

Saints and Sinners
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Contentment is wealth.

That line, in the 33rd chapter of the Tao Te Ching,
is often rendered that way.

Sometimes it is "he who knows he has enough is rich."
And it brings to mind, of course, those words by William
Henry Channing -

I say, of course, but maybe that's only us ministers who
think this way.

I first preached this sermon at the ordination of David
Kraemer in Rochester, Minnesota.

David was our intern minister and many of you know him
well -- he used to be a newspaper editor and he loves to
kayak — remember that, because it will matter later.

But I started with this observation to welcome David to
the weird club of ministry:

he too, can now say, "of course, that makes me think of
a relatively unknown transcendentalist from the 19th
century!"

William Henry Channing, you know it:

*To live content with small means; to seek elegance rather
than luxury, and refinement rather than fashion; to be
worthy, not respectable, and wealthy, not rich; . . . to let
the spiritual, unbidden and unconscious, grow up through
the common -- this is my symphony.*

This is my symphony.

Beautiful, right?

More than 200 years ago, William Henry Channing's
uncle, William Ellery Channing,
the leader and prime founder of the Unitarian movement
in this country,

expressed this symphony, this longing for a life of quality and contentment, as "salvation by character."

Salvation by character.

We were saved, said Channing,
by how we lived our lives.

Not through the protestant salvation by faith - by believing certain things about Jesus and God and the rest.

Not through the Catholic salvation by works - by doing the rituals of confession and communion and so on.

But instead, through salvation by character.

Through our actions, our lives, our spiritual symphony.

That was 200 years ago.

These days, we who are Unitarian Universalists - most, but not all of us here today -

I think we now believe in something we might call, well, salvation by love.

Salvation by love.

We think that if we let love be our guide,
if we stand on the side of love,
if we are filled with the spirit of love,
if we keep on until the place where there is more love,
then we will find salvation.

We will make the world better, we will have lives we are proud of.

We will be saved.

Saved from what, exactly, we're not sure - or at least, not in agreement.

That's a sticky part.

But we will be saved by love.

This is our prime value now - to be a people of love.

And love, as a theological virtue, an orienting principle, it's a good one.

I've got no problem with it, really.
Love God with all your heart, mind, and strength,
and love your neighbor as yourself.
This is the sum of all the commandments.
Love this beautiful world, the lights in the trees and the
wonder everywhere.
Sounds great. It's good stuff.

But here's the problem
with salvation by character,
or with salvation by love.
Here's the problem.

We don't always have great character.
We are not always people of love.
We don't always love as much or as well as we could or
should.
We don't always love what is worthy. Sometimes we love
things we know we shouldn't.
We don't always have good character. We don't always
love.

Sometimes, in other words, we are sinners.

That's right, I said it.
Sinners.
We sin.

When I told David that my title for his ordination would
be "Saints and Sinners",
he asked, "and which one am I?"
I love that when I told Bob the topic, he wondered the
same thing.
Which one am I?
As if we have to ask.

We are both.
Of course.
Saints and sinners, wrapped up in one body, one mind,
one soul.
You, me, lay people, we ministers too.
We are no more saints and no less sinners than anyone
else.

In some areas of life and faith, we recognize this reality
quite clearly.
We know we are not perfect, and that we are embedded
in systems of power and privilege,
systems in which we participate, knowingly and
unknowingly.

We are particularly clear about this, I think, after a long
struggle, when it comes to racial justice.
Those of us who are white know,
even if we wish to deny it sometimes,
we know that racism is a virus, which we have caught,
and must fight against within ourselves.
That we must make an effort to be “anti-racist” because
otherwise —
and even when we do try hard, sometimes —
otherwise we will behave in ways that extend the system
of racial oppression.

Likewise, I think we know this about ourselves when it
comes to economic justice and ecological sustainability.
We know that the complete saint, the perfect earth-loving
justice-maker,
would only eat from their own garden, walk everywhere,
use no carbon ever,
only shop at fair-trade farmers-markets.
While listening to NPR.
And we try.

But we know we are not perfect, and we're not going to be.

There are trade-offs, and sacrifices.

We try.

But we know that we sin,
that we do not treat the workers, far away unseen in
another country,
making the things we own and use, and
we do not treat the earth, our only home,
as well as we should or could.

We know it.

We sin.

We have also come, I think, more and more,
to understand how important this awareness —
that we are bound up in systems of violence and
oppression,
in principalities and powers,
how important this is with respect to humility and
empathy.

We know when it comes to these things that we are not
perfect.

So we might try to help each other learn,
but we are getting better about not using shame to
bludgeon each other.

This is one temptation, of course,
whenever we talk about saints and sinners:
to think we are the saints, and to attack the sinners.
And we may say, oh, no, we are Unitarians, we don't do
that.

Yes we do. Yes we do.

We are the heirs of the Unitarian tradition that believed,
as Thomas Starr King said,
we were too good to be damned,
just as much as we are heirs to the Universalists,

who knew God was too good to damn them.
And we have practiced - and sometimes still do -
the work of shaming those we consider sinners,
to make ourselves feel better.
We have practiced - and sometimes still do -
the liberal firing squad.
You know the liberal firing squad?
They make a circle.

