

Blessings
Thanksgiving 2020
Rev. Dr. Judith Wright

Many of us, like Pilgrim Edward Winslow,
have experienced Thanksgivings,
where we, too, have been so busy with the preparations for the feast-
and then, enjoying the meal itself –
that while we did indeed take time with our families and friends
to give thanks for what we had received,
I wonder if, like Pilgrim Winslow,
we were able to be **deeply** thankful for our blessings?

For example, I remember well preparing
a Thanksgiving meal for ten people at my home
-family and friends- all by myself not so long ago,
just before I came to Laconia.
When the dishes were washed, and the people left,
I was so very thankful that I could sit down and rest!
Some of you, too, most likely have had similar experiences with Thanksgiving.

This year in the midst of the pandemic,
we have an opportunity to truly slow down,
as many of us will be gathered in small groups or alone.
The isolation of this time has a silver lining,
in that we can have more energy and time to reflect perhaps more deeply
on all the blessings we have.

When I was an interim minister for one year

at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of South County, Rhode Island,
each worship service would end with these closing words:

It is a blessing to be.

It is a blessing to be here.

It is a blessing to be here now.

It is a blessing to be here now together.

I said these words during at least three Sunday services
a month when I led worship.

In all honesty there was little reflection on my part, at least,
as to what these words truly meant.

And I am sure that many of us have received letters or notes or emails,
ending with the word “blessings,” and then the person signs his, her, their name.
We often use this word “blessings” but what does it truly mean?

Indeed, what is a blessing?

Blessings can have many, many meanings.

The meaning of “blessings” can vary, for example,
according to one’s worldview, and one’s religious outlook.

Take, for example, *The Beatitudes*,
found in *The Gospel of Matthew*.

As part of Jesus’s *Sermon on the Mount*,
Jesus gave these teachings as spiritual values,
to hold in one’s heart and to follow.

The word “Beatitudes” comes from the Latin “*beatus*.”

These verses are not necessarily solely an expression of blessings conferred,

but a recognition, that if we follow these Beatitudes,
we will enter into a state of happiness or blessing.¹

It is likely that Matthew spiritualized the first four of these beatitudes-
from *blessed are the poor* to *blessed are the poor in spirit*,
or from *blessed are those who hunger and thirst*
to *those who hunger and thirst after righteousness*.

The last four Beatitudes are spiritual qualities that Jesus upholds
as qualities of mind to cultivate and cherish:

Blessed are the meek (or humble).

Blessed are the merciful.

Blessed are they who are pure in heart.

Blessed are the peacemakers.

Importantly, within the Islamic tradition we can find
parallel sayings to the Christian *Beatitudes*.

For example, “*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth* (Matthew 5.5),”
is similar to this verse in the Koran (25:63):

*“the servants of the God of Mercy are those who walk upon the earth humbly,
and when the ignorant address them, they reply “Peace!”*”

Humble people often have good self-control, are content,
and have a sense of serenity,
and they do find, even amidst all the sufferings on this earth,
a blessed way of living life, of working to find the joys in life,
and to turn what is destructive towards the good.

Of course, as a UU Buddhist, I think of His Holiness, the Fourteen Dalai Lama,

¹ R. F. Collins. The Anchor Bible. Commentary Series, Garden City/New York, Doubleday: volume 1, 629-631.

who exudes kindness, love, and peace through His presence of great humility. When asked how he thinks about himself, he often replied, "I am a simple monk." For me and many others, he is so much more than "a simple monk."

The Beatitude of "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God," is echoed in the Koran's verse of "*Make peace between your brethren, and fear God, so you will obtain mercy.*" (Koran, 49:10).

A peacemaker is one who brings about peace, especially by reconciling adversaries.

Leo Tolstoy, Russian writer, is one example of a peacemaker, who came to a place internally after much struggle, where he advocated a non-violent path to resolve differences. His writing would have a profound influence on the nonviolent resistance movements of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr, and Nelson Mandela. As Unitarian Universalists, many of us know that Tolstoy was influenced by our own non-violent nineteenth century Unitarian writer and philosopher, Henry David Thoreau of *Walden Pond* fame.

