

# “Salvation by Character”

Rev. Shawn Newton  
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
25 January 2015

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

## **Reading** - “All this talk of saving souls” – Linda Underwood

All this talk of saving souls.  
Souls weren't made to save,  
like Sunday clothes that  
give out at the seams.

They're made for wear; they  
come with lifetime guarantees.  
Don't save your soul.  
Pour it out like rain on  
cracked, parched earth.

Give your soul away, or  
pass it like a candle flame.  
Sing it out, or  
laugh it up the wind.

Souls were made for hearing  
breaking hearts, for puzzling dreams,  
remembering August flowers,  
forgetting hurts.

These men who talk of saving souls!  
They have the look of bullies  
who blow out candles before  
you sing happy birthday,  
and want the world to be  
in alphabetical order.

I will spend my soul,  
playing it out like sticky string

into the world,  
so I can catch every  
last thing I touch.

### **Sermon: “Salvation by Character”**

“Have you been saved?”

It was one of the most frequently heard phrases of my childhood,  
a very close contender with:

“Have you finished your homework?”

“Did you do your chores?”

And, “Will you please stop pestering your little brother?”

Salvation—and particularly a deep personal certitude of one’s own—  
was a central concern of the family and the faith in which I was raised.

A deeply felt concern for others’ spiritual well-being  
in the afterlife was so strong, that it was a question  
that could be asked of anyone,  
from a stranger on the street to the guy bagging your groceries,  
or the waitress dropping off your pancakes.

“Have you been saved?”

It was a profoundly personal yet deeply pressing question  
that those around me growing up felt must be asked of everyone.

To not ask, to hew to convention and the dictates of common etiquette, was to  
put someone else’s soul at risk.

What was wrong with being overly forward, the thinking went,  
if you were truly concerned for how someone would spend eternity?

And, so the question was often asked: “Have you been saved?”

Of course, the next and obvious question that both the curious and the cynical  
might ask in response is, “Saved from what?”

Far from a rebuttal, though, this is always a very welcome response to anyone seeking to evangelize their neighbours.

“Why, I’m so very glad you asked...!”

Of course, anyone bold enough to enquire about the status of someone else’s salvation is typically well-prepared with a ready-to-roll answer.

In evangelical parlance, that answer involves walking a person down what’s called “the Roman Road”—the set of five passages from Paul’s *Letter to the Romans* that spell out what one must do to be saved in that particular brand of Christianity.

Even if you’ve never been down that road before, it’s likely you’re more familiar with these texts than you may realize.

“For all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God.”

“...the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life...”

God loved us “while we were still sinners, [and] Christ died for us.”

If you confess this with your mouth and believe it with your heart, you will be saved.

And, justified by Christ, we can have peace with God.

Now, most Unitarians have a pretty strong allergy to the word salvation.

In fact, I’m guessing that a few of you are already breaking out in hives “with all this talk of saving souls”...!

But, let’s all take a deep breath.

And consider the benefits of a more nuanced take on salvation.

This is, after all, what our spiritual ancestors did in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

They spent a lot of time discussing what salvation meant.

It’s important to understand, right up front, that they didn’t care

for the narrow call to confess one's broken, sinful state and then somehow be ransomed by Jesus' brutal, bloody death any more than most modern-day Unitarians.

Instead, they came to see the working out of one's salvation, not as something dependent on God's mercy or Jesus' atoning sacrifice, but, rather, as a process through which people worked diligently to cultivate their own character.

Salvation by Character was a striving in the self to become a more moral being—something achieved through deeds instead of creeds.

It meant regarding humans not as inherently sinful creatures, but as beings capable of growth and able to take responsibility for their own lives on this planet.

As Dr. Tim Jensen puts it, they believed that:

...the human soul was something organic, like a flowering plant, which if properly cultivated (or "cultured") would blossom into something at once both beautiful and useful.

The "fruit" of this process of cultivation was Character: a distinctive and essential pattern of personal attributes which embodied moral strength, self-discipline, and the various other exemplary characteristics of a principled and virtuous life.

By educating the moral sentiment, through (for example) exposure to uplifting works of literature, and by exercising their moral fiber through acts of charity and the performance of other good works, our liberal religious forebears attempted to transform their lives into living testaments of their religious values<sup>1</sup>.

Now it should be said that,

---

<sup>1</sup> Rev. Dr. Tim W. Jensen, "Salvation by Bibliography," preached at the First Religious Society in Carlisle, Massachusetts, 4 December 2005.

some found all of the goody-two-shoes Unitarians  
striving to grow “in likeness to God” to be a bit much.

There’s some truth, after all, to that old joke  
about Universalists believing God too good to damn them,  
and Unitarians believing themselves too good to be damned.

Just as today, Unitarians could sometimes be insufferable,  
prone to smug self-righteousness, and convinced  
there was virtue in being holier-than-thou, or anyone else, for that matter.

Yet, that high estimation of our human potential  
was, and remains, a steady feature of our faith.

In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century,  
the Rev. James Freeman Clark  
summed up the guiding sentiments of the Unitarianism of his time  
with an anthem memorized by generations of Unitarians  
and, very often, emblazoned on the walls of our historic churches.

It wasn’t a creed, per se, since we’re adamant about not having them,  
but an affirmation of core Unitarian beliefs,  
captured in seven short lines.

We believe in the fatherhood of God,  
The brotherhood of Man,  
The leadership of Jesus,  
Salvation by character,  
And the progress of mankind.  
Onward and upward –  
Forever and ever!

Though it is burdened by the sexist language of the time,  
it offers a helpful window into the worldview of our forebears.

