

What Does It Mean to Be a People of Blessing? ©

A sermon by Rev. Roberta Finkelstein

Sunday June 3, 2017

This month's Soul Matters theme is blessing. Blessing. Initially I was kind of resistant to embracing the theme. The word blessing made me squirm. Too Hallmark, or too Irving Berlin (you know, 'count your blessings instead of sheep and you'll fall asleep counting your blessings') or too trite or too squishy or, I don't know. Something about the word 'blessing' just set off my spiritual BS detector. But, as often happens, as I engaged with the materials in the packet I found myself warming to the theme, and having my resistance challenged and eventually worn down. Sort of reminded me of the Rev. Scott Alexander's assertion that when people say to him, "I don't believe in God" his response is, "Well, which God is it that you don't believe in?" So, Roberta, what is it about the theme of blessing that you don't want to embrace?

In the introduction to this theme, Rev. Scott Tayler writes, "We all, at times, focus so intently on the few things going wrong that we completely miss the dozens of things going right. Tunnel vision too often takes over our days. For Unitarian Universalists, this is the central tragedy of the human condition. We respect those who frame the human problem as sin or twisted wills, but it's nearsightedness that our religion is most worried about. Which is also why blessings are so central to our faith. They are, for us, a way of widening our view. Unlike some of our brother and sister religions, we don't *say* a lot of blessings. Instead we *point* to them. For us, blessings are not something we give to each other as much as they involve us helping each other notice all that's *already been given* to us. And it's not just about widening our view to see the gifts themselves; it's about widening our understanding of life. Pointing to blessings repairs our

relationship with life, allowing us to see it as generous not threatening, full of grace-filled surprises not dominated by a cold indifference.”

I like that take on blessing. We don't say blessings, we don't offer blessings. We notice the blessedness all around us. We do this out of some of the core theological assertions of our Unitarian Universalist faith. One is our doctrine of human nature, also known as the First Principle: affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Having rejected the doctrine of original sin, we embrace instead what Matthew Fox calls original blessing. Fox began his ministry as a Dominican but was expelled from the order and the Catholic Church in 1993 for, among other things, referring to God as 'mother', working too closely with Native Americans, refusing to condemn homosexuality, and teaching the four paths of creation spirituality. Cool, huh? We should have nabbed him, but the Episcopal Church got him instead. Ah well.

Creation Spirituality is an eclectic approach to spirituality that draws on ancient mystics such as St. Francis and Julian of Norwich, as well as contemporary ecological and environmental thinkers. It is informed by indigenous spiritualities, Eastern traditions such as Buddhism and Sufism, and the Jewish prophetic tradition. I think of Creation Spirituality as a bridge between our First Principle and our Seventh Principle: affirming the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

What a blessing it is to be a part of a religious tradition that so deeply honors the diverse spiritual paths among the religions of the world. What a blessing it is to be a part of a religious tradition that grows and changes and evolves and expands when confronted with new realities and new potential truths! Did you know that there used to be only Six Principles? That Seventh Principle, the beautiful metaphorical casting of our very existence as an interdependent web, is almost brand new. It has been a part of our covenant only since 1985.

So, I was feeling blessed that I had been able to make my peace with the word blessing. I had found theological resonance. I was ready to jump into the question of what it means to be a people of blessing. And then I started reading posts on the worship support Facebook page for Soul Matters. Somebody asked about what hymns we were planning to use around the theme, and I answered, “Hymn #1, of course.” I love that hymn; in the old hymnal it was called “Prayer for This House” and that is how I still think of it. And this congregation loves that hymn. So, imagine my dismay when a colleague commented that their hesitation is that it encourages a fortress mentality, a closing off from the world. Bummer! But I can understand how you could read it that way. Keeping hate out, that’s good. But holding love in might indeed imply that we keep all the love for ourselves. But you all know that is not what we mean when we sing that hymn, right?

Religious scholars recognize that there are two distinct directions in which the eyes of the faithful might gaze: other worldly and this worldly. The other worldly look to salvation in the after-life; they are focused on getting into heaven and avoiding hell through a program of right belief. Life on this earth is simply a way-station, relatively unimportant except as it is used to align one’s heart and mind with the proper belief system. Within the major religions of the world, there are many sects or denominations that are other-worldly. They focus on purity and right-thinking and control. Their prayer for their house is to keep the evils of the world away.

