and they sin by disobeying God. Salvation, through Jesus' death on the cross also comes from outside humans.

It follows, then, that our rewards and punishments are also outside this human realm. Heaven is out there somewhere, on a supernatural plane. Hell is out there, too.

But, this view of salvation *can* leave behind concern for the distress of this world. The focus is on what happens to us when we die. In this view of salvation, we can rest assured that evil and salvation both are outside of us. So while we recognize that they exist, they are a part of a larger plan. Not of our making.

Rev. Parker offers us a look at Progressive religion's alternative theology. She emphasizes "that **human** beings need to be saved from the consequences of **human** sin – not from **God's** punishing wrath." She calls evil "that which exploits the lives of some to benefit the lives of others". And, she tells us "that salvation comes through the powers of life and goodness, present within and around us ..."

Parker points out that for liberal theologian Walter Rauschenbush, sin is not the betrayal of **God's** rules

but the betrayal of **one another**.

This speaks to our interconnectedness

To each other – not to a “God” out there

“Sin matters not because it disappoints, offends or alienates God,

but because it destroys life-giving relationships of love and justice in human affairs

-- leaving tragedy and broken hearts in its wake.”

In sum, the liberal theological perspective emphasises

that both sin and salvation,

evil and the redemption of evil,

are in our hands.

“Am I saved?”

Saved from what?

Are the threats we face existential pain?

That’s Rev. Ricky Hoyt’s view, in his book “Good Thinking”.

He sees the distress as what we see in our lives and in the world that is less than ideal.

Hunger, poverty, despair, and the like,

The movement which salvation portrays, then, is towards the ideal life and the world we want to see.

The world where hunger, poverty and despair are eliminated.

Rev. Hoyt says:

“Heaven is the word in traditional religious vocabulary that describes the existence where our ideals are accomplished, the world we will be living in when all our values are fulfilled.”

But, really, are we going to live to see all our values fulfilled?

And, if the world is still less than ideal when we die,

have we then failed to achieve salvation or experience heaven on earth?

While liberal religion successfully moved heaven from out there to this world,

salvation in an earthly paradise of peace, love and justice is still for another life.

That is, it’s for the lives of the people who follow after us,

who may actually see these ideals fulfilled.

For example, Martin Luther King did not live to see his work come to fruition.

On the other hand, Gandhi saw many of his goals succeed, yet strife still existed.

In both cases, however, they laid the groundwork for others to build on their work.

But, to only lay groundwork for others to achieve an ideal world is not very satisfying.

Perhaps, then, we need to go back to our definitions.

If salvation is a movement from distress to safety,
a release from bondage or deliverance from a threat,
if salvation brings health and healing,

can we not experience that now,
in the act of joyful, daily living?

In fact, isn't that what we saw in the lives of King and Gandhi?

Let's remember Rev. Parker's words –

“that salvation comes through the powers of life and goodness,
present within and around us”

She sets out an additional vision of salvation.

This vision “goes beyond hope for either heavenly reward or earthly success.

It recognizes salvation as the gift of full aliveness, here and now,
the restored and enlivened capacity to be in the world with wisdom.

Such wisdom is not a personal accomplishment

but an achievement of life together

in human communities that foster astute attention to life in the present,
that celebrate beauty and goodness, and that resist evil.”

**“Salvation is not something one possesses individually:
it is something one participates in communally.”**

**“Salvation is not something one possesses individually:
it is something one participates in communally.”**

“Am I saved?”

We've looked at:

The question of salvation being limited to a Christian world view.

The redefining of salvation to include the ultimate connection with the oneness of life.

Salvation as the ability to show others how to achieve an end to suffering.

The traditional Christian view of salvation from sin.

The less traditional Christian view of salvation in order to be in God's presence.

The Social Gospel view of the achievement of heaven on earth as salvation.

And, the alternative liberal religious view of present moment awareness leading to wise choices in healing engagement with the world.

“Am I saved?”

For me, I need to be centered in the present moment to see opportunities for salvation.

I am pulled towards possibilities for healing.

I believe that every time we act to heal a part of our world and deliver *one moment* from the suffering caused by exploitation, we experience salvation.

I believe it's a path we walk.

Not a destination.

And, as Rev. Parker suggests, it's a path we walk together.

As a community.

So, the better question for me would be “Am I saving?”

“Are we saving?”

It's an active, present tense question.

Rev. Hoyt's words:

“Heaven comes in the act of choosing the wise choices that move us toward our ideals, not only in the realization of those ideals.

Heaven comes in telling the truth instead of the lie.

Heaven comes in acting compassionately rather than selfishly.

Heaven comes the moment we choose to forgive, heal or empower.

Heaven is in the practice of love, the movement from fear to peace, the work for justice.”

May we all be saving and

May we all experience salvation today.

References:

God Is Not One

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Good Thinking

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