You’ll notice that there’s no reference to the holy trinity to be found there.  
God alone is cast as divine.

It affirms that we are siblings with all of humanity,  
and describes Jesus as a guide, if you will,  
but certainly not a messiah sent to save us.

Salvation, it goes on to say, comes through the building of character, and is seemingly boundless in its ability to improve humankind, “onward and upward—forever and ever!”

The unfettered optimism held by Unitarians of the late-19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries would, of course, eventually collide head-on with the horrible devastation of two world wars.

As you might imagine, “onward and upward forever” rang a bit hollow in the wake of the Holocaust.

In 1941, in the midst of the Second World War, Unitarian ethicist James Luther Adams delivered a famous lecture in which he took up the challenge put to religious liberalism by the tumult of the times.

His address was pointedly called, “The Changing Reputation of Human Nature.”

In his address to an audience of ministers, he called on his clergy colleagues to take seriously the critique that liberal religion hadn’t adequately grappled with the harsher realities of human nature.

To put a finer point on it, he called for a reevaluation of the concept of sin, and for a deliberate examination of the question of evil in our world.

The implication was that our 19<sup>th</sup> century forebears, themselves descended from the Puritans of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, had, perhaps, gone too far, tossing the proverbial baby out with the bathwater.

It’s understandable that they would have done so.

Their overly-optimistic view of the world stemmed from a strong rejection of the worldview they had inherited from earlier generations—generations that argued humans were born in sin, in total depravity, and that there was nothing but God’s grace, to spare us from the threat of eternal torment.

The Unitarians of the 19<sup>th</sup> century pushed back against these doctrines, asserting that human beings actually came into this world unblemished by sin.

They believed people could develop their given potential to lead a morally upstanding life, by resisting the negative, corrupting influences all around.

Against the generations who held that humans were powerless to improve their lot, but by God's grace, these Unitarians deeply believed in people's power to improve themselves and the world around them.

Now, you may well be wondering what this has to do with us.

You may be asking why we'd bother to talk about salvation and sin.

Aren't we past all that now?

How I wish it were so.

How I wish we lived in a world where the notion of sin was truly outdated and any talk of salvation completely irrelevant.

Yet, we do not live in that world.

Perhaps you heard the news this week that if the trend continues—and we have every reason to believe that it will—the wealth of the world's richest 1% will, next year, equal the combined wealth of the other 99% of the human population.

It's hard for me to see such staggering inequality as anything but sin.

Perhaps you heard the news this week that 2014 was the warmest year on record.

A fact that points to the growing devastation of life on our planet, beginning with the poorest people and most vulnerable species on earth.

As the world's governments lumber toward even meager progress

in contending with climate change, what word other than sin gets to the heart of this moral failing?

Perhaps you heard the news this week that the devastating reality of racism in this country is so much worse than most of us imagined.

While Canada ranked second in the world in the Social Progress Index released last week, articles published this week in one of the country's major papers revealed that, by almost every measure, the hardships facing Canada's most disadvantaged population are worse than those facing African-Americans in the U.S.<sup>2</sup>

Comparing Aboriginal-Canadians and African-Americans, our population outranks the U.S. when it comes to rates of unemployment, poverty, and incarceration.

Aboriginal Canadians also face higher rates of infant mortality, high-school dropout, and homicide.

The one key measure that's lower for our Aboriginal neighbours is life-expectancy.

That we're "winning" on these counts is nothing to celebrate.

As one writer put it, "It's a national disgrace."  
It could also be called sinful.

Given that I'm talking so much about sin and salvation, it's worth, while I'm on a theological roll, bringing up the word "repent."

It, too, is a wounded word, burdened by centuries of theological abuse. Its true meaning, though, is simply, "to turn around."

It's not hard to argue that we could use more of that, right about now...

---

<sup>2</sup> Scott Gilmore, "For a country so self-satisfied with its image of progressive tolerance, how is this not a national crisis?", *MacLean's*, 22 January 2015.

We are long overdue for a dramatic turn on so many levels.

Plainly put, our shared salvation—the healing of the world—demands it. If we are to be saved, our world must turn itself around.

Earlier, I shared a bit about two different eras in our tradition's history.

The Puritans of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries had a very low estimation of humanity, seeing people as flawed and sinful beings wholly dependent on God's grace for their salvation.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarians, in response, had a very high estimation of humanity, seeing people as beings full of promise, who were largely dependent on themselves for achieving their own salvation.

For each, their view of human character shaped their understanding of human agency.

Now, I hope you'll hear me out when I say that what I think we need, today, is a bit of both systems.

We need a clear-eyed understanding of the world as it is—people willing and able to see the harsh realities of our world—and the sometimes appalling human behaviour that works against the highest values of humanity.

And, coupled with that, we need a deeply-felt sense of our capacity, of our moral agency, to effect meaningful change in the world.

Our times are crying out for a blend of both realism and optimism.

For people who can hold the heartache of the world, yet also be led by an unrelenting sense of hope in our human potential to serve life through acts of love and justice.

In a word, the world is calling out for people of character.

People able to resist the seductions of cynicism and despair.  
People dedicated to building a better world  
by growing their own soul.

To reach salvation—to work for the healing of ourselves and our world—  
is not to seek perfection.

It is, instead, to commit to the road that, in the end,  
will make all the difference—the road that strengthens our character.

\*

“Have you been saved?”

I move through life trying to be prepared  
for the moment that question will come.

“Not yet,” is my answer.

“But I’m working on it,” I’ll say. “We all are.  
Not for ourselves alone, but for the whole wide world.”

May it be so, “onward and upward, forever and ever!”

Amen.