

“Beyond Individualism”

a sermon by Dan Lillie
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Three Themes

I’m not going to lie, I packed a lot into this sermon. I probably shouldn’t have done it, but I couldn’t resist; the connection between the themes was too strong for me *not* to try to talk about. So, I’m going to attempt to explain my understanding of three themes, and how they are connected, in less than twenty minutes.

So hold on, because here we go!

The Three themes are: Individualism, Beloved Community, and Salvation.

Theme One: Individualism

Let’s start with Individualism. After all, if we are going to go *Beyond* Individualism, as the title of the sermon suggests, we need to get to it, and through it, first.

Our first task in understanding Individualism, is to clarify that Individualism is not individuality.

Individuality is the unique combination of personality traits, characteristics, skills, talents, tastes and preferences that make each of us who we are. Individuality shapes our identities by helping us understand who we are in relation to others and the world.

Individualism, on the other hand, is an idea; a philosophy or way of life that gives utmost value to the autonomy and ability of each individual person. It prizes self-reliance and independence. It’s not surprising to see this idea running through Unitarian Universalism. Individualism shows most prominently (and often proudly) in our 4th Principle, a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

I’ll admit, this was the principle that drew me to Unitarian Universalism. Having grown up in a protestant church that professed a God-belief that I just couldn’t agree with, I found my first Unitarian Universalist community refreshingly open and accepting of my theological questions.

We're quite proud of this, aren't we? When it comes to religious thought, we certainly uphold Individualism, promoting the idea that we are each reliant on ourselves to shape our own beliefs about God.

And it's no wonder; individualism runs deep in our history.

The Puritans, our religious ancestors, placed heavy moral responsibility on the individual.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, a Unitarian minister, is well known for his essay *Self-Reliance*, which touts the merits of Individualism over conformity and dependence.

And the humanist debate among Unitarians in the early 1900s played with the idea of removing God from the moral equation entirely, placing even more responsibility on the individual.

Individualism is an interwoven part of the fabric of our Unitarian Universalist culture.

Here's the problem: Individualism is hurting us more than it is helping us.

In an article in *UU World* called *The End of iChurch*, Rev. Dr. Fred Muir argues that "we are being held back by a pervasive and disruptive commitment to individualism."

He says, "'For all its appeal and its influence in American culture, **individualism is not sustaining: Individualism will not serve the greater good**, a principle to which we Unitarian Universalists have also committed ourselves. **There is little-to-nothing about the ideology and theology of individualism that encourages people to work and live together**, to create and support institutions that serve common aspirations and beloved principles."¹

Another Unitarian Universalist Minister agrees. In a sermon on Individualism, Rev. John Papandrew said, "There is a vast underworld of people who have lived with the fantasy of the Lone Ranger and found it to be Hell. For Hell is the absence of relationship- the ultimate disconnection."²

Revs. Muir and Papandrew both seem to agree that Individualism is a problem, and both think so for the same reason: it ignores our need for connection and human relationships.

¹ Muir, Fredric. "The End of iChurch." *UU World*. <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/end-ichurch>

² John Papandrew, "Individualism: It Ain't Necessarily So," sermon, November 14, 1993, All Souls Church, Washington, DC.

Which brings us to our second theme: Beloved Community.

Theme Two: Beloved Community

Now, in my last sermon exactly a month ago, I gave a pretty thorough description of Beloved Community, so I'm going to give you the short version this time.

- *Beloved Community is based in covenant and relationships.*

We have chosen to build our religion on Covenant, not Creed. And so, when we opt for Covenant as the foundation of our our faith tradition, then we are making *relationships* the cornerstone of our community. This means that every time we come together is an opportunity to build the Beloved Community.

- *Beloved Community is Justice-Focused.*

When we are living into Beloved Community, we can recognize that the common good is truly for the good of all, and we work to bring it about in this life and world that we all share.

UU minister Mark Morrison-Reed says that “[t]he central task of religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice.”

- *The active agent in the creation of Beloved Community is Love.*

The kind of deep, universal love found in Beloved Community, King referred to as Agape. He said, “Agape is love seeking to preserve and create community. It is insistence on community even when one seeks to break it. *Agape is a willingness to go to any length to restore community.*”

This kind of love is essential for creating and sustaining Beloved Community.

So, to recap Beloved Community, it is based in covenant and relationships, it is justice-focused, and it is built with love.

