

Universalism: Our Common Destiny

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My unwillingness to believe in the salvation of all of God's children was my last great sin... When I repented of my insistence that God save some and damn others, I was freed to live my life graciously...

Salvation is not the hope of a few; it is the destiny of all.

—Philip Gulley and James Mulholland, *If Grace is True*

Ancient Witness: Jeremiah 31: 8, 12-13

Today I want to talk about something called, “universalism.” The poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning once wrote, “Universalism is the most beautiful word in the English language.”

Several years ago I read a book entitled, *If Grace Is True*, in which the authors, Philip Gulley and James Mulholland, say this:

Now I have a new formula. It too is simple and clear. It is the most compelling truth I've ever known. It is changing my life. It is changing how I talk about God. It is changing how I think about myself. It is changing how I treat other people. It brings me untold joy, peace, and hope. This is the best news I've ever heard, ever believed, and ever shared.

I believe God will save every person. (p.7-8)

Now, many of the early church leaders also believed that since Christ died for all, all would be saved—Origin, Jerome, Gregory of Nyssa. And it wasn't until over 200 years after his death, in fact, that Origin was branded a heretic. So Universalism wasn't actually banished from the church until the sixth century. Finally, it blossomed again in America in the 18th century with some leaders such as John Murray and Hosea Ballou.

There is a natural resistance to Universalism; it is not accepted by most. Listen again to Gulley and Mulholland:

Whenever I share my belief in the ultimate salvation of every person, I am invariably asked, “You mean every person? You mean Christians and non-Christians? You mean people who don't even believe in God? You mean people who've done horrible and evil things?”

The answer is yes. I mean the whole world, every person who has been, is and shall be. I mean Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, New Agers, pagans, and Christians. I mean atheists, agnostics, the apathetic, and the hostile. I mean rapists, child molesters and terrorists. (p. 161)

A couple years ago, Gulley wrote an article where he recounted his first call to serve as the pastor of a Quaker meeting. After his first sermon that was about God's commitment to the well-being of all people, the organist was upset that he didn't believe in hell. He wrote:

So that week she phoned the elders of the meeting to tell them she was leaving if I didn't start believing in hell...

I went to the meeting the next week, and they met me there on the front steps and took me down to the basement and said, "Would you agree to believe in hell so we can keep you and keep the organist?" I said, "No. That lacks integrity. I don't think I should do that." So I declined to believe in hell, and I was fired.

The next week he interviewed at another Quaker meeting, where he was, again, very open about God's inclusive love of all. He could hear them deliberating through a heating duct, and it wasn't going well. Then an elder pointed out that because he was young and inexperienced, they wouldn't have to pay him much. So he was hired. Gulley wrote, "I was at that meeting four years, and by the time I left I believed in hell."

Look, in the Christian tradition, we all know how the Bible has been used to justify a lot of things, how it has been used to divide and discriminate. But so much of the Bible also goes against this tribalism and nationalism, and affirms a universalism.

I know this is such a loaded word, but what do we mean by "saved?" It can seem so antiquated. Can we even talk about it? There are two ways to talk about salvation:

1. as a present reality
2. as a future goal

Salvation as a present reality means that God loves us and "saves" us continually—each moment—all the time—whether we know it or not. My statement, a little different from Gulley and Mulholland, is "I believe God *is saving* every person and thing." Constantly. It is independent of our experience. Salvation in this sense refers to a "hidden wholeness" that is present right now. There's nothing we need to do to bring it about.

The second way to talk of salvation is as *an experience*, when we become *aware* of the reality of this hidden wholeness. It is to experience it and live in it. In this sense, salvation refers to the joy and peace that this awareness brings. Perhaps this is what Paul meant by "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling." One is to live into one's salvation that is *already there*; one is to grow in one's awareness of it.

In the Christian scriptures, the Greek word, *sozo*, means "to be saved," "to be made whole" or "to be healed." And it was reported several times in the gospel accounts that Jesus would say, "Your faith has *made you whole*." Or "your faith has *healed* you." Or "your faith has *saved* you."

So in this sense, salvation is something that occurs over time, as our awareness unfolds. And so if faith is this continual journey of discovery that never stops, it is this continual journey that makes us whole! It is the struggle that heals and saves us! And so to follow Jesus is to live in this deepening awareness of our own salvation, of God's loving and saving presence, and to be healed and made whole by this awareness.

And so, it seems to me, that the task of the church is not so much to save souls, since we are all continually *being saved* by God. But it is to grow in our *awareness* of this truth. The church is not a place to save souls but *to grow them*.

