

Would We Recognize the Saviors Among Us?

Rev. DC Fortune

UU Congregation of the Susquehanna Valley

April 26, 2025

We heard some weeks ago the story of the abbot and his friend the rabbi. The abbot was upset because there was dissention amongst the brothers of his monastery, people were grumbling and being unkind.

The rabbi told the abbot that the Jewish community “knew that the messiah was one of your number.”

The abbot returned to his monastery and as news of the rabbi’s words spread among the brothers, the men began to treat each other more kindly, offering grace and forgiveness, apologizing for their own bad behavior, and they began to appreciate the divine in each other.

That is a beautiful story, and appropriate for Lent, when many are wondering what a savior might look like in our current time.

Would we recognize a messiah? A savior of humanity? Or would we nail him to a tree, or perhaps ship him to a prison camp in El Salvador without due process, to disappear from home and family, perhaps forever?

It is a difficult conversation to have.

Would we recognize a savior if she appeared in feminine form? Certainly there are myriad religions that would reject that notion out of hand, so steeped are they in toxic patriarchy.

A piece by someone named Teresa Bilowus appeared in my feed this weekend, shared by a colleague. Bilowus posts content on Instagram as @growingcirclesofwomen and seems to have the expected assortment of divine goddess imagery and language on her page.

At any rate, Bilowus shared a picture from this past week’s funeral events for Pope Francis at the Vatican.

Papal funerals are a Big Deal in Vatican City. They are governed and directed by rituals and protocols that date back centuries. Things are done in a specific order, without deviation, and generally all in Latin. People

stand or are seated in specific order, Cardinals here, Bishops there, Dignitaries over there, in alphabetical order by the name of the nation, in French, because French is the language of diplomacy. That's the rule.

Only, this week, officials allowed that protocol to be trespassed in a remarkable way that offered a public image of very personal grief at the foot of the papal casket.



There stood a nun.

Out of place.

Quite possibly she was the only woman in that entire room.

And she was not in line.

One might say she was quite *out* of line.

Bilowus identified her in this way:

Her name is Sister Genevieve. A tiny woman, barely seen amidst the vast ceremonial weight of a papal passing. Yet there she was — present, weeping, breaking all Vatican protocol to stand close to the casket of her dear friend, Pope Francis.

I was struck by the image. This wasn't just grief. This was presence. This was the Divine Feminine, breaking through yet again in the most unexpected of places: a male-dominated, clergy-only space, where she wasn't supposed to be. But she was. She always is.

Sister Genevieve, Bilowus explained, had been a close friend of Francis for decades, sharing a dedication to service and humility with the humble man who became pontiff.

She was the one who managed to bring the forgotten to him, within the walls of marble mosaic and heavy brocade. She brought into his presence members of the carnival community in which she lived and served with another nun not far from the center of Rome.

She arrived each week at the time when Francis held a "public" audience, bringing with her the people who worked in the carnival and circus, living in caravans, on the edges of polite society, only a small step up from a tent city of homeless residents.

Carnival barkers and roustabouts have never had prestige in any place they performed. The circus for centuries has been the place where misfits find community – apart from polite society. In some communities, all of this language translates to a more specific sort of description of these outcasts – they were members of the LGBTQ+ community, and were living, quite literally, at the edges of society, not permitted access to the abundance and comforts of the city.

And yet sister Genevieve brought these folks each week, to meet the pope, to be welcomed into his presence, and honored by the dignity and compassion he offered them.

Such lowly folk are not what the average western tourist expects to see in St. Peter's Basilica, or anywhere among the obscene levels of wealth amassed at the home base of a religion that lauds a humble carpenter's son. But Sister Genevieve brought them in and led them to Francis.

The 81-year-old nun was a dedicated friend to Pope Francis, linked by a shared understanding of the mission of Jesus' church: so feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned, and to care for the humble and most meager of humanity's number.

Standing alone, near the foot of Francis' coffin, the tiny woman burst into tears and held her face in her hands. She took out a tissue and dried her eyes, but her grief was so powerful, and so pure, that no one interrupted the holiness of that moment.

The international press made much fuss over this simple, vulnerable expression of personal grief, particularly as it violated a number of important protocols. Sister Genevieve, for her part, answered some questions from the press, but focused her attention on the rituals and rites of the day. They were here to mourn and bury a pontiff, not create moments of media content to warm the hearts of observers around the globe.

Representatives of this group were in attendance at the pope's funeral on Saturday, cleaned up and scrubbed shiny clean for the event, aware that they were being presented not just so that they could grieve, but to remind the world that Francis was their hero.



Representatives of the homeless, migrants, prisoners, and transgender people form a honor guard as pallbearers carry the coffin of Pope Francis inside the Santa Maria Maggiore, his final resting place. (Alkis Konstantinidis/Reuters)

Would we recognize a savior in Sister Genevieve?

