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 Arlington Street Church
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Sin

My colleague John Wolf famously wrote, “You want to support a Unitarian Universalist church because it [is searching] for the holy rather than dwelling upon the depraved. Because it calls no one a sinner, yet knows how deep is the struggle and how great is the hunger for what is good.”¹ I’ve quoted him many times, but it occurred to me this week that that may be the only time I’ve ever said the word “sin” from this pulpit.

So I’m going to tip the balance today and say “sin” – a lot – because we relinquished the word to fundamentalists, but we need to reclaim it; *we need it*.

For those of you new to this faith, I want to be sure you know that, while we celebrate the freedom to work out our own beliefs, Unitarian Universalism does not subscribe to the Christian doctrine of original sin. Original sin: human beings, enslaved by Adam and Eve’s transgression in the Garden of Eden, were freed by Jesus’ ultimate sacrifice, and only by subscribing to this doctrine, repenting of our sins, and the grace of G*d will we avoid a fiery hell and be admitted to a heavenly afterlife.

Unitarian Universalists believe in original blessing: the inherent worth and dignity of every being. Every one of us, by our human nature, lives with the propensity to both depravity and good; because we are endowed with free will, it’s a choice.² And we have a responsibility not only for our own behavior, but for the creation of a world of justice and peace. Here on earth, divine living is as much as we can know of heaven.³

¹ Rev. Dr. John Wolf, Senior Minister (now retired), All Souls in Tulsa, OK

² Rev. Marilyn Sewall, and others. Please see Marilyn Sewall, *The Theology of Unitarian Universalists*, at huffingtonpost.com/Marilyn-sewall/unitarian-universalist-theology_b_870528.html

³ For more, please see Rev. Christopher Gist Raible and Rev. Karl M. Chworowsky at wildflowerchurch.org/files/docs/archived_sermons/Unitarian.html

An old Puritan prayer begins, “Eternal Father, Thou art good beyond all thought, but I, [a sinner,] am vile, wretched, miserable....” To this day, the word “sin” is used to fetishize suffering and terrify people about pleasure, especially embodied pleasure. The label “sinner” is abused by the self-righteous, as satirist H.L. Mencken says, “who seem alarmed by the possibility that someone, somewhere, might be enjoying [themselves].”⁴

So why am I calling for the reclamation of the word “sin?” Because we need a word for actions that *we* name as immoral, violent, evil; actions that describe a transgression of our humanity. We need a word for inequality and oppression, structures of society that are not just “bad” or “wrong” or “missing the mark.” Begin the list with sexism, racism, and keep going: these are sins.

Here is *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, writing about sin:

“No matter how hard we try to reduce everything to deterministic brain chemistry, no matter how hard we try to reduce behavior to ... herd instinct, ... no matter how hard we strive to replace sin with non-moral words like ‘mistake’ ... or ‘weakness,’ the most essential parts of life are matters of individual responsibility and moral choice: whether to be brave or cowardly, honest or deceitful, compassionate or callous, faithful or disloyal. When modern culture tries to replace sin with ideas like error or insensitivity, or tries to banish words like ‘virtue,’ ‘character,’ ‘evil,’ and ‘vice,’ ... that doesn’t make life any less moral; it just means we have [used “shallow language” to obscure] the inescapable moral core of life.... It just means we think and talk about these choices less clearly, and thus become increasingly [unwilling to engage] the moral stakes of everyday life.”⁵

We cannot engage what we cannot name. What others have called sin – especially pleasure and joy – we call good. And what others have refused to name – especially destructive secrets, the abuse of power, and violence against the defenseless – we call sin. Reclaiming the word “sin” is a call to moral courage, and deep reflection.

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⁴ David Brooks, *The Road to Character*, pp. 53-54

⁵ Brooks, *op cit*, p. 54

Can you name the seven deadly sins? They are ... lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, and pride.

Handed down to us from the biblical King Solomon and codified by a 4th century monk,⁶ they've fallen somewhat out of vogue, but I'm inclined to resurrect them, with nuanced meanings.

Lust: uncontrolled desire for food, money, sex, alcohol, drugs, or power.

Gluttony: overindulgence and overconsumption of anything, to the point of waste.

Greed: the excessive or rapacious desire to acquire or possess more than we need.

Sloth: both physical and spiritual laziness, and the failure to do things that we should do, especially in light of the ways evil flourishes when good people fail to act.

Wrath: both destructiveness and self-destructiveness.

Envy: what Father Thomas Aquinas defined as “sorrow for another’s good.”

