

## **Wealth and Salvation**

October 15, 2006

By Rev. Jim Sherblom  
First Parish in Brookline

I once heard of a preacher who began his sermon: "There is great work to be done. Let's rise up and walk together!" And the people enthusiastically responded, "Amen, let's walk together!" The preacher continued, "Time is wasting. We've got to run!" And the congregation responded, "Amen, let's run!" Then the minister almost shouted, "The moment is here! We must rise up and fly!" And the people thundered back, "Amen! Let's fly!" But then the minister observed, "It takes money to fly!" There was an awkward silence, until a lone voice from the back said, "Amen, let's walk!" This is a funny story but herein lies our dilemma.

Sometimes UU ministers feel they should avoid any talk about wealth or money, or who has or doesn't have enough. Even more often we skirt around theological concepts such as salvation as too troubling to some people for us to be able to define and use that term within our congregations. Yet wealth and salvation are bedrock concepts that deeply influence the quality of our lives, so I am determined to explore both in some detail this morning. So let us begin with the little children. Jesus is reported as saying: "Let the little children come unto me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." If the Kingdom of Heaven is Jesus' preferred term for salvation, and it is, why is it such as these that are saved? Love will surely guide us! Because the children are pure of heart, with admirable intent, so seeking love they will be blessed by all that is loving and good; and being pure of heart, they will experience the kingdom of God.

Contrast this with Jesus' response to the young rich man who asks "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" Or more simply put "what is the least costly way for me to buy eternal bliss?" Jesus begins by paraphrasing Jewish law: avoid wrongful sex and telling lies while honoring your parents and loving your neighbors. The young man says he has done all of these. So then Jesus says: "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, give the money to the poor, and come follow me." And the young rich man goes away grieving for he has many possessions. Amen, there is great work to be done, let us walk together!

Those of you who are taking the "Two Branches" class with Charles Sandmel and me will not be surprised to hear that the Gospel of the Nazoreans, those most likely to have heard the story directly from those who were actually there at its telling, have a slightly longer version of this story which includes the following: But the rich man didn't want to hear this and began to scratch his head. And the Lord said to him, "How can you say that you follow the Law and the Prophets? In the Law it says: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'. Look around you: many of your brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of Abraham, are living in filth and dying of hunger. Your house is full of good things and not a thing of yours manages to get out to them." Turning to his disciple Simon, who was

sitting with him, he said, “Simon, son of Jonah, it’s easier for a camel to squeeze through a needle’s eye than for a wealthy person to get into heaven’s domain.” This expanded version of the story makes it clear that Jesus is not just talking about wealth, but rather is also talking about the obligations of wealth, the obligations of being in right relationship with others. Amen, there is much work to be done, let us run together!

This famous codicil to Jesus’ teaching, as expressed in Matthew: “Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven... it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” This saying has caused much distress for the rich for two thousand years, and it is the subject of much exegesis that suggests that Jesus simply means we should help the poor, or that it is difficult but not impossible, or else he is talking about **greedy rich people** rather than the ones in church this morning. From my perspective, these are merely adequate solutions of the problem. But when his disciples respond astonished, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus offers a solution, “For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.” Even with wealth, we must give up the conceit that we are in complete control of our own destiny, and we must accept that due to the interdependent web of all being, for our own salvation we must help those in dire financial need. The moment is here and now! We must rise up and fly!

Salvation, in Christian theology, is bringing humans into right relationship with the divine and with each other, such that the meaning and object of their lives lies outside of their own selfish desires, and the consequence of their love is oneness with all beings. As Jesus is quoted in the Gospel of John saying, “I came that they may have life, and have it more abundantly.” So what should be the object of our love and salvation, and why does the pursuit of wealth so often get in the way of our own happiness? The Junior Choir gave us a clue with their Introit: “How many times have you heard someone say, “If I had his money, I could do things my way? Little they know that it’s so hard to find, one rich man in ten with a satisfied mind...the wealthiest person is a pauper at times compared to the man with a satisfied mind.” How do we get a satisfied mind? Perhaps to answer this I need to introduce to you the distinction of instrumental goods versus objective goods.