If we look within Hinduism, the word "blessing" includes being blessed by anyone of the many, many different deities within Hinduism. For example, if we go to a particular Hindu deity's temple in India, we will be most likely offered some holy water in the cup of our hand, which we can taste, if we wish, and then, we are encouraged to put the rest of the holy water onto the top of our heads, as a blessing from the divinity residing within that temple. Temple folks may come and mark our forehead with a *tilak*,

which is a sign that we have received the deity's blessing.

And, as we leave the temple, we may receive *prasad*, usually a gift of food or flowers, said to be blessed by that particular deity. *Prasad* is considered quite holy and is thought to be a gift, a blessing, from the deity for healing and well-being.

Another form of great blessing within Hinduism is called *darshan*, which literally means "sharing a point of view."

Such a sharing is described in *Be Love Now*, written by Ram Dass.

He writes: Darshan

"comes from that higher place of spirit manifested through another being.

It is a profound shift from the point of view of the ego to the point of view of the soul.

It can make all your study and reading come to life in a moment.

It can be an experience so profound as to change the direction of your life, returning you to your spiritual roots,

taking you beyond all words and thoughts

into the most profound depths of the heart.

In that depth, the little soul begins to dissolve into the bigger Soul.

That movement from the jivatman to the greater soul, the atman, is like dissolving into an ocean of love." ²

Ram Dass describes darshan as truly a **great blessing**, which can happen anywhere.

We don't need to go to India to receive blessings from a saint.

Darshan, he writes "*can occur in a dream, through a picture or a statue, or a physical place or hearing or reading the words of a realized being.*"

If we have a connection with such a highly realized being,

² Ram Dass. *Be Love Now: the Path of the Heart*. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2010. P. 77.

then it doesn't matter where we are. Just thinking about the being, brings him or her into our minds and is a great blessing.

Ram Dass teaches that in a state of darshan, we are not meeting on the physical plane but on the soul plane.

"Darshan", Ram Dass writes, "is the meeting of hearts, the merging of souls³".

When I was in Nepal in 2008, I visited the site of a Tibetan Buddhist deity called Vajrayogini.

I knew absolutely nothing about her at the time.

But I had been in a silent retreat at Kopan monastery for three months, and was staying on for a couple of months more to teach English to some of the nuns.

In between teaching, I and some of the nuns would visit sacred sites in Nepal.

One was in Pharping, where Vajrayogini's holy temple is.

Visiting there, all of a sudden, I felt stirrings deep within myself that felt as if I were connecting with Vajrayogini.

Afterwards. I didn't think any more about Vajrayogini

- for years - even though I knew "something had happened there."

About five years later, living in Massachusetts,

I would meet Lama Migmar, a teacher from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

Of all the spiritual teachers I have ever met,

I immediately felt that he was my teacher.

I discovered then that his main spiritual practice was that of Vajrayogini!

I now practice every day the sadhana, or spiritual practice for Vajrayogini.

So, this is a kind of darshan for me. I can't explain this in rational terms.

Neem Karoli Baba, Ram Dass's Guru, would hold up one finger to Ram Dass,

and say to him, “Can’t you see, it’s all One?”
“Buddha, Christ, Moses, and Krishna
are all just different aspects of the same being.”

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Again, as a Unitarian Universalist I believe as well in such Oneness,
the Unity of all,
as well as the different aspects of the sacred,
the interdependent web of all existence.

To meet such a teacher as Neen Karoli Baba is indeed a great blessing,
And I believe I have been fortunate to meet him through Ram Dass,
as well as the music of Krishna Das.

You, too, could meet Neen Karoli Baba through Ram Dass’s writings,
and Krishna Das’s singing kirtans.

Recently my Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Lama Migmar,
made a comment in one of his teachings about blessings.
I think his comment is what got me thinking about “blessings” for this sermon.

