
All That He Assumed He Has Also Saved

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John 1:1-18

"What has not been assumed has not been healed;
it is what is united to his divinity that is saved. . ."
"Gregory of Nazianzus, Epistle 101

Invocation:

In the name of God "our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend." Amen.
"The Hymnal, no. 388, "O Worship the King," v.5

This may come as a surprise, but did you know that Unitarian Universalists" or "UUs" as they call themselves" did you know that UUs are well aware of the stereotypes the rest of us have about them?

Consider this UU joke for example:

A UU died and in the afterlife was walking along on a road. When the UU came to a fork in the road there was a sign with two arrows pointing in different directions. One arrow pointed one way and said, "To Heaven." The other arrow pointed the other way and said, "To a discussion about Heaven." Guess which way the UU went? Yes, you guessed it: to the discussion about heaven!

It's a funny stereotype, isn't it? It's the stereotype of a community that values discussion and respects doubt about matters of faith as much as experience and certainty about matters of faith.

In a similar vein consider another Unitarian Universalist joke:

A UU prayed, "Dear God, if there is a God, if you can, save my soul, if I have a soul."

Now, notice something in common about these jokes. They both involve a community that is "making fun" of itself. That is, they are not jokes that outsiders make about UUs but jokes that UUs themselves make about themselves. And that is crucial for the kind of humor involved here.

When outsiders make fun of another group it is all too likely to be experienced as ridiculing or targeting that group" even attacking the group. But non-ridiculing humor is more cathartic for everyone involved because it is more universal" more about what we all have in common as human beings, and not just what we want to point at and laugh at about a particular group.

Now there's an interesting play on words here! Unitarian Universalists laughing at themselves can offer us a universalizing

humor that enables us to laugh at ourselves""to laugh at each other as fellow human beings. Of course, these jokes are not just about a UU struggling with issues of doubt and faith. It's about all of us having doubts about faith. That's why we all find it funny, because we all have the same human feelings in common with the group that is the butt of that joke.

Now, let's shift the focus to groups other than UUs""just to confirm the point. Consider the following joke in the familiar pattern we all remember from schooldays: There was a Jewish rabbi, a Catholic priest, and a Baptist minister. We all remember that pattern of jokes, right? In this case:

A Rabbi, a Catholic priest and a [Baptist] minister were discussing how they divide the collection plate between church use and God.

The Rabbi said that he draws a circle in the middle of the room, stands in the middle of it, and throws the money up into the air. Whatever falls outside the circle goes to the Lord, and what falls inside goes to the church.

The priest said that he does something similar. However, he draws a line. When he throws up the money whatever falls in front of him is for the church, whatever is behind him goes to God.

The [Baptist] minister said that she also used a similar method for dividing up the collection plate. She throws the money up in the air, and she figures whatever God wants God will grab it.

Yes, ""God will grab it, if God really wants it.' Now that's one way to do stewardship, isn't it! But while we're laughing let's also play the game of ""name that commonality.' The game goes like this: first assume there's a universality here and not just an occasion to make fun of Baptists. And second, name that common feature that is part of our shared humanity. In this case, of course, it's the universality we all share of wanting to keep all of our assets for ourselves and not to give them up to anyone else""including God, right?

Now, lest anyone think that we're leaving-out the Episcopalians with all this good humor, consider one more example. Consider the differences in three types of church dressing rooms for clergy; that is, the clergy vesting rooms found in three different churches: Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Anglican or Episcopalian. To appreciate these differences you just need to know that the clergy vesting room is where the priests dress in their robes before entering the sanctuary to preside over worship.

Now each of these three types of vesting rooms can display characteristic furnishings; room furnishings that typify the different traditions. So, for example, the Greek, Russian, and other Orthodox Christians enjoy icons so much that their clergy vesting rooms may include an icon of Christ as one of the furnishings in the room.

And the Roman Catholic clergy vesting rooms might have an image, of course, of the Blessed Virgin Mary""since Catholics honor Mary so much in the rosary and in many other prayers and songs. But what might our Episcopalian clergy dress in front of instead of an icon of Christ or an image of Mary? What could typify our tradition comparably to the others? Hmm? The answer is a mirror; that's right, just a mirror!

Now once again, while (I hope) we're having a good laugh, I invite you to assume there's a universality here and to name that commonality. And what's the common feature or universal characteristic that is being parodied here? It's our human vanity, of course? It's a vain self-absorption that can sometimes trump even our piety or devotion to God.

So my clergy vesting joke is not just about the vanity of Anglican or Episcopal clergy but about all of us as creatures of vanity. And that's why we laugh, because we recognize from our own experience. As they say in the 12 Step recovery movement, ""If you can spot it, you got it!'

But in order for our laughter to be a non-ridiculing and non-toxic kind of laughter we have to assume the universality of what is being caricatured here. A more generous and humane laughter resonates with the commonality of what is being parodied and exaggerated in our jokes about ourselves and about each other.

