

**“Are We Saved?”**  
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**Unity Church-Unitarian**

**Guest Minister: Rev. Gary Smith,**  
**First Parish in Concord, Massachusetts**  
**Worship Leaders: Rob Eller-Isaacs, Janne Eller-Isaacs**

**SERMON: “Are We Saved?” – Rev. Gary Smith**

When I was a little boy in Maine, when every Sunday service was intergenerational, I would stand with my parents and recite with them, and with all those other people I knew so well, the words of the Congregational Church’s Kansas City Statement of Faith:

“We believe in God the Father, infinite in wisdom, goodness and love, and Jesus Christ, his son, our Lord and Savior, who for us and our salvation lived and died and rose again and liveth evermore, and in the Holy spirit, who taketh of the things of Christ and revealeth them to us, renewing, comforting and inspiring the souls of men.”

And the statement went on, and I knew it by heart then, much as I know the words of “Spirit of Life” now. The Kansas City Statement was something we said every Sunday, and it was comforting, I suppose, because I could count on saying it every week, but I never really understood it. I said it in faith. I said it on faith. I said it, because if you wanted to belong to that particular church, you had to say it, and you had to believe it, or in my mother’s words, you had to say it as if you believed it.

The shaft of light of a free church, of the Unitarian Universalism being born in me, came at that moment early in my career, in the United Church of Christ, in 1973 or 1974, when my colleague one Sunday said to the congregation we both served, in prefacing the reading of this Kansas City Statement of Faith: “Most of us believe this, most of the time.” And I thought to myself, “Can we DO that?” It was like opening the prison doors, and all the inmates of doubt were escaping!

The sermon that I’m preaching today has been staring me in the face for years it turns out, words from a magnet on my refrigerator, words by Thomas Jefferson: “It is in our lives, and not from our words, that our religion must be read.” If you are new to Unitarian Universalism this morning, or if you have been coming here for years and have struggled to describe to your family and friends just exactly what we believe, this may be a sermon for you.

“It is in our lives...that our religion must be read.” Words do matter, but not particular words, I think, not those words from a Kansas City meeting in 1913, not words from the Apostles’ Creed, not even our own words from somewhere near the front of our hymnbook, our Unitarian Universalist Purposes and Principles adopted in 1985. In an interview this past summer in the Boston Globe, Earl Holt, minister at King’s Chapel in Boston, said that for him the words of our principles are nearly meaningless, so bland, he said, that even a Rotary Club membership could recite them together.

At First Parish in Concord, we’ve used some words these past years to try to capture what we believe, the words of our weekly benediction:

“Go out into the world in peace. Have courage. Hold on to what is good. Return to no person evil for evil. Strengthen the fainthearted. Support the weak. Help the suffering. Honor all beings.”

These are words for our own congregation in Massachusetts for these days; this captures the meaning of our faith right now, but they will change. The words of our faith keep changing, and that is what the Transcendentalists were trying to tell us 150 years ago. Open your eyes to nature and look into the eyes of the one sitting near you. “The heart knows,” Emerson said.

But beyond the words, it is in our lives and in our deeds “that our religion must be read.” We know this. We know this when the little car with the bumper sticker that says, “Make Peace Not War” cuts us off in rush hour traffic and punctuates its deed with an emphatic gesture. If we’re lucky, we recognize the irony and laugh it off. Maybe you found your way here to Unity Church because you could see the hypocrisy of proclaiming a faith for one hour on a Sunday

morning and then failing to make any connection to the other 167 hours of the week. We want the words we say to match the deeds we do. We want the deeds we do to match the words we say.

"It is in our lives, and not from our words, that our religion must be read." I think this is what Jesus meant when he tried to describe how his followers would know when the Kingdom of God had come — call it the Kingdom of God, call it the Blessed Community, call it the Promised Land, call it the world we all strive for. Have we lived up to the challenge to feed the hungry, to give the thirsty drink, to take the stranger into our homes, to clothe the naked, to visit the ill and the imprisoned? Whenever you do any of these things for the most humble among us on this earth, Jesus said, you bring the Promised Land closer.

So join in with us, Unity Church says: Affordable Housing, Habitat for Humanity, Evergreen Project, Family Meals, Sharing Korner Foodshelf, Quilting Group, Genesis II, Holiday Gift Giving, Project Home, Voter Registration, Restorative Justice, Peacekeeping Circles, Center for Victims of Torture, the medical clinic in Malawi, Mano a Mano in Bolivia, Partner Church in Transylvania, and all the countless ways each of you, young and old, in so many ways, live out our religion. What do you believe at Unity Church, someone will ask you. Watch what we do together, you might answer.

"It is in our lives, and not from our words, that our religion must be read." I think this is what Anne Lamott means in a column at salon.com when she says she calls out for help in these hellish times in which we live, and then "the phone rings or the mail comes," which is to say those acts of kindness that catch us unaware, in which the giver and the receiver spiral into one and we are left what Anne calls "that noodgey Holy Spirit feeling inside," which is to say, we know we are in the presence of something holy.