Beyond the comfortable ways that we receive blessings,
Lama taught that sometimes a blessing comes in the form of a spiritual challenge,
that the teacher deems necessary for a practitioner to undergo
in order to let go of negativities of mind that may be interfering
with one’s spiritual journey.

As an example, Lama Migmar told the very famous story
of the Tibetan practitioner, Milarepa,
who wanted to receive teachings from Marpa,
a famous Buddhist teacher and translator of Buddhist texts from India.

(I am giving you the condensed version

of this very famous Tibetan Buddhist relationship
between Milarepa and Marpa, who lived around 1050 CE.)

Milarepa searched for Marpa and when he found him,
he asked Marpa for the highest of the Buddhist teachings.
Marpa gave him three of the four most important empowerments.
But he did not give him the fourth and most important empowerment,
that would guide Milarepa to full enlightenment.

Instead, Marpa challenged Milarepa's faith and devotion
to Buddhism and to Marpa, himself, as Milarepa's teacher.
He told Milarepa that he wanted him to build a multi-level stone tower for him.
Without doubting, and with great effort and physical trials, Milarepa did so.

Then, Marpa told Milarepa to tear the tower down,
as it wasn't correct. Again, through his devotion, Milarepa did so.
Marpa had him do this, three more times,
until Marpa finally accepted the fourth multi-story tower,
which still stands today in Lhodrag, Tibet.

Marpa explained to Milarepa that his trials in building the towers
were to overcome his negative karma, believed by both men
to have accumulated over Milarepa's many lifetimes.
After receiving the final fourth empowerment from Marpa,
Milarepa went into solitary retreat for many years,
where he is said to have become fully enlightened.
Thus, a blessing can be not an easy path to follow,
but one that can help us to move further along on the spiritual path.

While I was never told to build a tower, My Zen teacher,
Sensei Daido Loori, from whom I studied Zen Buddhism for nine years,

during one sesshin (long meditation retreat) in upstate New York
one morning asked me and some other students
to move a pile of wood to a new place,
as part of that day's work practice.

The next day, he told us to move the wood back to the original site.

Thus, I had a small taste of what Milarepa went through,
and at the time when Daido asked us to do this,
I have to confess, I did not see it as a blessing.

But most likely it was.

I would be remiss if I didn't speak about my experiences of blessings
from Native Americans.

For example, I took two weeks of teachings
from Native Americans at the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, NY,
where I learned from two Native teachers
about the Native American tradition of saying thanks for everything they use.

The potter who taught me how to make a pot from her tradition
said that she thanked the clay and the earth before she removed the clay
to bring from Arizona to upstate New York.

And the Native American artist who taught me how to make a drum,
said that he had given thanks to the fallen tree
whose sections from the hollow trunk he used
for the base of each of the drums we made.

And, he had given thanks to the animals from whom
the hides came for coverings of our drums.

As our Story for The Time for All Ages reminds us this morning,
Native Americans believe deeply that everything is **interconnected and sacred**,

all of the land, all of the beings, all of life. **All of creation is a blessing.**

In conclusion, Rev. Jeanne Nieuwejaar, UU minister, who sometimes graces us with her worship services here at UUSI, has written about blessing in her book *Fluent in Faith*. She writes about how we as UUS might see ourselves giving a blessing to others, as well as receive blessings from others.

Jeanne points out that each of us has the holy within ourselves.

She says, “*whatever has a spiritual energy is at least as much within us as beyond us.*”⁴

A blessing, Jeanne affirms is a “two-way street,” “*something we become together in order that the spirit may flow.*”

As we can clearly see, there are many meanings of the word “blessings,”

I am sure there is so much more to discern.

Let’s end this morning’s sermon with the words spoken for a year by me with the UU congregation of South County, Rhode Island.

These words have more meaning for me now and hopefully for you as well:

It is a blessing to be.

It is a blessing to be here.

It is a blessing to be here now.

It is a blessing to be here now together.

Peace and love to you.

⁴ Jeanne Harrison Nieuwejaar. *Fluent in Faith*. Boston. Skinner House Books, p. 136.