Now that leads us directly to the kind of generosity and humanity that our Lord himself represents in today's scriptures appointed for this First Sunday after Christmas Day. It's the generosity and humanity that St. Paul celebrates in the Letter to the Galatians when he says:

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. (Galatians 4.4-5)

This scripture says precisely that "God was in Christ' assuming our universality and identifying with our commonality. That is what it means that Jesus was "born of a woman" and "born under the law" that is, he was born under the universal conditions of all of us; mortal creatures of flesh and blood who need redemption from those things that the law identifies in us as our injustice, our unrighteousness, and our unholiness.

In fact, in order to emphasize Jesus' identification with our complete humanity the ancient church developed a formula for describing the universality and commonality of his becoming like us "in every essential except sin.' It goes like this:

"What [he has not] assumed has not been healed;
it is what is united to his divinity that is saved." Gregory of Nazianzus, Epistle 101

In those terms Jesus identifies with our humanity so completely that no human being is left outside the universal redemption offered by God in Christ. No one is so unredeemable on the one hand, or too perfect already on the other hand, to be excluded from this inclusive embrace of God seeking to adopt us as God's "children."

Rather, the question is whether we will receive God's generous offer of divine identification with us through Christ. On the contrary, there may be some aspects of character that we prefer not to acknowledge and so we will hinder our experience of God's offer of universality. That is what our gospel reading acknowledges when it says that:

the world did not know him . . . [and] his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. (John 1.11-13)

Perhaps the best finale to these illustrations of gospel good news is a humanist version. I'm thinking of that morality tale that many of us enjoy during this Christmas season. It's Charles Dickens' classic, A Christmas Carol that humanizing story that features the mean-spirited Ebenezer Scrooge and his humble employee, Bob Cratchit.

You know the characters and the plot: Scrooge at the beginning is depicted as exclaiming "Bah! Humbug!" to every overture of Christmas good cheer in the world around him from the interior life of his business practice to the external world of 19th century industrial London. But then three spirits or spiritual interventions intercept his life and he experiences a transformation so complete that he becomes like a child himself being reborn or re-birthing.

It is then, by the end of The Christmas Carol, that an unlikely adoption has occurred: old Ebenezer Scrooge lets himself no, almost abases himself to be adopted by the Cratchit family as a kind of "Uncle Scrooge" to Tiny Tim. He is no longer the Scrooge of his "Bah! Humbug!" days full of scorn and ridicule for all things "Christmassy.' He has instead "assumed the universality' of human experience in a way that unites him across the abyss the abyss that would otherwise separate him as a wealthy English financier from the abject poverty of his employee's life and family.

In the Roman Catholic churches across the world this Sunday the readings celebrate the Holy Family on this First Sunday after Christmas Day. That is certainly appropriate after the churches' almost universal observance of Jesus' birthday last week. It is providential too that this Holy Family Sunday occurs just days after Pope Benedict 16th has recently survived an attack and been restored to his vocation as the spiritual father of a spiritual family.

But we Episcopalians have a related and equally powerful theme in our observance today of our adoption as children of God children "who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God" (John 1.13). It is in that regard that I exhort you to observe for the traditional twelve days of Christmas a Christmas discipline: I invite you to follow through on what was inaugurated here today.

In imitation of our Lord in his incarnation as the Christ child, I invite us here to assume our human universality with all other people, and to identify our common humanity with all other people, and in that way prove the ancient church formula: "All that he assumed has been saved or healed.'

Conversely" and I put it to you as a question" is it possible that wherever we do not experience his saving and healing power in our own lives, it is because we have left out of account some aspect of character, or some group identity, that our Lord himself has embraced in his universalizing identification with us? I leave it with you only as a question on this First Sunday after Christmas Day. But the point of the question is intended to be a generous, non-ridiculing and redemptive one.

With generosity of spirit, therefore, I pray that by the Twelfth Day of Christmas on Epiphany, January 6, there may be no one among us who can say [smile] "Bah! Humbug!" to our Lord giving power to anyone who receives him; power to become "children of God," as the gospel declares, no matter what kind of Scrooge we may have been before.

And for that generosity we continue to celebrate the Christmas Spirit: the Spirit of rebirth that our Lord's birth inaugurated wherever it is found in the world today. Thanks be to God!

Invocation: *In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Appendix

Accessed by this author on 12/27/09 at
www.stjohnadulthood.org/The_03.htm
(Episcopal Church of St. John in the Wilderness, White Bear Lake, MN)

3. The Early Church's Debate Over the Person of Jesus
3.1. The Council of Chalcedon Doctrine on the Person of Jesus
451 AD: Council of Chalcedon declared that Jesus is:

- fully God and fully Human
- equal to God the Father
- existed from all eternity

This formulation was the result of a struggle over the first few centuries of the church to understand:

- the degree of *humanity* versus *divinity* in Jesus
- the *separateness and integrity* versus the *unity* of Jesus' humanity and divinity

www.stjohnadulthood.org/The_03.htm (Episcopal Church of St. John in the Wilderness, White Bear Lake, MN) Accessed by this author on 12/23/09.

www.uua.org/documents/congservices/yacm/uu_identity.pdf Adapted from this website and access by this author on 12/23/09.

www.stjohnadulthood.org/The_03.htm (Episcopal Church of St. John in the Wilderness, White Bear Lake, MN) Accessed by this author on 12/23/09.

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