Instrumental goods hold no value in themselves, rather they are a means to the end, a finger pointing at the moon, the means by which we come to cherish truly objective goods. Objective goods are things which have deep meaning in and of themselves: you are an objective good, your relationships with your parents, your children, your friends and families, these are objective goods. They hold meaning in and of themselves and are not a means to some other end. Why be in the choir, with its frequent rehearsals and requirement to sing music of other people’s choosing? Why be the Choir Director, with the need to prepare so carefully for every worship service? I think it is because you are each more truly yourselves, and thereby in some measure happier, for having performed this great service. Your transformation of our worship together is an objective good, your dedication and practice is the instrumental good to that end. And we deeply thank you for that great good that you perform each Sunday as part of this service!

Alfred North Whitehead, perhaps the greatest philosophical interpreter of the impact of Einsteinian physics on modern thought, concluded that the greatest sickness of 20<sup>th</sup> Century America was confusing instrumental goods for objective goods and vice versa. He termed this *misplaced concreteness*, when the concrete goodness attributable to an objective good is inappropriately assigned to an instrumental good. He said that our obsession with money in this culture, with expensive cars, fancy houses, and other luxury goods were the sign of a culture that misunderstood or had been deeply misled about what is truly of value. This misplaced concreteness was in Old Testament times called idolatry, assigning the goodness attributable to God to other objects where it does not belong. I believe that our culture continues to suffer from a diminished sense of self as a result of this rampant misplaced concreteness. Daily living in a market culture we have often absorbed purely commercial values to an incredible extent, driving many of us to pursue ends which are not in our own best interests, and to diminish our sense of being despite the incredible people that we truly are and the wonderful lives that we live here together. The poor are shamed! The rich are blamed! But it is really a rampant commercially induced perceptual disorder about what truly has meaning. On this dark road from greed to giving, love will guide us! Look first to our lives together for meaning and we will be saved. We are seeking right relationship with all being!

Hence I turned to *The Economist* for insight. It reminds us that: “More than any other country, America defines itself by a collective dream: the dream of economic opportunity and upward mobility. Its proudest boast is that it offers a chance of the good life to everybody who is willing to work hard and play by the rules.” *The Economist* tells us that this market based salvation is an illusion, that not all who struggle will be rewarded, and that many of those who triumph and capture great riches will alas still be deeply unhappy in their lives. Money and wealth creation is an instrumental good, human wellbeing and happiness is an objective good. Being financially well trained, I could perhaps teach each person in this congregation how to have enough financial resources to meet their basic needs, but it will not bring you happiness unless you yourself discern the difference between instrumental goods, those things which are means to achieving meaning in our lives, and objective goods, those things which are the meaning in our lives. We are living in a market oriented culture, one which has elevated material goods to a new idolatry, but it is important to our sense of self, to our very salvation, that we discover and then cherish that which brings real enduring meaning to our lives.

I do not blame the rich; I cannot blame the poor; we are each struggling in our own way to find meaning and wellbeing in the midst of a market culture. To find what Jews call atonement, this being at oneness with all being, what the Christians call salvation, we must return to our better selves, and in so turning we can become people of generous spirit. As Jesus said: “Look around you: many of your brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of Abraham, are living in filth and dying of hunger. Your house is full of good things and not a thing of yours manages to get out to them.” If you wish to have more, and to enjoy it more, give some of what you have to those who are truly in dire need, both of you will gain by so doing. As Dr. Allen-Thompson reminds us in our third reading: We find generosity at the core of religious beliefs throughout the ages... A generous spirit...opens us to deeper levels and... expands our ability to take it all in with

uncommon gratitude, which in turn motivates more giving, much like the cycles of nature. We must participate with a pure heart in order to enjoy those benefits which Jesus called the kingdom of heaven.

It may not be true for each of us, for many of us are in great need, but on average Unitarian Universalists have the highest incomes of any religious group in America. There is power for great good in the collective wealth and relationships here in our pews today. We may not publicly own up to it but we do own it. Collectively we have the means to bring wealth and salvation to the world. Will we rise up to the challenge that stands before us? Love will guide us on the way but we must determine where we are going! There is great work to be done. Let us rise up together and fly! Amen.