"It is in our lives, and not from our words, that our religion must be read." I think this is what Carl Scovel means when he talks about the kingdom of fear in which we too often live. "Love," Carl says, "is the antidote to fear. But love," he says, "is a fuzzy word.... Love is not something we feel.... Love is doing — feeding the hungry, comforting the sick, visiting the prisoner, witnessing to justice, dying for another, not against another." There are those words again. And I think those words about feeding the hungry and all the rest stand for lots of things, like noticing the new kid at school who nobody else is noticing or letting someone cross the street or waving to a neighbor or cooking a blueberry pie for someone for no reason at all. "Love is a fuzzy word," Carl says, until we actually do something.

"It is in our lives, and not from our words, that our religion must be read." I think this is what Barbara Ehrenreich, the author of the book, Nickel and Dimed, meant when she wrote about someone who accused her of anti-Christian bigotry in her book. She had described Jesus as "a wine-guzzling vagrant and precocious socialist." "On the vagrant part," she writes, "there can be no debate, and, although 'guzzling' may be a bit overstated, Jesus was sufficiently associated with wine.... As for Jesus being a socialist, I take it back. He was actually a little left of that, judging from his instruction to the rich man to sell all that he had and give it to the poor. If that's what it takes to be a Christian," she concludes, "believe me, it's...a lot easier to be a socialist. You have to dedicate yourself to working for the poor, just as a Christian should, but at least you get to keep your stuff."

"It is in our lives, and not from our words, that our religion must be read." I think this is what Jim Wallis meant, in an opinion column of his I read this summer and tore out of the newspaper right then. Jim Wallis is the convener of Call to Renewal and the Executive Director of Sojourners, and he pulls no punches:

"How did the faith of Jesus," he asks, "come to be known as pro-rich, pro-war, and pro-American? What has happened? We hear politicians who love to say how religious they are but fail to apply the values of faith to their leadership and politics...."

"...Faith challenges the powers that be to do justice for the poor instead of preaching a 'prosperity gospel' and supporting politicians who further enrich the wealthy... Faith hates violence and tries to reduce it and exerts a fundamental presumption against war instead of justifying it in God's name.... Faith creates community from racial, class, and gender divisions, prefers international community over nationalist religion.... Faith regards matters such as the sacredness of life and family bonds as so important that they should never be used as ideological symbols or mere political pawns in partisan warfare...."

And Jim Wallis concludes, with questions that echo the ones Jesus asks when he was trying to rally people to see a better world: "Who will uphold the dignity of economic and political outcasts? Who will question the self-righteousness of nations and their leaders? Who will not allow God's name to be used to simply justify ourselves, instead of calling us to accountability?"

On a screened-in porch by a lake in Maine, I stood and cheered. These voices are missing from the public square for fear our patriotism will be questioned or that we will be denied access through security checkpoints.

"It is in our lives, and not from our words, that our religion must be read." Here is what I have learned about Unitarian Universalism. We believe in universal salvation more than we believe in individual salvation. Our question is not, "Am I saved?" or "Are you saved?" as if you are lacking something, but the question here is "Are we saved?" Are we all saved? And by saved I mean are we part of the journey to whatever the Promised Land might be, the Kingdom of God might be, the Blessed Community might be? Do we care for the stragglers, for the outcast, for those who may be different?

I wanted to weep last month when I read of a man in the midst of the Florida devastation, his modest house still standing while all his neighbor's homes lay in ruins. When asked how he could account for this, he said that he believed in God. When he was further asked what that said about his neighbors, he replied, "You figure it out."

Welcome to Unity Church and to Unitarian Universalism where we will try to help you as you rebuild your home and lives, damaged or destroyed by whatever devastation might come your way. And not just you, but the strangers beyond these walls too, beyond this city and this nation. Our faith is too big to be small, too expansive to be petty, too generous to be about the self-alone. "It is in our lives, and not from our words, that our religion must be read."

We have a Celebration Sunday too in Concord. It's the first week of March. And I have a career's worth of fund-raising sermons. I've used shame and guilt. I've been upbeat and I've been discouraged. I've begged. I've seated a skeleton in a chair next to me in the pulpit, holding out a top hat. Put flesh on the bones, we said that year. I've offered to tap dance on the table in front of the pulpit.

But if Thomas Jefferson is right, that "[I]t is in our lives, and not from our words, that our religion must be read," then I think all my efforts, or the efforts of any preacher who has come here before me in past years begging you to be generous, will be for naught, our words will disappear into all the dark corners of the room. Our generosity does not come from preachers or any place out there; it comes from in here, and it comes in that moment when we realize our own personal salvation is not what is at stake. We move from the "I" to the "We." Are we saved? When we say "yes" to that, in that moment, generosity will pour from our hearts, from our hands, and from our lives.

May it be so.