We are, I think, growing out of that phase.
At least I pray that we are.
We are more humble.
We know that we are each good and evil,
high-road and low-road,
trying and stumbling.
Saint. Sinner. Both at once.

Maybe we are starting to do what we always told the
religious right to do:
love the sinner.
Ourselves.
Each other.

That doesn't mean everything goes, out in the world or in
the walls of the church.
As we know all too well
there are things we do not permit without consequence.

Sins too great to be allowed,
and sinners, too unrepentant, who have forfeited their
place in the covenant of the church,
and in some cases, their right to be a free citizen of the
republic.
But these are the exceptions.

Generally, we recognize that we each make mistakes,

and we try not to judge too harshly.
And we have learned to talk about our imperfections -
our mistakes -
even if we don't call them sins.
But it's okay to call them sins -
one can speak of sin without it being original.

For all my talk earlier about big social questions:
economic and ecological justice,
the truth is that the sins, the struggles, the pains and
hurts, which bring people to church and send them away,
which each of us, human beings, all,
wrestle with in the night and sometimes in the bright of
day, the sins which trouble our souls most are far more
personal.
We have not always been so good about grappling with
them as we have with the wider social questions.

These sins, these troubles are about how we treat
ourselves and each other.
About the unhealthy lusts and distractions.
About the temper we can't always keep,
the addiction that holds us captive,
the envy, the resentment, the self-doubt,
that thing we did once, or more than once, and we
regret.
The pain we caused in another for our own gain.
The neglect of our friendships, our own spiritual lives.
The time we cheated to get ahead, or at least, not fall
further behind.
The time we chose the least bad option, but it still feels
awful.
The time we were not of good character.
The time we were not guided by love.

This isn't other people.

This is us.
Here in this room.
You, here.
Me, up here, just as much as everyone else.
Just as much.

I remember a conversation a long time ago;
it was seminary, and we were reading Paul's letter to the
Romans.

Talking about conscience and freedom.

And got to Romans 7:14

*For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the
flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my
own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the
very thing I hate. I know that nothing good dwells within
me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I
cannot do it.*

And one of our classmates spoke of how addiction is
exactly like this:

we will, we wish, to do otherwise, but cannot do it.

And each of us, addict or not, has sometimes felt like
this, right?

And yet, theologically, we reject this dualism between
body and spirit, between flesh and soul.

That is not the way we see it.

We are much more likely to find resonance with those
beautiful words from Mary Oliver's poem Wild Geese:

You do not have to be good.

You do not have to walk on your knees

For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body

Love what it loves.

It is our witness, our testimony, our conviction,
that our deepest impulses are for good.
That love runs in our veins.
That we're born right the first time.

And I remain committed to that proposition,
and do not wish to challenge it.
I believe that.
We were born good.
But not perfect.
It is too easy an out to just say
"let the soft animal of your body love what it loves."
As if it was that simple.
As if we don't screw up.
As if we don't forget who we are supposed to be.
As if sometimes we get dealt a bad hand, and have to
make the best of it.
As if we don't sin.

It is not our deepest nature, to do what we should not
do.
It is not our corrupted flesh or our twisted heart.
It is just finitude. Just real life.
And ministry, religion, lives in the place where our inner
saint and our inner sinner dance together, and live
together, and struggle and are at peace together.

We might wish that we spent our lives on the river in our
kayak, catching the lights in the tree and the wonder of
all.
But, just as much, we live in the newspaper editor's
office, reading out the latest tragedy over the wires.
Pain and loss and corruption and petty-mindedness.
So we could say that ministry is between the river and
the newsroom, but of course, that's too simple, too:

for nature, as Tennyson said, and Dillard wrote of as well,
is red in tooth and claw just as much as it is glowing in
beauty and wonder,
and the paper publishes stories of heroism, compassion,
and hope, not just misery and loss.
It's all around us, everywhere.

We are called then, to come alive.
To the fullness of life.
To our wonder, and our pain.
Our greatness, and our meanness.
Our goodness, and our sin.
To preach the full story.
To forgive ourselves and each other,
for we will screw up.
To build and live in religious communities,
to have ministries,
where we help people, ourselves, grapple with their sins
so they might live their best life,
with mercy and love, not damnation or shame,
but honesty.
People need us to be real.
To wake, and live not in denial of these truths,
but walk together through the journey —
all of it.
To be compassionate, and prophetic, at once.
Yes, to love the sinner, which is us, and one another,
as real people.
And, yes, to rejoice that the holy, God, for some of us,
spirit, life itself,
is love, love larger than our sins, however enormous they
may feel to us,
larger than our sins.
That our story is never over,
that we can be saved,
salvation by love, yes, salvation by love,

even though we do not love perfectly at all times,
salvation by love,
because it is not our own love
that saves us,
it isn't.
It is the love of each other,
the love of the earth, announcing our place in the family
of things,
and the love of what is beyond our names, the spirit of
life,
which sustains us and loves us in our coming and our
going
in all the days of our life.
May this be our symphony.
Let us sing.