

# **WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**

## **Are You Saved?**

Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer

Sunday, January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2016

**White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church**

*"Grow Your Soul & Serve the World"*

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## READINGS

*The first reading is from Nancy Shaffer*

Because we spill not only milk  
Knocking it over with an elbow  
When we reach to wipe a small face  
But also spill seed on soil we thought was fertile but isn't,  
And also spill whole lives, and only later see in fading light  
How much is gone and we hadn't intended it

Because we tear not only cloth  
Thinking to find a true edge and instead making only a hole  
But also tear friendships when we grow  
And whole mountainsides because we are so many  
And we want to live right where black oaks lived,  
Once very quietly and still

Because we forget not only what we are doing in the kitchen  
And have to go back to the room we were in before,  
Remember why it was we left  
But also forget entire lexicons of joy  
And how we lost ourselves for hours  
Yet all that time were clearly found and held  
And also forget the hungry not at our table

Because we weep not only at jade plants caught in freeze  
And precious papers left in rain  
But also at legs that no longer walk  
Or never did, although from the outside they look like most others  
And also weep at words said once as though  
They might be rearranged but which  
Once loose, refuse to return and we are helpless

Because we are imperfect and love so  
Deeply we will never have enough days,  
We need the gift of starting over, beginning  
Again: just this constant good, this  
Saving hope.

*The second reading is from Rev. Olympia Brown, Universalist minister – the first woman ordained by a denominational body in 1863. This is an excerpt from her sermon, “The Opening Doors.”*

*“Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be lifted up, you everlasting doors.”*

Today, we are not dependent upon any text or the letter of any book. It is the spirit that giveth life and the spirit speaks to our souls with every breath that blows. Burbank and Edison and Madame Curie have lifted up the everlasting doors and revealed [God’s] countenance, radiant with love.

Thus earth and air are filled with proofs of Divine love, goodness and power. The mountains and the hills have spoken and the rocks and the souls have added their testimony. The Opening Doors lead to no dark dungeon, open upon no burning lake, give no evidence of everlasting punishment. But all gladden us with assurances of Divine Goodness and indicate the final triumph of the good!

Not only by the researches of science are we shown the glories of creation, but the scenes of beauty which daily greet our eyes, the song of birds, fragrance of flowers, the moonlight shining on the waves all tell the same story of divine love.

*Roll on, sweet harmonies of love  
through all earth’s blooming valleys, roll;  
above the world, the stars above,  
soars upward my enraptured soul.*

And this is the message which I bring you today. Stand by this great faith which the world needs and which you are called to proclaim.

We shall speak the language of Universal love, and it will be heard and the message will be carried far and wide. Have before you ever the vision of final victory, and assurance of the salvation of all souls.

Universalism shall at last win the world.

## SERMON

When I was in junior high,  
I began spending more and more time with some new friends  
who went to the “cool” church in town.

I didn’t know much about it –  
but I knew they all seemed to have a lot of fun,  
and really liked their church  
and all their friends went their –  
and they had a band and they had parties  
and they had pizza.

I started just hanging out with the youth group –  
it sounded pretty Christian, to my Lutheran ears –  
so that was all I needed to feel comfortable – at first.

The first time I felt a little uncomfortable was at an evening event that  
had a worship service – with very emotive song leaders and people  
raising their hands in the air. I thought, *I think we only raise our hands in  
the air in the Lutheran Church if the pastor asks a question or the  
microphone isn’t working and we can’t hear.*

And then, a little later, it was a fall evening,  
and they hosted a big concert –  
buzzing speakers and stage lights  
and images on the screen with lyrics  
and people in prayer -  
and I, a nerdy Lutheran church kid,  
just needed to step outside for a few minutes  
because it was a bit too loud and expressive in there for me –  
anything that loud and not playing *A Mighty Fortress is our God*  
wasn’t quite my thing -  
and from the other side of the parking lot,  
a cool looking kid with dyed hair and a chain wallet came over  
and asked me a question –  
a question that seemed comfortable to him –  
and so unconformable to me: are you saved?

I searched my mind and soul quickly for a diplomatic answer,  
because I had no clue how to be convincing.

“Uh...yeah, sure.”

He saw right through me.  
“How do you know?”