Salvation as a goal, is something to be realized. Individually, this looks like enlightenment and inner peace. Socially, this looks like justice and equality.

But in both of these senses—a present reality and the realization of this reality—the salvation of the individual cannot be separated from the salvation of all. To become “whole” means to be one or be aware of our oneness with all things. Our reading in Jeremiah is one example of the ancient Hebrew understanding of salvation that was almost exclusively social and communal. That is, it was the whole community that was liberated and experienced salvation. It was the *entire Hebrew people* that were saved and delivered. And it didn’t stop there, because the salvation of the Hebrew people led to the salvation of *all people*, to a time when *all nations* would come to God’s holy mountain.

I found a great poem by Lisel Mueller that touches on this. It is called, “Monet Refuses the Operation.” (I found it in Anne Lamott’s book, *Plan B.*) Here’s some of it:

*Doctor, you say there are no halos
around the streetlights in Paris
and what I see is an aberration
caused by old age, an affliction.
I tell you it has taken me all my life
to arrive at the vision of gas lamps as angels,
to soften the blur and finally banish
the edges you regret I don’t see,
to learn that the line I called the horizon
does not exist and sky and water,
so long apart, are the same state of being...*

*I will not return to a universe
of objects that don’t know each other,
as if islands were not the lost children
of one great continent. The world
is flux, and light becomes what it touches,
becomes water, lilies on water,
above and below water,
becomes lilac and mauve and yellow
and white...*

*Doctor, if only you could see
how heaven pulls earth into its arms
and how infinitely the heart expands
to claim this world, blue vapor without end.*

All things are one; there are no boundaries. To see this is to experience salvation. It is to realize that there is but one common destiny, and we each are a part of that destiny. Paul wrote that all things are

unified in God, and that there is “a plan for the fullness of time to gather us and unite all things in Christ.” *All things* are destined to be gathered up into God, things in heaven and things on earth. The church, a lesser communion, is a sign of the great, universal communion of all things. As a gathered community, we can be a sign to a scattered world.

I will end this with a story by Walter Wangerin. He was about 10 years old, and he was visiting his father, who was the President of a local college. His father’s nickname for him was “Ah-vee.”

I tapped the door down low, little roach-kicks for a knock.

“Come in.”

Ah, me! There was life in there.

I turned the knob and nudged the door a little open. And a little farther open. And peeped in.

“Wally! What do you want?”

My father sat behind his desk, facing this door. A huge oak desk, it seemed to me. Dark wood. In the shape of a coffin.

My father’s face was the focal center of the entire room. His black-rimmed glasses were circles of scrutiny, judging me, steady and unwinking, impartial and dire at once. He had brown eyes. He was twisting his left eyebrow between his thumb and forefinger, grooming the wing; for the raven of judgment was about to leap and fly before it stooped.

“Well?” he said, and I inched forward toward the desk.

“I,” I said, laying a finger on the edge of oak wood, unable to look at him.

“You?”

“I... well—you know those six-thousand-watt light bulbs at the rink?”

“Yes?”

“Well, that what I want to tell you.” I waited, as if wanting were the telling.

“Yes?”

“Well. Yes. I broke one.”

“Ah,” said my father. “Did you climb a pole and bump it accidentally?”

“No.”

“Ah. What then? What did you do?”

“I,” I said, “threw a stone...”

Slowly, my father arose behind his desk. I didn’t look at him. Just as slowly, he rounded the far side and came toward me—black suit, black hair, black spectacles. Judgment cometh. The multitudes are gone. There are two of us after all. Only two.

I was prepared for the spanking. The order of things would be righted in my punishment. I lowered my head.

But I was altogether unprepared for what my father did... I think I would not have cried if my father had spanked me. But he knelt down at my side, and he took me in his arms, and he hugged me, and then I began to cry, and I couldn’t stop crying.

Love killed me. I hadn’t expected love. I hadn’t expected the most undeserved thing, to be forgiven. That fire of my father’s love—it melted me altogether, reduced me to a little mess, to a child again, for sure.

Oh, how pitifully I loved my father then! How God-like his love for me.

And he whispered, “Ah-vee, Ah-vee,” and I didn’t dispute his name for me; for I was, again, “Ah-vee.”

Friends, it seems to me that we are all being held in God's love this very moment. This is our present reality. We are, right now, part of the wholeness of God, the salvation of the world. It is not the hope of a few but the destiny of all.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)