

Revisiting Salvation©
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet
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As I am sure all of you are aware, the holiday season is upon us. For a significant number of people the phrase “the holiday season” refers to just three holidays, Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Years Day. There are numerous other holidays at this time of year however. One of them begins at sunset this evening, the holiday of Hanukkah. For those of you who have roots in Jewish culture or tradition I wish you Happy Hanukkah. Probably only a few of you here celebrate Hanukkah. It is quite possible that some of you may have only minimal knowledge regarding the holiday and what it commemorates.

Many people have limited knowledge of the various holidays that fall within what is commonly referred to as the holiday season—the time period from Thanksgiving through New Year’s Day. This year the holiday season has at least 28 holidays representing 8 religious faith traditions. Each year the number is different but typically there are 20 or more in any given year. In pointing this out it becomes quite obvious that the phrase “the holiday season” includes more than just three holidays. This season then means different things to different people.

Each holiday, like each person, is unique in its own way. Each has its own history, meaning and celebration. At least three of the holidays during this period share two things in common. The three holidays I am referring to are Thanksgiving, Hanukkah and Christmas. When we consider the history of these three holidays it is clear that the people involved in the origin of each had a belief in God—many people today would assert, the same God. What is less clear is that each of these holidays shares a common theme, namely salvation.

This theme may not be apparent, so let’s look at how salvation is a part of each. In this country Thanksgiving harkens back to the story of a feast that included the early Pilgrims of Plymouth and the indigenous people of that area. Similar feasts had been common in the lands the Pilgrims had come from. The story many of us learned was that the first such feast in this country took place in 1621 as a celebration for a good harvest. The feast was a way of giving thanks to God for the salvation from starvation that the harvest would provide.

For those of you who may not be familiar with the history of Hanukkah, it commemorates the purification of the temple in Jerusalem which had been defiled by hostile, foreign forces. The temple purification would require that the menorah be burned for eight nights, yet there was only enough ritual oil to last one night. Incredibly, once the menorah was

lit, the oil lasted for the full eight days and the temple was purified. Salvation in this instance centered on what was sacred, the temple.

Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus, considered by Christians to be the Son of God, the Messiah, the Savior. Salvation then is a common and very significant theme of the holiday season. In spite of this, I find that the word salvation comes up even less than the word God in discussions I have with fellow Unitarian Universalists. Since we tend to be a talkative bunch on the whole that leads me to believe that we have an issue with the word.

An experience from my ministerial training gives me a sense of one possible reason that some of us might have a level of discomfort with the word salvation. The experience occurred as during my Clinical Pastoral Education training at Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center in northern New Hampshire. I spent eleven weeks there one summer as a chaplaincy intern. I recall quite vividly one particular patient visit. The visit was with the second person I called on my first day of seeing patients. I knocked on the door, introduced myself as a chaplain intern, and asked if the person would care for a visit. I was then invited in. I had no more than told the woman my name and inquired about her's when she looked deep into my eyes and asked, "Do you know Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior?" (pause) I tried to take a slow, deep breath but my stomach was in such a knot that I just couldn't. My response, that Universalist theology included the concept of salvation for all, was not the answer she wanted to hear. Considerably later during the visit I learned that for years the woman had been a religion instructor at a Baptist Bible college. Our theological perspectives were worlds or possibly universes apart. While my intention in being there that morning was to offer pastoral care, this woman was intent on the issue of salvation, my salvation. She was focused on what she believed would be important after I die. I was concerned about her wellbeing in that moment and in the days ahead. If any of you have had a similar experience, I can understand why you might be reluctant to engage in a discussion on salvation or even have the word escape your lips. Our reluctance to use the word, however, reduces our ability to influence how the word is used and what it means. Our avoidance of speaking to the issue of salvation means that the word tends to be associated with a narrow definition, not a broad and inclusive one. I wonder what our liberal religious faith would be like today if our Universalist forbearers had kept quiet regarding their ideas on salvation. It is quite possible we wouldn't be known today as UU's—instead we might be just U's.

As those who follow in the footsteps of our Universalist forbearers, I believe we have a responsibility to do what we can to keep discussions of important topics and issues such as

salvation open and broad. The issue of salvation is as important today as it was one hundred or even two hundred years ago. It is a topic we as Unitarian Universalists not only should be, but in fact are, involved in, even while we avoid using the word. Now I hope those of you who felt a bit uneasy when you first noticed the title of my sermon aren't looking to find a way to get out the door without being noticed. Please, keep your seat and take a deep breath. When I speak of salvation it has nothing to do with sin or what might or might not happen after we die. For that matter, my use of the word salvation isn't connected to whether or not a person believes in God.