Theme Three: Salvation

So we've talked about Individualism as theme one, and we reviewed Beloved Community as theme two. Still with me? Good! That means it's time for theme three: Salvation.

Some of you may not like this word: Salvation. It's too churchy; it's too religious. I'm sure that more than a few of you think it doesn't belong here. But hear me out.

We can conceive of our lives having more than one dimension; for example, we can talk about caring for ourselves physically and emotionally, recognizing them as distinctly different aspects (although certainly related); we can talk of having a "social life"; and we have spiritual lives to cultivate and care for as well, although we often have a harder time articulating what this entails.

Are we only ever threatened in the physical sense? Are only our physical lives ever threatened, and therefore capable of being saved, or can we admit vulnerability in the other aspects as well?

So if we can conceive of our lives having different aspects or dimensions, then why should we be resistant to the idea of our lives being "saved" in any of them?

Clearly, our physical lives are saved when we avoid a car accident, or someone performs the Heimlich maneuver to prevent us from choking.

And maybe we can look at therapy and counseling as a way to save ourselves emotionally.

But what does saving the spiritual life look like? What could spiritual salvation mean even if we don't believe in heaven, hell, or an afterlife? What does salvation look like in this life?

We Can't Save Ourselves

Now, you see, this is where the three themes start to come together.

Individualism (not individuality, mind you, but individualism) is smothering us. It is holding us back, and it is causing the world to suffer, because Individualism tells us that we don't need one another.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. We absolutely need each other. Individualism is the problem, and Beloved Community is the answer. And I'll even go a step further and say it's not just the answer, it is our Salvation.

Beloved Community saves us from Individualism. Beloved Community is our Salvation from Individualism.

Here is the cold, hard truth friends: *we can't save ourselves*. Not every time, anyway. Sure, we can do things to become strong, resilient people.

We can exercise and work out to make ourselves fast and strong physically.

We can learn to get in touch with our emotions, to check in with ourselves about how we are feeling and what our instincts are telling us.

Socially, we can learn how to win friends and influence people; I hear there's a book about that.

And spiritually, we can engage in meditation and many other forms of spiritual practices that help us stay grounded and centered.

But ultimately, we will face threats in all of these aspects of our lives that are too big, too daunting, too overwhelming to face alone. The world is bigger than even the biggest and the strongest of us- it can throw obstacles and tragedies greater than we can overcome; it can impose grief and loss upon us that is beyond our ability to cope. And this is as it should be; for we're not meant to be solitary beings. We need one another.

When we get past the social narrative of rugged individualism, of the solitary hero, and the self-made human, we can recognize how our egos are holding us down. We can keep our individuality, but we need to let go of our individualism. Because it's this adherence to Individualism that prevents us from building the Beloved Community.

So, I ask again, what does salvation in this life look like? It looks like Beloved Community.

We have to move beyond Individualism because our Salvation is in the Beloved Community.

This is the life-saving, life-affirming message of Unitarian Universalism.

in our current political and social climate, our congregation is growing, and we're not the only one. Many UU congregations are experiencing growth in membership. And some say it's about hope, but I think it's even deeper than that. It's because we feel powerless when we're alone. We feel like the world is moving in the wrong direction and there's nothing we can do about it. And we're right: there is nothing any of us can do about it alone. But together, in community, we can react, respond, and resist. Alone, we

cannot save the world; but together, we can save each other. Our salvation lies in each other's hands.

So when people come to our Unitarian Universalist communities, they're looking for more than hope. In fact, I'd say they already have hope, and that's what brought them in the door. They already had hope that the world could be better than it is, and they came here seeking a community that could help them deliver what they hope for: Salvation. Their own, and the world's.

The compelling part of building Beloved Community is that we get to be saved *and* do the saving. We both serve and are served by our belonging here. We can be blessed, and we can be a blessing.

The Beloved Community requires that we go Beyond Individualism. In order to build the Beloved Community, we have to recognize the limits of what any of us can accomplish on our own. Self-reliance is a myth. Have you ever actually seen anyone pull themselves up by their bootstraps? How is that even supposed to work? I can't even conceptualize it, much less do it.

I can't save myself. I need you. I need all of you. I need this Beloved Community to pick me up when I'm down. I need this Beloved Community to orient me time and time again to my purpose, to the meaningful work I am called to as a minister. I need you to call me back into covenant when I fall out; I need you to help me stay justice-focused; and I need your Agape love, the foundation of Beloved Community. You are my salvation. Or, in the words of Alexi Murdoch: "my Salvation lies in your love."