

What Salvation Is and Isn't

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Last week, I wrote about the gun-and-violence culture which permeates society in North America. I am horrified at how many Christians participate in that culture and proclaim proudly that owning guns is their God-given right. It's the only way they know how to deal with their fear about losing their privilege.

In my discussion, I used the word "salvation" ironically to describe their idolatry.

Someone asked why I used that word. Salvation, they said, is about what happens after we die, and that doesn't apply to guns or violence.

It's a common misunderstanding. Many people understand salvation this way. We are saved because Jesus died on the cross to save us from our sins; that's how we go to heaven after we die.

That's not what salvation means in the Bible. This understanding is too reductionistic. It turns Christianity into what Marcus Borg calls a "religion of requirements": if we live the right way, if we believe the right things, if we "accept Jesus as our Lord and Saviour", then we will get to go to eternal bliss.

But the Bible has a much larger view of salvation. Indeed, salvation is not primarily about the afterlife. Salvation happens in this world.

The Greek word in the Bible is "sozo," which means "health" or "wholeness." To be saved is to be healed, to be made whole. That happens in this world, in this time, in this life. It has to do with wholeness of mind, body, and spirit for the individual, and wholeness of community and justice for all.

Salvation isn't just about getting the prize at the end of life. Salvation has to do with a process of transformation in our ongoing encounter and relationship with the divine. We are renewed and become more whole. We awaken to the all-embracing, all-inclusive wholeness as we rest in the divine embrace. We recalibrate our lives and all life to that eternal reality. Salvation describes that journey with God as we are made whole, as we are healed, as we are transformed.

The Bible uses many different images for this understanding of salvation. In John's gospel, Jesus is described as the light of the world. The light shines into the shadowed places of our world, and we learn to see reality through the lens of God's love. Light is not an other-worldly thing; it is profoundly material and this-worldly.

In the same way, John images Jesus as the bread of life and as living water. Salvation is about satisfying our deepest hungers. Jesus nourishes us and quenches our deepest thirsts in ways that consumerism and materialism never can.

The book of Revelation describes the goal of life in the profoundly physical image of a city. A river flows through it and trees grow on its banks with leaves for the healing of the nations.

We also discern this theme in the Hebrew Scriptures. The prophet Isaiah proclaims that Israel is "given as a light to the nations, that God's salvation may reach to the end of the earth." God's purposes for the world are made real as people of faith learn to live together in justice, peace, and love. The purpose of life is healing and wholeness, not separation and brokenness.

These images point to healing as a process that happens in community. It is not an individualistic thing. There is no salvation for me which does not also include the wholeness of all. This is part of what it means to "love our neighbours as ourselves." We can never be whole until all are whole and the whole creation is made whole.

When I used the word salvation in my title last week, I used it ironically. It seems obvious to me that the gun-and-violence credo of the MAGA crowd works actively against this kind of wholeness. It tears communities apart. Their rhetoric is designed not to foster wholeness and harmony, but to champion anger, division, and hatred which leads to the current brokenness of our society in both Canada and the United States. They provoke and stoke the culture wars.

In response to this loud and brutal philosophy espoused by people on the extreme right, this is what I believe and what I work for:

Any faith that sets itself apart from others is not my faith. It is not the faith that I understand Jesus came to teach and live.

Any faith that sows division or marginalizes those who are different and tries to shame them or declines to help those who are less fortunate than us is not a faith that I share.

Any faith that subscribes to a narrow set of beliefs as a way of defining who's in and who's out is not a faith that I share.

Salvation cannot come while racism exists. It does not come while sexism and misogyny continue to breathe.

Salvation cannot come while the poor are still poor. It does not come while religious people use shame and condemnation as tools.

Salvation cannot come while the earth is pillaged. It does not come while violence and oppression continue to be spiritually justified.

Salvation cannot and does not come while greed and privilege rule a society. It does not come while the vulnerable are exploited.

The way of Jesus is found in wholeness and the renewal of all things: mind, body, spirit, humanity, community, interconnectedness, the healing of the earth, and the common working towards wholeness for all.

For Jesus, social justice is salvation. Racial justice is salvation. Equality is salvation. A living wage is salvation. The death of patriarchy and misogyny is salvation. The end of war is salvation. The death of prejudice and religious elitism is salvation. The death of political greed and oppression is salvation.

Wholeness for all and with all. That's the good news of the way of Jesus. Because that's what love means.