So what is it I mean when I talk about salvation? What am I referring to? Let me begin to answer those questions by returning to my experience with the woman I was visiting in the hospital. As you may have already surmised, the initial part of our visit was a bit rocky. We clearly had two very different agendas for our discussion. Her focus was on the distant future, my future, which to her looked very bleak. My focus was on the here and now of her life.

I don't know about you but my experience with attempting to manage someone else's future frequently results in an increasing sense of anxiety, sometimes to the point of despair. I often end up feeling powerless and exhausted. The woman I was seeing just didn't have the energy necessary to keep her focus on my future for very long. Like most of us when our energy level is depleted, she soon shifted her attention to the present, her present, and the reason she was in the hospital. (pause)

At this point you might imagine that the entire visit went poorly. In fact, it didn't. Once we were both talking about the present moment she began to share how she felt. She was in pain and she was fearful of the surgery she would soon be undergoing. My willingness to be with her provided respite in her time of pain and fear. I couldn't offer her the type of salvation she wanted me to have, but I could offer her salvation from at least a small portion of the suffering she was experiencing in that moment. By the end of the visit she asked that I visit her again post-surgery. I honored her request and visited her three more times. At each subsequent visit she smiled when she saw me and expressed gratitude for my coming by. I am pretty certain that she would not have considered the time I spent with her as being a time of salvation, but I did and I still do.

I believe salvation can and does occur every day for many people; salvation from pain or suffering, from loneliness or isolation, from injustice, from limiting or constraining ways of perceiving the world, and any number of other forms you might imagine. Salvation, in the way I am using the term, can include many things—things of this lifetime. More than that, salvation doesn't have to come from beyond or outside of us. Here I would have us recall our reading

from the Gospel of Thomas, “If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you.” If this was a message that Jesus was conveying to those he spoke to, it is very different and more expansive than the concept of salvation that is being preached in many pulpits each Sunday. I believe this is a message that we as Unitarian Universalists can both accept and actively support.

Here I return to my earlier assertion that we, as Unitarian Universalist, not only should be, but also are, actively involved in matters pertaining to salvation. Using the expansive concept of salvation I just put forward, let’s consider a few of the ways we are involved in this issue. To begin we can look at what our first Principle calls us to do: “to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” Each and every time we live out this principle we are offering salvation from condemnation. What a difference affirming a person’s worth and dignity can make in someone’s life. While there may be times we fall short in this area, my hope is that we do our best to live out this principle not only with others but with ourselves as well.

And then there is the work we do in our religious education programs. As the Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing asserted nearly two hundred years ago, we don’t attempt “to stamp our minds upon the young,” but instead we strive “to stir up their own.” We seek to assist the young in our programs to bring forth and develop the best of what is within them. It seems to me that our efforts here are in accord with the message in the Gospel of Thomas. We trust that if our children and youth are able to bring forth the best of what is within them, they will be saved — saved, at the very least, from blind obedience to dogma.

In the wider world we work to bring salvation from suffering. In Unitarian Universalist congregations across our land we have given generously of our time and money for major disasters including hurricanes, earthquakes and tsunamis and also for local community needs such as food banks and homeless shelters. And in the face of global climate change, we put forth significant effort to save the environment that supports all the living creatures on this planet we call home—from recycling, to using more efficient light bulbs, to turning down our thermostats, to riding bikes instead of driving to church and so much more. In so many ways we are living out our Principle of “affirming and promoting respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” I could go on and on with examples. My hope is that at this point you could go on and on as well. These are just a few of the ways that we, as Unitarian Universalists, are actively involved in matters pertaining to salvation.

Now let's circle back to how it seems we tend to avoid the word salvation in our discussions. I realize that there is another possible explanation for our reluctance to use the word. It is possible we don't want to bring attention to ourselves and all of the salvation work we are doing. While I recognize this is a possibility, I doubt it is the primary reason most of us don't include the word in our conversations. Whatever the reason might be, during this holiday season, a time when the theme of salvation is so prominent, I would encourage us to keep up our efforts in doing salvation work. I would also invite us to find opportunities to use the word in a way that supports its broader meaning. In doing so we may just save some of the meanings of the word. In doing so we may empower those who will carry our faith forward into the future. And we might just give them ways to feel comfortable speaking of Unitarian Universalism as a tradition that expands and offers salvation, not to the few, but to all.

So may it be.