

## *“Finding Salvation in this Life: Spiritual Practices and Practicing Redemption”*

### Opening Words:

The theme for March is “redemption.” We are exploring many facets of redemption, from experience with the judicial system and prison ministries last week with Rev. Leslie Kee, to poetry that explores redemption with poet Harvey Hix at the end of the month. Redemption evokes a sense of change and transformation, an experience that brings us new peace or understanding, new relationships with ourselves and with others; redemption implies the possibility of healing and forgiveness, whether we are asking for these or offering them. Redemption can happen in a moment or over a lifetime; redemption can come from spiritual practices and discipleship, work that we do day in and day out in the name of our beliefs and our search for wholeness. Redemption can come from an act of kindness we offer or an unexpected tragedy in which we experience love and community from a new vantage point. Some of the questions I’ve offered for you to consider this month include: Some communities and cultures have a ritual practice of atonement—

can you imagine what this might be like? How would it change your community to have such a practice? When have you had an experience that felt redeeming—to you or to a community? When have you found unexpected healing or transformation? When have you prayed for a situation to resolve in a way that would offer redemption to you or to others? Where do you long for an experience of redemption, atonement or reparation?

When I think of redemption, I think of both the ways in which I must care for myself as well as the ways in which my community offers a salve for my soul. I think of moments where I turned a corner and found something unexpected—in myself or my context—that changed me in ways I could not have planned or understood before. I think of human suffering, struggle and crisis, and the many ways we might experience a shift in these experiences. Of course, the word redemption has taken a distinctly Christian connotation in our culture; today I hope to offer you a different imagining of what it means to experience redemption.

SERMON

Redemption is something we may think of as an event that happens and is over, rather than a process. We shy away from this word because it feels...heavy, and unreliable. Perhaps

someone in our past has offered us “redemption” and then we had an experience that was not actually redeeming. Redemption in this connotation feels like something we don’t choose, something that happens to us. I would offer that redemption is sometimes the result of things we chose to engage or let go of, and sometimes a surprise. We usually think about the result of transformation rather than the process of transformation, because the letting go and making new are hard work, often painful work, and it is easier to think about what will be on the other side than what we have to get through to enjoy it.

We know what the other side of our pain, suffering, and challenges might look like; we don’t always know what it will take to get there. When I worked as an organizer in low income housing in Dallas, tenants I worked with wanted to transform their apartment complexes. It was hard to imagine how we would do that, but we could talk about what would be different—there wouldn’t be crime, management would be respectful, apartments would get updates on an actual schedule, sewage wouldn’t back up all over common areas. Kids would have afterschool activities and seniors would feel safe and be respected as leaders. The work to make this happen was going to be complex and challenging—we were going to be asking for change on multiple

levels. Ownership and management, families and individuals, city leaders and adjoining properties with neighbors who might not share this vision all had to be involved in this shift. Tenants groups and leaders had to commit to educating themselves about how properties were managed and financed, about how local and federal laws applied to their housing, and had to commit to pressuring these various constituencies to shift in ways that would support change. They came to meetings, trainings and conferences. They prayed together. They started a conversation that permeated the complex and even at times the city. Shifts began to take place—new ownership partnerships between tenants and non-profit developers took over properties and reframed the communities, transforming them inside and out. While the wider neighborhood still stands in contrast, these changes have put into motion new possibilities. The power of redemption for their neighborhood was in their vision of the future and their willingness to create and re-create that vision together, as a community. They made a leap of faith—that their vision was possible.

The truth about transformation and redemption, whether it is personal, communal, or global, is that it usually is preceded by some kind of crisis. Regardless of how one handles the crisis,

change will occur; but there are actually tools we can use to manage crisis and guide change. These tools help us personally but they also help us guide change communally. The outcomes for crisis can be complete destruction. The tenants I worked with could have done nothing and had their entire complex shut down, demolished, and redeveloped into something else—these would have been transformations too, although we wouldn't want to talk about them because the outcomes are so negative. These changes would not have been redeeming, in most people's eyes. My point is that we have a choice in the midst of our crises to act in ways that will increase the life-giving outcomes and decrease our experience of total destruction. Transformation that is life-giving is redemptive.

In the UU tradition, it is not the redemptive power of God or God's incarnation that we turn to, but rather the redemptive power of community. The support we need to face and sustain life-affirming change can be found in community; interdependence is a necessary element in surviving and guiding change. Don't walk this path *alone*.

One of my students once told me she was looking for that place in life where things just fell together and difficulty disappeared [don't

we all get tired and wish for this?])—where so many challenges weren't showing up all the time. I smiled and gently told her that place never comes—life doesn't change; what changes is how we approach and respond to life and its challenges. Redemption is often something we experience internally, something that shifts for us.

Sometimes crisis forges integrity by asking us choose from our hearts and our deepest selves in order to effect our own salvation. Crisis can also challenge our integrity, masking our deeper selves in a surface of fear, pain and stress. Tools that allow us to clear away the fog and reveal our true nature help us deliver ourselves and each other out of crisis. These might be prayer or meditation, or walks or therapy or art or close friends or writing or...what other tools have you found?

