

## Homily for 4/4/10 -- "Being Redeemed"

When I first began to think about the theme for this worship service, I admit initially feeling at something of a loss. Given that this is both Easter Sunday and the middle of Passover, it seemed like an appropriate idea to observe both holidays in some way. After all, while we UUs feel comfortable drawing upon the wisdom of many of the world's religions, both Unitarianism and Universalism historically evolved out of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Deciding to honor both Passover and Easter did little, however, to solve the problem of finding a worship theme, as these two holidays are really quite different in many ways. The difference between the two holidays is even more obvious when viewed from the Jewish perspective. After all, Christians openly acknowledge that Jesus was in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover and most Christian scholars recognize that the Last Supper was, in fact, a Passover Seder. But for Jews, Easter has no significance at all.

As I reflected on this problem, however, I remembered the phrase "redemption from bondage" from the Haggadah, the text which is read during the Passover Seder. I also remembered that Moses was sometimes referred to a redeemer, a fact celebrated when African slaves likened Abraham Lincoln to Moses during their struggle for emancipation. I also know that Christians often describe Jesus as the Redeemer. So, I thought, perhaps exploring the idea of redemption might be a way of meaningfully reflecting on both Passover and Easter.

In the process of exploring the theme of redemption I learned that it can be found -- in one sense of another -- in many of the world's religions. Exactly what one is being redeemed from and how the process of redemption works, however, differs a great deal from tradition to tradition.

Indeed, the two traditions we're drawing upon today, Christianity and Judaism, view both redemption and redeemers very differently. For most Christians, Jesus is the one and only redeemer and sin is what one is redeemed from. For Christians, Jesus' death was the price paid to redeem humankind from its fallen state and, if one believes this, one is redeemed.

None of these ideas are part of the Jewish concept of redemption. For Jews, redemption is an ongoing project requiring both the involvement of the Divine and action on the part of humankind. It is related to the practice of atonement and the idea of t'shuvah, of "return," to a more righteous way of life. Jews may differ as to whether the Messiah -- the final and ultimate redeemer Jews have waited for -- is a charismatic human figure or a symbol of the redemption of mankind from the evils of the world. But there is general agreement among Jews that every person must live as if he or she, individually, has the responsibility to help bring about a messianic age.

That Jews see redemption as a joint project between the Divine and the Human can be seen in the figure of Moses. Indeed, Moses offers a pointed challenge to the idea that deliverance from Egypt was purely a divine project. Whatever miraculous properties the staff of Moses may have possessed, it did not walk into Pharaoh's palace on its own. So the

Haggadah invokes the hands of both God and Moses, emphasizing that both have a share in the rebirth of freedom. And Moses' staff reminds us symbolically of the unique role in the redemptive process we each hold in our hands. The question is whether we can overcome our reluctance, as Moses did, to fully embrace the ongoing work of liberation.

Comparing the Jewish and Christian perspectives on redemption, it seems that the emphasis in Judaism is on world redemption, while the Christian focus is on personal salvation. While the essence of Christianity is on saving the soul, the essence of Judaism is "tikkun olam," saving the world. Happily, I don't need to choose between these two perspectives, but can opt instead to integrate what I view as the best of both. I can appreciate the unique needs and yearnings of my soul and seek wholeness and transformation as an individual. I can also help to transform the world into a more whole and evolved place in which to live. Indeed, I don't see how I can do one without the other.

Another interesting question connected to the theme of redemption is whether we are meant to redeem ourselves or receive redemption from some external source, whether divine or human. While Christianity largely looks to an external source, Judaism suggests redemption starts with us and our actions. Once again, my experience finds truth in both perspectives.

One example that comes to mind -- an example that also indicates that God does, indeed, have a sense of humor -- happened about fifteen years ago. I was just about to get into the shower one morning when, either

thinking about some work problem or simply daydreaming, I whacked my big toe on the side of the tub. The pain was immediate and enormous. But what was even more painful was a voice -- a voice that sounded just like mine -- screaming in my head telling me what an incompetent idiot I was. That savage inner critic, which had been blaring similar recorded messages in my head ever since I could remember, was just getting going when something amazing happened. As if someone had turned the tuning dial on a radio, the inner critic stopped mid-tirade and another voice said kindly and gently -- and with just a hint of irony -- "If you can't talk nicely to yourself, perhaps you shouldn't talk to yourself at all." Despite the raging pain in my toe, I began to laugh at the absurdity of this situation. Soon I was laughing and crying so hard, I needed to sit down.

To this day, whenever I hear my inner critic kick in, I also hear that other, wiser voice. Which, of course, makes it hard to take the voice of the critic half as seriously. Now I could say this message was some sort of divine gift, which is what it surely felt like when I first heard it. But then I'd also have to admit that I'd been regularly meditating and working with a therapist for a while before this event happened. So had I redeemed myself or had I been redeemed? I think the answer is both.

As some of you already know, I'm a person who tries to see religious concepts in symbolic and archetypal terms. So I see both the Passover and Easter stories mythically, meaning I believe that they're really telling us something important about ourselves and our own experience of being alive. In thinking about the story of the Exodus from bondage in Egypt, of the Israelites, Pharaoh, and Moses, I ask myself about the ways in which

I'm still unfree, about the inner forces of resistance that keep me enslaved to old ways of being, and of how I might to become my own liberator.

When I consider the story of Jesus' death and resurrection from a mythic perspective, I am always reminded of Joseph Campbell's observation: Does it matter if someone died and rose from the dead two thousand years ago if you aren't rising from the dead today? Like all of the dying and rising gods of the ancient world, the Jesus' death and resurrection symbolize nature's endless capacity to regenerate itself. Viewed mythically, Christ consciousness happens whenever we follow the advice of the poet William Blake "to see a world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wild flower, hold Infinity in the palm of your hand, and eternity in an hour." We also share in that consciousness whenever we aspire to love each other unconditionally and care for those less fortunate than ourselves.

So I don't view the idea of a redeemer in literal or historical terms -- whether that person is Moses, Jesus Christ, or Barak Obama. It seems all too easy to me to look for a being who, magically, can restructure our lives and makes everything all right. I prefer to think of a redeemer of any person - it could be any of us in relation to one another - who alters our sense of reality. Or it could be the sudden intrusion of a deeper, higher awareness -- awareness which I prefer to call God -- that brings us this altered sense of who we are and of what ultimately matters.

In that sense, perhaps we should speak of redemptive *moments*, moments when we are able to see ourselves in a new light or envision new possibilities and new dreams for ourselves and our world. And perhaps we

participate in the process of redemption when we open ourselves to the possibility of redemptive moments.

Which brings me back, now, to those of us who gather together to worship here this afternoon. As people who share a liberal religious faith, one of our missions is to be, in the words of UU minister Steve Edington, a redeeming community. "We are called to create a special and sacred place," he writes, "where lives are transformed, where we can move from broken-ness to wholeness, where we can both face our shortcomings and celebrate our yet-to-be realized possibilities. And where we can find ways, acting together, to be agents of redemption in a world so in need of hope and of healing." May it be so. Blessed be. Amen.