And I turned the color of an August tomato  
or the words of Christ printed in my bible  
and fumbled through my answer:

“Well, I mean, you know...  
I’m Lutheran –  
and (my go-to answer for anything related to faith)  
and Oh! My Grandpa is a pastor!  
And –  
you know –  
it was probably either when I was baptized  
*(and I quickly remembered they didn’t do infant baptism)*  
or...um...when...  
*(and then I knew the full-proof answer for all things)*  
When Jesus died on the cross – that was it. It was then!”

I felt like a flustered contestant on salvation jeopardy.

He gave me a look like, “lucky answer.”

But he simply said, “I just felt God was nudging me to come to talk to  
you – I’m glad you’re saved.”

And then we talked about the concert...  
and I continued my internal existential questioning of faith and  
salvation and the life here and hereafter.

I can look on that time now as pretty funny –  
and at the time, it caused a lot of anxiety –  
good, but hard, questions to wrestle with.

Why is this church so different than mine?  
Do my friends think I'm going to hell?  
Am I saved?

Langston Hughes wrote a short story, with a more serious tone, entitled  
*Salvation*, he writes:

*I was saved from sin when I was going on thirteen.  
But not really saved. It happened like this.*

*There was a big revival at my Auntie Reed's church.  
Every night for weeks there had been much preaching, singing, praying,  
and shouting, and some very hardened sinners had been brought to Christ.*

*Then just before the revival ended, they held a special meeting for  
children, "to bring the young lambs to the fold." That night I was escorted  
to the front row and placed on the mourners' bench with all the other  
young sinners, who had not yet been brought to Jesus.*

*My aunt told me that when you were saved you saw a light, and something  
happened to you inside! She said you could see and hear and feel Jesus in  
your soul. I believed her. I had heard a great many old people say the same  
thing and it seemed to me they ought to know. So I sat there calmly in the  
hot, crowded church, waiting for Jesus to come to me.*

*The preacher preached a wonderful rhythmical sermon,*

*A great many old people came and knelt around us and prayed, old  
women with jet-black faces and braided hair, old men with work-gnarled  
hands. And the church sang a song about the lower lights are burning,  
some poor sinners to be saved. And the whole building rocked with prayer  
and song.*

*Still I kept waiting to see Jesus.*

*Finally all the young people had gone to the altar and were saved, but one boy and me. He was a rounder's son named Westley.*

*Westley and I were surrounded by sisters and deacons praying.*

*It was very hot in the church, and getting late now.*

*Finally Westley said to me in a whisper: "God damn! I'm tired o' sitting here. Let's get up and be saved." So he got up and was saved.*

*Then I was left all alone on the mourners' bench. The whole congregation prayed for me alone, in a mighty wail of moans and voices. And I kept waiting serenely for Jesus, waiting, waiting - but he didn't come. I wanted to see him, but nothing happened to me. Nothing! I wanted something to happen to me, but nothing happened.*

*Now it was really getting late. I began to be ashamed of myself, holding everything up so long. I began to wonder what God thought about Westley, who certainly hadn't seen Jesus either, but who was now sitting proudly on the platform, swinging his legs and grinning down at me, surrounded by deacons and old women on their knees praying. God had not struck Westley dead for taking his name in vain or for lying in the temple. So I decided that maybe to save further trouble, I'd better lie, too, and say that Jesus had come, and get up and be saved.*

*So I got up.*

*Suddenly the whole room broke into a sea of shouting, as they saw me rise. Waves of rejoicing swept the place. Women leaped in the air. My aunt threw her arms around me. The minister took me by the hand and led me to the platform.*

*That night, for the first time in my life but one for I was a big boy twelve years old - I cried. I cried, in bed alone, and couldn't stop. I buried my head under the quilts, but my aunt heard me. She woke up and told my uncle I was crying because the Holy Ghost had come into my life, and because I had seen Jesus. But I was really crying because I couldn't bear to tell her that I had lied, that I had deceived everybody in the church, that I hadn't seen Jesus, and that now I didn't believe there was a Jesus anymore, since he didn't come to help me.*

You know this story.  
Whether it's your own, or someone you know.

Religion, we know, and specific theologies, can be dangerous.  
They can damage young souls  
trying to make meaning in life and find their way.

