

## Socinian Eucharist

A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse on 18 March 2007  
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OPENING WORDS Since we are honoring our spiritual ancestors from Poland today, it is appropriate to open with words by the Nobel Prize-winning poet, Wislawa Szymborska. Her poem, *A Contribution to Statistics*, was translated by Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh:

Out of a hundred people  
those who always know better  
--fifty two,  
doubting every step:  
--nearly all the rest,  
glad to lend a hand  
if it doesn't take too long  
--as high as forty nine,  
always good,  
because they can't be otherwise  
--four, well maybe five,  
able to admire without envy  
--eighteen,  
suffering illusions induced by fleeting youth  
--sixty, give or take a few,  
not to be taken lightly  
--forty and four,  
living in constant fear  
of someone or something  
--seventy-seven,  
capable of happiness  
--twenty-something, tops,  
harmless singly,  
savage in crowds  
--half, at least,  
cruel  
when forced by circumstances  
--better not to know,  
even ballpark figures,  
wise after the fact  
--just a couple more  
than wise before it,  
taking only things from life --thirty  
(I wish I were wrong),  
hunched in pain  
no flashlight in the dark  
--eighty-three, sooner or later,  
righteous  
--thirty-five, which is a lot,

righteous and understanding

--three,

worthy of compassion

--ninety-nine,

mortal

--a hundred out of a hundred. Thus far this figure still remains unchanged.

For this hour, and the rest of our lives, may we be filled with compassion for *at least* 99% of our fellow beings.

ANTIPHONAL READING In this world there have always been many opinions about faith and salvation. The opinions of our Polish and Transylvanian ancestors were similar, so may we speak together antiphonal reading #566, *God Is One*

Again, those of you on the right side of the congregation, the piano side, please read the italicized words; those of you on this side, please join me in reading the words in normal print.

In this world there have always been many opinions about faith and salvation. *You need not think alike to love alike.*

There must be knowledge in faith also. *Sanctified reason is the lantern of faith.*

Religious reform can never be all at once, but gradually, step by step. *If they offer something better, I will gladly learn.*

The most important spiritual function is conscience, the source of all spiritual joy and happiness.

*Conscience will not be quieted by anything less than truth and justice.*

We must accept God's truth in this lifetime.

Salvation must be accomplished here on earth. *God is indivisible.*

Egy Az Isten. (Edge Oz Eeshten) *God is one.*

FIRST READING "The First Church in Salem, Unitarian" is one of the oldest continually-operated churches in North America, and the first to be governed by congregational polity. They've been reciting the same covenant together since 1629. The Rev. Alice Blair Wesley, a retired UU minister and scholar, paraphrases the Salem covenant as follows:

"We Pledge to walk together in truth and affection as best we know them now or may learn them in the days to come that we and our children may be fulfilled and that we may speak to the world in words and actions of peace and goodwill."

SECOND READING Clive Staples Lewis was born in Ireland, in 1898. He is best known for his books, the *Chronicles of Narnia*, but he also wrote a great deal of theology. He spent his twenties as an atheist, and was talked back into Christianity by his friend, J.R.R. Tolkien. This is from his book, *A Grief Observed*, about the death of his wife:

"Talk to me about the truth of religion and I'll listen gladly. Talk to me about the duty of religion and I'll listen submissively. But don't come talking to me about the consolation of religion or I shall suspect that you don't understand."

SERMON How many of you have ever participated in a Christian communion service? How many have felt their life change, because of a spiritual service, rite or ritual? How many come to this congregation precisely because you don't want to talk about "life-changing rituals"?

A few months ago, Mark Gustafson delivered a sermon here, and asked some potent theological questions. He asked about Heaven and Hell, and about what "salvation" could possibly mean, to contemporary Unitarian Universalists. Specifically, he asked if UUs believe that Adolph Hitler is in Heaven.

Questions like these are ancient. People have been asking "what happens after we die?" about as long as we've been able to talk.

The corollary question, “how should we live, while we’re here” comes up immediately thereafter.

I cannot answer any question that begins with the phrase “what do UUs believe about...” because we are a creedless faith. We do not have a list of things that we must believe to be a UU; nor a list of things we cannot. If anything, the closest thing to a common belief might be that we each must determine what we believe for ourselves— and support and challenge each other, as we search. That said, I will try to answer Mark’s questions, about what a plurality of UUs believe, about heaven and hell and salvation.

The obvious answer is, we cannot know whether Hitler is in heaven. We cannot say for certain *anything* about an afterlife, one way or the other. I prefer to focus my efforts and attention on life, here and now, and trust that any possible afterlife will take care of itself.

I don’t think that Mark was so much asking about Hitler, specifically, but rather about the possibility of salvation for those who have done so much harm, who’ve caused so much suffering in the world. I hear Mark’s challenge as a call to judgment. It is easy to talk about forgiveness, and say “everyone goes to heaven,” but does that mean that there are no consequences for our actions? If people like Hitler and Pol Pot and Idi Amin go to heaven, then why are we working so hard at being “good”? Why do we labor so, to create more justice and fairness in the world, if we get the same reward for being unjust?

This is one reason why I like the Szyborska poem from our opening words. She says that 99% of us are worthy of compassion. There might a percent or two of humans who really don’t deserve to get into heaven.

Now, I already regret talking about heaven. I don’t believe that life is a test, and I don’t believe that most of us choose our behavior based on whether we’ll be rewarded or punished, in an afterlife. We \*do\* wrestle with what feels right to us in this life.