You might be wondering, “How can individual spiritual practices and communal/community practices create what many Unitarian Universalists refer to as “salvation in this life?” How are these tools of redemption for individuals and communities? Where and how can we begin to engage these and why should we? The tools allow us to practice the affirmation of life, and practice... allows things to unfold that would not otherwise...For example, you may have a goal to run a marathon, or learn to play a song on

guitar or piano. You would never expect to be able to do these things without practicing, engaging a teacher, and even connecting with the community of other people doing these things.

The question we need to ask before engaging in prayer or spiritual practices is: ***What is our vision for ourselves and our world that would benefit from these practices? How do these tools redeem suffering, crisis and the challenges of our human communities? Can we really practice “redemption?”***

Fundamentally, we may be asking: What does it mean to pray?

In his book, Finding Our Way Again, Brian McClaren says that when we put together institutional participation (like coming to church and doing stuff together); the knowledge we gain through sermons, RE, reading and discussion; and spiritual experiences through spiritual practices we undertake on our own and together, we grow and experience life-giving transformation (redemption), both individually and as a community. We need all of these. As part of this growth, we need to include a variety of spiritual practices that will allow us to have new (redeeming!) spiritual experiences. This is echoed in UU minister Erik Walker

Wikstrom's work, which includes several books—including one being passed around in this congregation called "Serving with Grace" and an adult religious education curriculum called "Spirit In Practice."

As each of our congregations and our denomination overall develops a Life-Affirming (redemptive) vision for who we are in the world as Unitarian Universalists and what we hope to do together, we are in need of new practices and disciplines, and we may need to find new practitioners to join and learn from, create new circles of community. UU theologian and writer, Rev. Thandeka, calls these practices learning to "love beyond belief," and asks us as Unitarian Universalists to first be in community together, with spiritual grounding, before we undertake the work of the world—social justice and salvation in this life. This also involves developing what theologian Kathleen O'Connor calls a "hermeneutic of hunger" rather than just one of suspicion...we must allow ourselves to hunger for spirit, for community, for life-affirming change...for redemption.

But are our spiritual practices something we do alone, when no one is looking or listening or something we do together? Many would suggest we need both. As Brian McClaren says,



“sustained and sustaining hope, mutual encouragement, and stimulation to love and good deeds—these are among the desired outcomes of communal practices” (111).

McClaren identifies three types of spiritual practice that bring communities together and create growth. Contemplative activities, communal activities and missional activities. Describing my own three areas of this triangle: **Contemplative practices are those things we may do on our own or supported in community, but privately and quietly. For me these are:** writing, outdoor time, meditation; **Communal practices are those practices we engage together such as** Sunday services, engaging in a meditation group or Sangha, our candles of community or sharing of our joys, sorrows and concerns, prayer, outdoor time, deep listening. **Missional practices might be those things we do in solidarity such as the** Standing on the Side of Love campaigns for the GLBT community and immigrant families; social justice work within our communities and even Stewardship campaigns that help us to raise money for our congregations so that we can continue to work together and support one another. UU minister Erik Walker Wikstrom identifies eight kinds of spiritual practice or prayer as well: personal, spiritual, communal, justice, life, soul, body and mind practices.

Each of these offers a different kind of redemptive experience. While more discreet in his definitions, these certainly are echoes of the larger categories that Brian McClaren refers to. Wikstrom includes artistic endeavors, ideas that deepen our understanding of ourselves and our world, and activism.

So, is prayer a form of spiritual practice or are all spiritual practices a form of prayer? Without splitting hairs, I suggest that all spiritual practices are various forms of prayer; the important element for anything to be prayer is the kind of presence and intention one brings to it.

In reading Margaret Wheatley's work on chaos and organizations she says that what determines how we will recover from periods of chaos comes from the values we choose to organize by. She encourages us that if we organize from a value of community we will find ourselves in a very different place. Within this, we can choose "collaboration, being together, and healthy relationships" (YouTube lecture) and find also renewal and life affirming change. Redemption. All of these threads tell us that there seems to be a level of connectedness, a kind of mystical dance we are participating in that connects our energy to all of the energies

around us, for better or for worse depending on what we bring to the dance.

I could do another entire sermon series on this, but I what I get from the research I've read is that the energy we create has an effect on everything else...so it's wise to think about the realities we create through thought, emotion and action and to begin pay attention to who we are being...are we Present, are we prayerful? Are we playful? What intentions are we acting from? Are they redeeming in some way? Do we even know?

If you are unsure about praying "for" something, remember that there is a difference between experiencing healing and experiencing "cures." Prayer seems to create an opening for transcendent experiences that allow healing and transformation, redemption, even when the basic details seem to stay the same. So whether you call it intention or prayer or Presence or being prayerful, the impact you bring to the co-creation of a better world is real although somewhat immeasurable.

So...do you pray? Is this a praying congregation? Do you practice redemption? What practices affirm life and love for you and for this community?

As you consider the kinds of prayer you may already engage individually and collectively, I invite you to consider what kinds of shifts might occur in this community and the surrounding community as you become what Rev. Jane Vennard refers to as a “praying congregation” and learn to do what Rev. Thandeka calls “loving beyond belief.”