

SALVATION: SAVED FOR WHAT?

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

I offer this true story, this true experience as a frame, a lens for my sermon this morning. It's not an easy story to hear, but it is an important one.

Not long ago, I was walking in one of our neighborhood parks as I often do. It was early in the morning. Near the small wooden bridge, I saw a woman- a woman I had passed a couple of times before on similar walks. I could tell she was a troubled person...when I had passed her on the path previously, she clutched a plastic bag of possessions to her and talked to herself in low tones. She avoided making eye contact. I tried to pass by without disturbing her.

This time her plastic bag was on the ground near her feet. And when she saw me coming, she pulled out a white t-shirt, arranged it just so, and threw it over her shoulders and back. She did this intentionally so that I could read the words printed on the t-shirt.

It was her way of making conversation. It was her way of encountering a stranger safely. Perhaps it was a way of confronting me. It was also a plea, a voice crying in the wilderness.

The words on the shirt were a question. So as I walked toward her, I was confronted with her most important, most anxiously-held question. The writing on the shirt read...

"Why Am I alive?"

It was clear to me that she did not want me to stop and help her, though I wondered if I should do something. But she had clearly marked out her space. And so I passed on by...

But her presence, her troubled energy, my awareness of her, has stayed with me...and of course, her question, her deep, brilliant, anguished question has stayed with me.

"Why am I alive?"

I offer her question to you this morning. Perhaps, if we struggle with her question, it will in some way relieve a bit of her burden. If we struggle with it, not to help her, not to arrive at the perfect answer, not to settle it and move on...but if we struggle with it in our own hearts...I think we will have given the only response possible.

We will have heard her. "Why am I alive?"

So, I hope you will join me in struggling to hear her question as we explore the meaning of salvation.

Spiritual directors, rabbis, imams and ministers will tell you that all religion is about relationship. We cannot answer the question of who we are, who we are meant to be, why we are alive...we cannot answer these essential questions in isolation.

They are questions of relationship. Who am I in relation to my family, in relation to my neighbors, in relation to a stranger I meet on the park path?

Who am I meant to be in relation to my UU faith, in relation to those who are homeless or jobless, who am I meant to be in relation to a grandmother in Afghanistan or a Polish citizen mourning the death of their president?

Why am I alive and my brother is not? Questions of relationship.

When we watch a loved one die, or suffer, we ask the most human of questions, "why not me?" Why am I spared? Why must my brother die, while I go on living?

The concern of most liberal religionists, whether Jewish, Protestant, or Unitarian Universalist, is to reveal what it is we are meant to do with our lives. As survivors, at least for now, what are we alive for? What have we been saved for?

We liberal religionists are not so concerned with what we have been saved from...or what may happen in our next life.

The *Dictionary of World Religions* tells us that salvation may be understood as the state of being safe from destructive forces—natural or supernatural. Salvation can mean acts of deliverance from destruction, pain, loss, death, sin, curse, punishment or suffering. We here this morning have been spared.

The Latin, *salus*, and the French, *salut*—"whole," "healthy" -- imply the notion of salvation as healing, a metaphor found in many religious traditions. We here this morning move toward healing and wholeness.

Salvation as a category of religion means to move from woe to joy. There are three elements involved: the human predicament (our human limitations, wounds, longings), a vision -- what fulfillment or wholeness might look like, and a path -- how do we move from A to B...from limitation to wholeness?

When we consider what salvation or healing might mean to us we need first to consider our predicament, our woe. Then we need to craft a vision of wholeness -- what might it look like to be in joy? And then we need to find a practice, a way that takes us toward joy.

What is your practice, your way toward joy?

The means might be through moral living, ritual, prayer, meditation, ascetic practice, trust in a savior, psychotherapy or twelve steps. Any of these can be paths of salvation or saving grace.

It might be music, art, dance, hiking or poetry. But to heal, it must have the intention, the rhythm, the devotion of a true practice....it must be a way of living.

A way of living that moves from woe to joy. That acknowledges suffering, and the possibility of release from suffering.

I thought of Bob Dylan's song, *I Shall Be Released*.

I listened to it as I worked on this sermon. It speaks to me of the woe of the human condition, "*they say every man needs protection...they say every man must fall.*" And the joy, "*I see my light come shining from the west down to the east.*" For it offers the hope, "*any day now, any day now, I shall be released.*"

The *Dictionary of World Religions* tells us that more orthodox religions emphasize human impotence and characterize the path toward salvation through grace and the help of God or Allah or Amida.

Liberal religions emphasize human will and reason and characterize the path toward healing through good works or personal decision. In liberal religion, intention counts for a lot.

Liberal religions stress a limited kind of salvation, with images of healing, acceptance and hope. But, a liberal salvation is not a once-and-for-all kind...it is more of an imperfect, more human process, with the possibility of a recurring need for salvation.

Orthodox religions stress absolute or eternal salvation with images of Nirvana, Paradise or the Kingdom of God.

A liberal kind of salvation can be understood as transformation, or fulfillment of self. A way of answering the question, "Why am I alive?"

This is not an easy path...this crafting of an intention to seek healing and wholeness, this intention to move toward joy.

Perhaps, like me, you get stuck in the woe...and deny or feel intimidated somehow by the joy. Salvation, transformation is not easy, perhaps not even possible to do alone. And if we don't turn to a savior or a guru or a prophet to save us, then what?

How can we know why we are alive? What have we been saved for?

And that brings us back, as sermons so often do, to religious community...to the reason why we gather in religious community Sunday after Sunday.

I love the reading I found for this morning. Jane Rzepka's story of the marriage license dilemma – the challenge of convincing the city hall clerk that she was a minister named Jane, convincing herself that she was herself – and how we need to do that for each other, how it is most often through the affirmation of others that we find out who we are...Why we are alive.

We can help each other know who we are.

We can help each other on our path to joy.

We can also help one another when we make mistakes. When we fail to love well. When we struggle with the difficult parts of our nature...our so very human nature.

Salvation is not possible without forgiveness. The priest in me, would have liked to listen to the story -- to the confession -- of the woman in the park and to offer a blessing of forgiveness.

We cannot do the work, live the life we are meant to live without forgiveness.

This week I hurt someone unintentionally. I hurt someone I care about, someone who relies on me. Perhaps there are others here this morning who also come in need of forgiveness.

This too is part of the grace of religious community. Not only to affirm our humanity, our best selves...but also to offer to one another the bread of forgiveness.

We are alive to bless one another. To help each other move toward joy. And to offer forgiveness one to another.

That may be at least a partial reason why we are alive...alive here together, alive here together in religious community.

May It Be So/Amen