Pride: believing that one is essentially better than others.⁷

In practice, this is what sin looks like: Selfishness. Arrogance. Exploitative ambition. Wanton materialism. Wanting to do one thing, but doing another. Wanting what we should not want. Hardening our hearts. Favoring the short term over the long term. Being unkind in thought or deed. Rationalizing. Deceiving others and ourselves. Being a bystander.⁸

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The beloved spiritual community can offer a corrective to sin; the solutions to sin are communal as much as they are individual, and they have everything to do with the spiritual practice of paying attention; engaging mightily with hard choices; and opening our hearts.

Many years ago, my sixth grade Unitarian Universalist Sunday school class was told the story of a man whose wife was very sick, and would die if she didn't get a certain medicine that was available, but very expensive. One night, having exhausted every means to obtain this medicine, and having

⁶ Evagrius Ponticus

⁷ Wikipedia: Seven Deadly Sins

⁸ Brooks, *op cit*, pp. 54-55

concluded that he would rather go to jail than for his wife to die, he robbed a pharmacy.

The class was directed to discuss what we believed should happen to this man. The teacher left the room. She would return, she said, for our verdict.

After passionate discussion, there was one thing on which we could all agree: the sin, we said, was not the man's. The sin was that the treatment was available only to the rich. And if that man had been a member of our congregation, we said, we would have found a way to help him pay for the medicine.

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Here's today's final pitch for reclaiming "sin." Just this: when we face and name sin, we also take on the possibility of interrupting the trajectory of sin and amplifying our faith that "no one, anywhere, is banished from grace and possibility."⁹ I like to collect stories about a change of heart.

There's the one about Jason Leger, the rabidly anti-Muslim guy protesting outside a mosque in Phoenix, wearing an obscenity-laced tee shirt. Some very brave congregants invite him to come in and join the prayer service. Afterwards, he tells the press, "Out of respect for the Islamic people, knowing what I know now, because I have talked to them and spoke to them, no I would not do that again, just because I don't want to offend or hurt those people."¹⁰ *Interrupting the trajectory of sin.*

There's the one about twenty-two year old Idaly Proano, who stole a van in Salt Lake City, hell-bent on getting her next fix, when she looked into the rearview mirror and saw a baby strapped into the car seat. She turned the van around, drove it back, and waited to turn herself in to the police and get help for her addictions.¹¹ *Interrupting the trajectory of sin.*

⁹ A beautiful fragment from a larger thought by my beloved colleague, Rev. John E. Gibbons, "More Ponderings About Our Theological Good News," First Parish in Bedford, MA, 1/9/11. Please see uubedford.org/spirituality/sermons/655-more-ponderings-about-our-theological-good-news.html

¹⁰ Please see tribune.com.pk/story/896271/anti-islam-protester-has-change-of-heart-after-observing-prayer-service-at-arizona-mosque/

¹¹ Please see good4utah.com/news/local-wasatch-front-/car-thief-shows-a-change-of-heart

There's the one about the infamous Fred Phelps, patriarch of Topeka's Westboro Baptist Church, who allegedly experienced a conversion when his grief about his wife's illness compelled him to realize that we are all made the same. Zacharias Phelps says that his grandfather renounced his hatred, and, shortly before his death, was excommunicated from the "church" he founded.¹² *Interrupting the trajectory of sin.*

And there's the one about Johnny Lee Clary, who joined Oklahoma's Ku Klux Klan at the age of 14 and, by the time he was 30, was named Imperial Wizard. An outspoken advocate of white supremacy and racist violence, he terrorized Rev. Wade Watts, a Black civil rights activist, ultimately setting fire to his church. In return, Rev. Watts prayed for Clary, and expressed kindness, love, and forgiveness toward him. As they were leaving a radio station after a debate, Rev. Watts introduced Clary to his wife and the niece they were raising, and asked Clary how he could hate the little girl. Johnny Lee Clary realized that he could not.¹³ He recanted his association with the KKK and joined Rev. Wade Watts in his work for racial equality.¹⁴ *Interrupting the trajectory of sin.*

Beloved spiritual companions,

Let us reclaim the word, and call
actions that we name as immoral *sin*,
actions that are a transgression of our humanity *sin*,
actions that are evil *sin*.

Let us imagine, together, the healing of sin as work to which we are called,
both individually and as a beloved spiritual community.

“No one, anywhere, is banished from grace and possibility.”
May we engage the moral stakes of everyday life,
interrupt the trajectory of sin,
change our hearts,
and so change the world.

¹² Please see dailykos.com/story/2014/05/23/1301451/-Prior-to-death-Fred-Phelps-had-change-of-heart-according-to-grandson

¹³ Wikipedia: Wade Watts

¹⁴ Lisa Wade, PhD, *How the Kindness of a Black Man Changed the Mind of a KKK Kingpin*,” 6/27/12. Please see thesocietypages.org/socimages/2012/06/27/how-a-kkk-leader-became-an-anti-racist-activist/