Would we recognize a savior who is a woman, an elderly one, who has very little in the way of institutional power? Who is likely to be forgotten by the men dressed in fancy robes who will decide this week who will succeed Francis to the papacy?

Would we recognize a savior among those whom the nun brought into an audience with the pope? Among the drag queens and butch lesbians, the transgender folks, the homeless, those who might be addicted to drugs, or have disabilities?

I remember a time when I was sitting outside a pizza joint in a Boston suburb, chatting with a friend as we waited for our orders to be ready.

There was a guy picking up bottles and cans and other litter on the sidewalk near us. He was unkempt, wearing clothes that looked like they might crumble to shreds at any moment. He smelled unpleasant.

His face, though, was thoughtful, as he kept a running commentary under his breath, seeming to chat with others whom we could not see.

He picked up cans to turn in at the grocery store for a nickel apiece. Bottles, too. Glass bottles were easier to pick up, but heavier to carry. Plastic bottles were light, but did not carry well because they kept sliding out of his plastic grocery bag.

He did not seek our attention, so we chatted about nothing in particular as we waited for our pizza.

The man picked up a water bottle from the road near the curb, where it had rolled. It was partially filled with water, and had its cap still attached.

The man shook the water briefly, unscrewed the cap, and then walked over to where a tiny tree had been planted by the city in the sidewalk, and poured the water out onto the dirt at the base of the tree.

It was maybe a cup of water, just 8 ounces. God only knows how long it had been sloshing around in that half-filled plastic bottle, but he did not let it go to waste by pouring it into the gutter of the street – he brought it to this scrawny little sapling and gave its water to the roots of that living thing.

In this simple action, the man transformed before us from someone who was uncomfortable for us to be around into someone who had a much bigger lesson to teach.

Would we have seen anything divine about this man before we watched this interaction? If pressed, we might have come up with some lofty language that spoke of the presence of the divine in everybody, including this pathetic creature before us. But really? That would have been theory – philosophy, if you will. It would not have been real to us.

But we saw something more: he had the capacity for kindness, and not because he was hoping to get a reward. He was not paying attention to us, as he was engrossed in his own internal conversation. He was just doing the right thing, caring for nature, such as it presented himself near a busy intersection across from the Walgreens and the ice cream shop.

Suddenly, we were able to see the divine in this man.

And the lesson was not lost on either of us.

The only reason we saw that divinity was because we observed this man behave in a way that we appreciated as valuable, noble, kind, generous. This was the 21st century version of the widow's mite – the lesson about the virtue of giving what you have instead of what you can afford to spare for charity.

I went back to my apartment that day and wondered about the other divine souls I regularly ignore: urban areas are not lacking in people who are unhoused, or disabled, or addicted, or mentally ill.

Our Universalist understanding of the holy tells us that every person has worth and dignity, that every person is worthy of love and salvation and the grace of god.

And we had missed that part of this man until he proved himself worthy of that designation in our eyes.

There was a lot of soul-searching to be done that day.

The difference between this guy on the street at 6 pm and the guy on the street at 1 am was nothing more than seven hours and a pint of cheap wine. They were the same man. The wino we might judge, or perhaps pity in the wee hours of the morning is the same guy who just poured out his windfall gift of tepid water for a tree rather than simply pour it down the storm drain.

Finding the divine in everyone is not an easy thing to do.

It is easier for us to see the divine in those who are powerless than it is for us to see that divinity among the powerful. Think of the politicians currently holding power in our nation's Capital. Do we see the divine in them? The

ones who want to destroy the department of education? The ones who want to privatize Social Security? Decimate the Veteran's Association?

Could one of them be the savior?

Oof. That's a heavier lift than the homeless guy collecting bottles.

Sister Genevieve is a humble member of a humble order of nuns, but is still part of an enormously powerful, global organization with no small number of sins to its name.

Could she be the savior? Even as she serves a large institution that has done so much harm?

Or the guy picking up bottles?

Or the speaker of the US House of Representatives?

Or the president?

I know those are tricky jumps to make.

Everyone has inherent worth and dignity.

Everyone is worthy of the loving embrace of the divine.

Each person has a spark of the divine within.

I could instruct you now to go and do savior-ish things, since we all have that capacity, but I won't.

I want us to think about the potential of others to be our leaders. Think about what we might learn from those we otherwise might not respect, or value.

Yes, certainly, do the right thing as you go through your day, but let us be aware that the savior may come in a variety of shapes and sizes that surprise us.

Every person has the capacity for salvation. Every person has the right to liberation. No matter what they've done. No matter who they are. No matter any of it.

Let us remember the wisdom from today's reading.

We are not done.

There is more to do.

Never forget, this moment, or all that brought us here – in time and space.

Remembering past, present,

And that we are not done.

There is learning and growth before us.

May we never be so sure of ourselves that we are unable to see miracles
when they happen, or saviors when they appear.

Amen.