All I know is, I feel better when I know I have done my best to be fair and compassionate and just. When I’ve cheated someone, or been unkind, I feel it in myself. When I work hard to create justice and right relations, I feel better about myself and my world.

When I am able to forgive someone for something they did to me, then I usually feel better. There are still a few whom I cannot forgive. And I know, someday, somehow, if and when I am able to forgive them, I will feel better in my own body, in my own life.

I don’t want to give people a “free pass”; I want there to be standards of behavior and consequences for treating others unjustly. And I want to challenge myself to both work for more justice and work to forgive the unjust.

That’s what salvation is, for me: working to feed and heal and care for my fellow beings, working to free them from despair, and working on forgiveness for us all.

I don’t know if there is an afterlife, but I do know that we are capable of creating a heaven or a hell in this life. Salvation is less earning something in the future than working to create a better circumstance in the present. Which brings us, finally, to the Socinian Eucharist.

Our spiritual ancestors, in Poland, in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, had some pretty radical ideas. They believed that Jesus lived an exemplary life, but that he was a human being, not a god. They didn’t even believe that god was god, in the sense that some use the word. They believed that god was imperfect, that god was growing and evolving just as we are. They were less concerned with going to heaven than with living according to Jesus’ teachings and examples in this life.

And as a reminder of those ideals, they rededicated themselves to living ethical lives by taking communion four times per year. They broke bread together, and drank wine together, not in memory of Jesus’ resurrection, but in memory of the difficult work he did while he was alive.

Our Polish and Lithuanian ancestors created a thriving culture of religious tolerance and ethical living. They had three different universities and were one of the first religious movements to use the new printing press technology to get their message out to the world. Led by an Italian theologian named Faustus Paolo Sozzini, or Socinus, in Latin, they were creating a humanist utopia in 1569. Unfortunately, the rest of our human cousins were not yet ready for such ideals, and these early unitarians were killed or captured or scattered across Europe, and their message was quieted for a century or two.

Recently, the Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini has been offering a Socinian Eucharist— a communion service, in the style of the followers of Faustus Socinus, so we can rededicate ourselves to these humanist values of justice and compassion. Now, when I first took communion in the Protestant church of my youth, it felt solemn and important, and I felt a bit more like a grown-up, but it did not change me as a person. I didn't feel any different, afterwards.

Later, I felt a bit of a tingle, when some friends and I discussed the idea of a timeless moment, where every person who had ever taken communion existed in common with each other. Billions of people, from hundreds of lands and two thousand years of history, all meeting in one eternal moment, all sharing the same wine and wafer, all divisions and distinctions shown to be illusory in the oneness of ultimate love... But that isn't how it is usually talked about, and the tingle went away.

In various UU churches, I have participated in Thanksgiving communions, with cornbread or gingerbread or loaves of bread from our multiple national heritages. I have heard of a UU communion service performed with chocolate, and I have offered flower services which are sometimes called flower communions, even though their inventor, Norbert Capek, did not want them called that.

All of these services were nice, they showed, in a ritual way, how we are all inter-connected, and depend upon each other to live and love and thrive. But they didn't really change me, either. They didn't make feel different about who I was in the world. About seven years ago, in a sanctuary that looks a bit like this one, at the First UU Church of Columbus, Ohio, I attended a Socinian Eucharist led by Mark Belletini.

That evening, I was reminded of Jesus' love for his fellow humans. I was reminded that he fed the hungry, and aided the sick, and he stood up to the leaders and agitated for peace and justice and compassion, even when it was dangerous to do so.

That evening, I learned about our Polish ancestors, who took Jesus seriously and tried their best to live according to his example.

That evening, I was reminded that \*I\* can live like that, too. I was reminded that our human lives matter; that we can work for justice and compassion and we can make a difference.

I was reminded that life and love are bigger than death and taxes; that even though governments and corrupt organizations and greed and fear and military might always seem more powerful, the message of Love always lives on, in spite of them.

I was reminded that our lives are more holy and more connected and more wondrous than we than we can ever really explain— and all we have to do is look around, and appreciate, and respond accordingly, with gratitude and awe and a little compassion for the person next to us. I learned that salvation is always possible, I just have to do it. I learned that just like Jesus, and just like the women and men in Rakow, Poland, at the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and just like every other person, of every other spiritual tradition, who has ever acted out of compassion and concern, even when it was dangerous or difficult or inconvenient or simply scary to do so, just like everybody else, I can make salvation real.

The Spirit of Life pulses in us all, and we can ignore it or push it aside and tell it that it isn't powerful enough to have any effect in the dog-eat-dog culture of our contemporary world, or we can embrace it and live it and feed those dogs and each other on the bread of justice and the wine of compassion.

I walked away from that communion knowing I was blest to be alive and inspired to live more closely to my highest ideals.

{beat}

Of course, over time, that feeling faded, as day-to-day details filled my mind and ordinary sorrows crowded my heart.

Which is why I offer this Socinian communion at least once per year, to remind myself and others of the power within us to save ourselves and each other. I will offer it this afternoon, about 12:45, right here in this sanctuary. There will be a wheat-free alternative available.

C. S. Lewis said that religion was a duty, not a consolation. He experienced his faith as an obligation, imposed from outside. I feel Spirit outside and inside me; I feel it as both a powerful healing force,

consoling me when I need it, and as an obligation, to carry that message out to the rest of my human cousins, who need to hear it as badly as I.

So may we be.