There are times and circumstances when an other-worldly orientation is completely understandable and essential to survival. An enslaved people, for example, would cling to a vision of a better life in the next world as an antidote to the despair and misery of this world. Without a belief in a God who was waiting for them in some other place and time, coping might not have been possible. But

the other-worldly orientation of the enslaved peoples of America didn't serve to close them off from reality; it gave them the resilience to survive. And resist.

Maybe it is a luxury to be able to join a faith community whose hopes and dreams for salvation are firmly planted in this world. That is who we are, we Unitarian Universalists. I've never quite thought of it this way before, but our this-worldly orientation may be evidence of our privilege. In that case, we need to use that orientation for the good. And we do, at least sometimes. We assert that what we do in this world matters. In fact, it is the only thing that matters. There is no other world waiting – there is no other time. What we have is this one wild and precious life – to use poet Mary Oliver's words. And salvation is a matter of making the most of it.

Once you decide that your religion is of this world, there is one more decision to be made: what will the nature of the relationship between your religion and the larger culture be? Will it be one of accommodation or critical engagement? The religion of the empire is often a religion of accommodation. Let's preach a gospel that supports the emperor, even when it is made manifest that the emperor has no clothes. (I am, of course, speaking hypothetically!)

But that wasn't the way our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors engaged with the world; nor is it the way we engage the world today. We are a religion of critical engagement. We believe that the greatest patriots are not those who wave the flag in uncritical enthusiasm, but those who care enough to inform themselves, think for themselves, and demand that their country live up to its ideals. A religion of this world, critically engaged with the culture, does just that. It resists and disrupts when the values of freedom and justice are trampled. It speaks and acts on behalf of all peoples who find themselves pushed to the margins. It advocates for a deep respect for all of creation, for privileging compassion above profit. We are, in

the words of former Unitarian Universalist Association President Bill Sinkford, “. . . a religion with a spiritual heart and a civic circumference.”

To maintain our spiritual heart and our civic circumference is hard work. It is the work of a lifetime. And so, we need our sanctuary, our brave place, our blessed house with walls strong to keep hate out and hold love in. We need to be here, to be refreshed and restored and replenished, so that we can, week after week, go back out from this house and do the work of justice, and mercy, and compassion. This house is not a fortress that turns us into narcissists. It is a way-station that nourishes us for the journey and equips us over and over again for the work we are called to do over and over again.

What does it mean to be a people of blessing? It means that we are acutely aware of the fact that we have this place, this house of love and courage. We pay attention to the gift of beloved community. We recognize it for the blessing that it is. And then we ask ourselves, how does having this blessed and beloved place equip us to bless others? Not to say a blessing, not to bestow a blessing, but to be a blessing?

Again quoting from the Soul Matters packet, “Those who feel blessed have little trouble passing blessings on. Our tradition takes this calculus seriously. As UU minister, Rev. Don Wheat, puts it ‘The religious person is a grateful person, and the grateful person is the generous person.’ In short, by noticing our blessings, we become a blessing. So, this month the question in front of all of us is not simply “Do you notice the blessings surrounding you?” It’s also, “How are the blessings in your life leading you to bless others?” Blessings don’t just fill us up; they cause us to overflow. Life spills into us and we spill into others. In other words, blessings don’t just enrich us; they connect us. And maybe that is the greatest blessing of all.”

In a moment, Worship Associate Linda Sanders is going to lead us in a ritual of blessing known as Flower Communion. Flower Communion originated in Prague just before World War II. Rev. Norbert Capek and his wife Maya wanted to give people hope in a terrible time, so they founded the first Unitarian church in Czechoslovakia. As they were especially fond of children they wanted a ritual that would assure the children that even in the midst of wars and terrible times, you could continue to believe in love, to act in friendship and good will, and to help one another. So, they created the Flower Communion. Celebrating Flower Communion reminded people that you can have beauty and sharing despite the fear. You can, when you come together, keep the ideas of love and peace alive in people's minds and hearts. When the Nazis came to power in Czechoslovakia, Rev. Capek was arrested and sent to the concentration camp at Dachau, where he died. But his idea, the Flower Communion, lives on in our Unitarian Universalist churches all these years later. Today we celebrate Flower Communion to remind ourselves about how important it is for us to keep alive the memory of powerful ideas, to remind ourselves to be surprised by beauty, and to remember to take leaps of faith during hard times.

Linda, will come forward now and tell us how we can bless each other with our gifts?