

## **SAVED?**

I Timothy 1:12-17

Kelly Boyte Brill  
Avon Lake UCC  
18 September 2022

I was involved in some sobering conversations this past week. Thursday afternoon I participated in a zoom call with a group of UCC ministers from around the country. All of us are senior ministers of the larger membership churches in the UCC. We meet every January for a meeting. This was a mid-year check-in call. One by one, we each reported in, answering the question, “How are things going for you? How do you feel as this new program year begins in the congregation you serve?” From Oregon, California, Nebraska, Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Texas, Ohio...we each responded. “In-person worship attendance is about 60-70% of what it was before the pandemic.” The same for every church, in all those states.

We used words like “lament” and “grief” to describe our feelings. We miss the people we no longer see. We’ve reached out, we’ve sent care packages, cards, emails, texts. We feel a loss, a sadness, a confusion when people don’t respond. We worry about them, hope they’re ok, and at the same time we just don’t understand their absence.

Our check-in call turned into a support group of sorts. One of the benefits of any support group is that you realize you’re not alone. We didn’t solve anything, but there is a comfort in sharing.

Like our church, these other congregations are not giving up. Each of my colleagues described robust, creative programming and a renewed sense of mission.

We believe that congregations like ours make a difference in the world and in people's lives. We know that many people in our communities feel a sense of isolation and loneliness - people crave belonging. We all know people who have experienced rejection in other churches and who need an invitation to a church that is inclusive and welcoming. In the midst of so much bad news, we find hope when we engage in justice and compassion projects together.

So we're not giving up. We're moving forward into a future that we know will be different.

So that was Thursday. Friday morning, I received a text from Nate with data from a new Pew Research study. The percentage of Americans who identify as atheist or agnostic or who claim no religion at all has risen to 30% of the population, a dramatic increase. My first response was, "Thanks for starting my Friday sermon-writing day with that cheery news." Then, Beau, Nate, Tim and I exchanged messages about these statistics, and I realized that they actually do have something to do with the sermon topic for this week.

We could spend the rest of the year and then some discussing reasons for all of the above news. Reasons why people haven't yet returned to church and reasons why interest in religion is waning. And we **will** be engaging in some of those conversations.

I believe that one cause of the decline in interest is that some churches, some Christians, are preaching a message of intolerance, bigotry, a lack of concern for the environment — and some of those voices are loud and prominent. It turns people off to ALL Christians. It is especially turning young people off. I'll say more about this in my

presentation on Christian nationalism. And this is why our support of programming for youth, families and children in this church is so important. Our young people here grow up knowing that church is about community and inclusion and concern for the world.

There's another obstacle which keeps people from hearing the Christian message and that is what I'll simply call bad theology. I realize that's subjective, but this is what I mean. Hundreds of people have told me, over the years, that they grew up with an idea that God is judging them, watching their every move. I call this image of God the great Assistant Principal in the Sky, the Assistant Principal usually being the school administrator who is tasked with discipline. So people grew up feeling afraid of God, and keeping their distance from God. And then, often, they would hear other messages like, "Everything happens for a reason," or a platitude like, "God never closes a door without opening a window." And all of a sudden, nothing makes sense. If you try to harmonize all of these messages, what you come up with is a God who is arbitrary, who is causing bad things to happen to good people, a God whose followers try to live by trite sayings which, by the way, aren't even in the Bible. The result is that people walk away. They dismiss the entire Christian way of life because the version of it that they've been shown and taught just doesn't connect in any helpful way.

When Doug and I were in Europe last month, I was reminded that the notion of God as a frightening judge has been with us for centuries. We visited an art museum in Belgium which contained painting after painting full of gruesome, vivid images of what hell is like. The church used art like that to keep people in line. Sometimes the church actually commissioned artists to create paintings that would scare people. It was a way

for the church to maintain power. As long as people were deathly afraid of going to hell, they would keep coming to and supporting the church!

We can't clear up centuries of bad theology in the next ten minutes, but this is a conversation worth having. When you hear people rejecting the church, realize that there are good reasons for it. And then realize how far those reasons are from the message of Jesus. The way Jesus taught and lived was a way of gentleness, compassion, justice, mercy, inclusion, and healing. I believe that the more we reflect on the person and teachings of Jesus, the better able we will be to encourage those who are seeking the kind of community we offer.

Our passage for today is one of those which is easy to misinterpret and misunderstand. The letter we know as I Timothy is written about the apostle Paul and in the first person. Scholars now believe that it wasn't written by Paul, but rather by some of his followers later on. This passage is about Paul's dramatic conversion. His name was Saul - he was a persecutor of Christians in the very early days of the Christian movement, not long after the end of Jesus' life on earth. Saul wasn't looking for his life to change. He was on the road, going from town to town, seeking out those who called themselves Christians and confronting them, violently, telling them they were wrong.

The book of Acts gives us the details of what happened one day on the road. A bright light blinded Saul, a voice came to him, saying, "Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And Saul was blind for three days. After three days and nights of praying and fasting, he regained his sight, changed his name, and dedicated his life to spreading the

message of Christ, starting churches throughout a wide region, and writing letters we still read today.

Our passage for today says, “I used to be a blasphemer, a persecutor, a violent man, but Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. I was dealt mercifully for the reason.”

Paul describes what it was like to, in his words, experience salvation. He says, “I was treated mercifully, and the grace of our God has been granted to me in overflowing measure, as was the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus.”

Have you been saved? It’s a question some Christians ask of each other, even of strangers. Have you been saved? By this, some mean, “Have you had a dramatic conversion experience like Paul did?” You’ve probably heard some people talk about the experience of being born again, a moment, a definable, memorable moment during which you make a decision that you will become a Christian.

Those experiences happen for some people. But for many of us, things are different. Many of us were born into church-going families. Our spiritual lives have been meandering journeys. Sometimes we feel closer to God, sometimes we drift away. Sometimes we feel God’s presence in an intensely real way, but not always. We’ve lived with doubts and questions.

We may think that the notion of “being saved” doesn’t apply to us.

At the 11 AM service today, as part of the rite of confirmation, we will be reciting the United Church of Christ statement of faith which contains this phrase, “You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.” That phrase identifies that part

of God's role in our lives is to save us. It doesn't mean that we have to think of ourselves as miserable sinners who have to be saved from the grasp of hell. It does mean that all human beings live with temptation. We are challenged by life, we struggle to make decisions. We need and want God to grant us wisdom and courage.

I love the idea that God wants, in holy love, to save us from "aimlessness." The opposite of aimlessness is purpose, and purpose is an essential part of a meaningful life.

Here's what salvation means to me. We are saved from meaningless wandering through life. We are saved FOR lives of joy, meaning and purpose.

We are saved from despair, and saved for hope.

We are saved from loneliness, and saved for communion with God and community with one another.

We are saved from brokenness and saved for healing.

Salvation means that God is at work in our world and in our lives, that transformation and growth are always possible.

If we embrace this good news, and share it with others, in authentic ways as the spirit leads us, we will be doing all we can do for the future of the church. One of my mentors in faith and ministry, Fred Craddock, used to use this as his benediction: "Live simply, love generously, speak truthfully, serve faithfully, leave everything else to God." Amen.