They can cause harm to people  
questioning their self-worth,  
their sacredness,  
their beloved-ness,  
and cause major questioning on whether they stand in right relation  
to their family – to their friends – to their world – to their God.

The question of salvation  
has been, is still,  
used as a bludgeon – an accusatory question  
of who is in, who is out –  
who is worthy, who is not.

If you are good or evil.  
And there is a clear line between the two.

It isn't that the aunt in Hughes' story,  
or my friends at the cool church,  
are necessarily mindfully, purposefully, willfully  
attempting to shame, belittle,  
brand me as evil, corrupt, and fallen.

Quite often, it's the opposite – it is their hope to bring people into the  
light, lift them up – because they believe that is the highest calling in life  
– to be able to live a life of meaning, there is a certain experience to  
accompany it.



Are you saved?

As much as I rail against and disagree with the theology often accompanying that question, and truly believe that it is a misreading of biblical text and a warped and corroded theology and comes more often with hurt feelings and experiences of isolation and despair – that coercive evangelizing is in fact the opposite of Jesus’ teachings of ethics and the biblical tradition of mercy and humility – yet and still - I think we disservice ourselves to dismiss the question and allow only certain traditions to control the ancient, beautiful idea of salvation.

Of being saved.

Not too long ago, in a small group here, a member spoke about why they come to church on Sunday.

Speaking of the harshness of their job and the real challenge of facing each Monday morning, they said, “I come here to brace myself for the week ahead – this church is saving me.”

Another wrote an email this fall, in the midst of the hard political climate, and after a Sunday service wrote,

“In the car on the way home...

I said, ‘I feel like the fiery ball of rage and sadness and fear that has been pulsing inside of me for the last week has for the first time been quieted and replaced with something loving and good and hopeful.’

My partner said, ‘I feel like for a week I haven't really been able to breathe and now I can finally draw a deep, full breath again.’

The old snarky Unitarian dismissals to the question of “are you saved?” I think miss the point, and the possibility and the potential of the question.

We live in a long tradition of believing in the power of an old and yet so relevant theology – Universalism.

Which, for centuries, has railed against theologies of a vengeful God, eternal punishment and damnation and fire and hell...

As Olympia Brown wrote, in what [Annie/Helen] read for us today, *The Opening Doors lead to no dark dungeon, open upon no burning lake, give no evidence of everlasting punishment. But all gladden us with assurances of Divine Goodness and indicate the final triumph of the good! Have before you the assurance of the salvation of all souls – Universalism shall at last win the world.*

Olympia Brown, the first woman ordained by a denomination in our country, was an early and prophetic Universalist – and a clear and beautiful thinker. And she speaks still, to us.

Salvation, from its root words meaning wholeness, and healing, and well-being, like a *salve* for a wound, is much less about a personal guarantee for a life hereafter, and much more about a sense of wholeness, connection, liberation – personal and communal – for our life here, now.

So the question can be visited again, perhaps in a new key – and less of a “once and you’re done” approach – but a “constantly and continually” approach.

The intention is often deeper than the flimsy theological veneer: *are you living a life with meaning? With purpose? Not meaning or purpose placed upon you, but rising up from your spirit and being in resonant relationship with those around you and the wisdom of the ages?*

What has saved you?  
What is saving you right now?  
What people,  
what moments,  
what places,  
what music, food, poetry, sunshine?  
What is saving your life right now –  
a child's laughter, a morning walk, a good cup of coffee?

Because the fact is  
we need saving.

We need saving each and every day  
by something, someone, someplace,  
with the ability to lift us above the fray,  
or to illumine the shining and shimmering beauty  
we didn't notice before.

Saved from what?  
We need saving  
from despair and despondency  
from isolation and individualism  
from fear, hatred, judgment –  
from narratives told to us every day  
about not measuring up and not being good enough –  
and sometimes we need to be saved from our own egos  
and narratives of arrogance – personal, collective – national -  
we need to save ourselves  
and save one another  
from any message, any proclamation  
that calls into question our worth, our dignity, our identity –  
what is saving your life?

*Because we not only spill the milk,*

Nancy Shaffer writes,

*But also spill seed on soil we thought was fertile but isn't,  
And also spill whole lives, and only later see in fading light  
How much is gone and we hadn't intended it  
[Because we] forget entire lexicons of joy  
Because we are imperfect and love so deeply  
we will never have enough days,  
We need the gift of starting over, beginning  
Again: just this constant good, this  
Saving hope.*

Yes, it is true  
that we are already sacred –  
there's no needing to re-do that.

We gather in the tradition of Olympia Brown  
and so many others who were persecuted for their belief  
in an unconditionally loving and forgiving God –  
for their belief we are all children of God –  
or more broad language –  
we are all sacred – worth – we all have dignity –  
whether we believe in God or the universe  
whether we believe this life is benevolent or neutral,  
ours is a tradition that says we are all created, born, made  
in mystery and beauty and wonder and love.  
But there is a need to remind ourselves of it –  
and one another, and all that is.

And the fact is  
we are being saved  
by the earth, by the sun, by one another,  
which for some  
is the very existence of God –  
each and every day.

We are being saved  
from our own imperfect selves,  
and our inclinations toward greed or fear or hate  
by tender moments that break open our heart  
and beautiful moments that lift our spirit  
and miraculous moments  
where we remember  
we are constantly behind made new, made whole,  
being baptized in the beauty of this life  
and soaked in salvation like sunshine.

I was able to visit my Grandpa, 94 years old, over the holidays.  
And maybe because I'm a liberal preacher, almost every time I see him,  
he asks, "Did I tell you the story of my army chaplain back in the 40s?"

And as much as I have, I say, I think so – but tell me again.

"It was 1944" he began,  
and many of our comrades were home on leave.  
So me and some friends decided to go ask our Catholic Chaplain,  
'do you think us Protestant boys are going to heaven or hell?'  
The priest said, 'The way I see it, we are all in California,  
trying to get to New York –  
there must be a thousand roads you can take,  
and we'll all end up there, together.'  
Well, that's been my philosophy, too."

Right now,  
someone is at the door, waiting  
searching for a word of blessing on their identity  
for a word of healing on their heartache  
for a word of hope in this shattered world.

Because they are struggling to see the light  
through the fog of mental illness  
Because their heart is shattered by the grief  
of losing a child, a parent, a friend  
Because they have been rejected by their family,  
religion, community for who they are  
Because they don't know how to find hope in a broken and harsh world

Right now, someone is searching  
for an open door  
a light kept on  
and a gracious people ready to receive their story,  
their heartache, their gifts, their possibility,  
to be known and be named as beloved. Sacred. Worthy - as they are.

That is a saving faith.  
People are still searching for a blessing on their lives,  
a proclamation of their soul as sacred – imperfect and beautiful, all.  
That is the possibility of Universalism – still needed.  
As much as in 1863.

And may it be up to us,  
as part of a larger whole,  
that does what Universalist Clarence Skinner called  
the point of this whole faith:  
to turn this old earth into the Kingdom of God.

Let us not focus on what we hate about the question  
or what we rail against theologically –  
although there is a time to criticize that, too –  
but let us celebrate the tradition that is our inheritance –  
radical hospitality and radical inclusion and love  
for all people – all creation.

Let us name for ourselves what is saving our life.

Salvation, wholeness, healing, well-being –  
that is a vision for this world, this life –  
Universalism, Universal Salvation  
is both the healing of one's own heart  
and, as the justice seekers say, our collective liberation -  
the world is still hungry  
for the fearless, loving, grateful heart of Universalism  
blessing their broken lives and naming them  
and all of us  
as sacred  
already saved *and*  
still in need of saving.

Each day, in the common ordinary miracles of this world –  
our souls are being saved  
we are saving one another  
and we are saved by a larger love holding us all  
and in every breath of life and spirit and love,  
we are graced with glimpses of heaven  
right here – right now.

You might just find your soul at the altar of life –  
with your story and your song and your longing,  
open to the miraculous in common moments –

you might just get baptized by the beauty of this world –  
and from something you didn't know was there,  
or by something you didn't expect,

you might be cloaked in mystery and beauty and love  
you might just move out into this world  
with heart open, soul open  
and be stopped in your tracks  
by the morning sun and birdsong  
by crayons on paper and belly laughs  
by a violin, a piano  
by a smile, a voice,

you might just get up  
and be saved.