

## The Necessity of Forgiveness

October 9, 2016  
Rev. Rebecca M. Bryan  
First Parish in Brookline

I am going to talk about two things this morning that you won't normally hear much about in a Unitarian Universalist congregation: sin and atonement.

For the purpose of getting us all on common ground for this sermon, I'll share the definitions of the words as I will be using them in this sermon. We'll then explore each of them in greater depth, after which I will invite us all to participate in a ritual of atonement based on the Jewish act of teshuvah.

In order to be in right relationship with these traditions, I need to say that I am not Jewish nor am I an Indigenous Person.

My words and our service today are not in observance of Yom Kippur; rather they are an honoring. Forgive me for errors that I make in reflecting upon both the Jewish and the Indigenous People's tradition, and teach me so that I may not repeat such mistakes again.

Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement, is the Holiest day of the Jewish calendar. The practice of teshuvah, or returning to a state of rightness with one's self, God, and other people, is a practice in the Jewish tradition that is always available. However, the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are considered to be days when the gates for such atonement are especially opened. Today is the seventh day in that sacred period of time. Rosh Hashanah was last week and Yom Kippur begins at sundown this Tuesday.

Sin. A concept that many if not most Unitarian Universalists do not believe in, is something that many of our interfaith partners working for justice do believe in. Sin is a concept that has caused great harm AND there is a way that it can hold great purpose. Without a regular way to recognize when we have fallen short, or made mistakes, how do we go about correcting them?

There is a way of thinking about sin that does work for me. This comes from the German theologian Paul Tillich. He had, by the way, a great influence on the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's theology. Tillich's understanding of sin is that it is separation or estrangement from the ground of one's being. Separation or estrangement from the ground of one's being. He calls this God—that is his definition of the ground of his being. Indigenous people call it the ground of being—Great Spirit. For many it is found in nature, which is another reason that it is inhumane how we have taken this from them.

Using Tillich's definition, we can also understand sin as separation or estrangement from our true nature, our genuine selves. Separation from living our values or estrangement from others.

Tillich writes of sin this way. It is “The personal act of turning away from that to which one belongs.”<sup>1</sup>

Using this concept of sin as being separated from our Truth or living out of alignment with our values, we can quite easily see how we all live in sin, at least some of the time, if not frequently.

When we are living this way we know it. We might feel guilty, not impassioned, resentful, blocked, angry. We blame others, see their faults and not our own. The overall sense is that *all is not well*. Unchecked and unresolved these things fester, grow, and can kill. Too often we do not even realize that these things are within us. We just grow unhappier, more judgmental, more fearful, and more tired.

However, we understand sin, even if we simply call it imperfection, human fallibility, we all live in that state.

There are spiritual and emotional ways to resolve this state. Found in world religions and other spiritual approaches to life, it is all about atonement. Meaning to become right again with ourselves, our values, and others. Atonement is different than repentance. We repent when we are sorry. However, we do not necessarily change our actions in the future.

Atonement is also different than reparations. When we make reparations, we give something back that is owed. That does not necessarily mean, however, that we are at peace.

When we atone, we admit our mistakes, we experience genuine sorrow that this happened, we make amends about what has occurred, and we change our ways moving forward.

The reason that atonement is so essential is not to make us feel good. No. The reason that this is so essential is because whatever parts of ourselves are living out of alignment with our values are aspects of ourselves that are then closed down. Parts of us that are stuck, not open and available. These parts of ourselves are often frozen in anger over what has happened in the past or frozen by fear over what may happen in the future. Thus there is one less piece of ourselves, our true selves, that we have to offer to this world.

For example: if we are advocates for justice, we are bitter advocates. The work that we do may wane or become less and less appealing to others as they experience it through our bitterness and isolation.

As parents living in a state of estrangement from our true selves, we lose the time that we have with our children. We wake up one day and they are five years older, or ten, or they are gone. Worse yet is that we pass this way of living onto our children. We teach them that self-righteousness is acceptable. That living in a way that blames others and takes no self-responsibility is the way to go. We teach them through our sins, that there is no way to peace.

---

<sup>1</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 volumes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951, 1957, 1963)  
<http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/tillich/stguide/stguide3.htm>

As members of a faithful community, when we live separated from what sustains us we do things because we think we should. Because that is what the others are doing. This works. For a while. And then it doesn't. Or we lose all connection to what made this community so sacred in the first place.

This place of sin, however, is not just within ourselves. It also has to do with our relationship with others, with people we know and love, and with those that we do not know and that we are still responsible to. Like with our American Indians and any other groups living in secret, living in terror, living on the margins.

To return to a place of wholeness, or to atone, to move into a place in your heart and your mind where you are willing to turn, requires great courage and equally importantly great vulnerability. Just because we are ready or desire atonement, does not mean that the other person or people are there, too. AND we must be open to it anyway.

In the Jewish faith this process of atonement can be experienced through teshuvah, meaning “to return.” Eliot Dorf calls this “...a full blown turn to the right path and to good standing with the community and indeed with God...”<sup>2</sup>

Being willing to have this kind of truth and atonement, forgiveness for ourselves and others, is indeed caring for our souls, our selves. Hence the connection to our ministry theme, care of the soul. Debby Irving, author of *Waking Up White* writes, “Only when I tapped into my own vulnerability did I rediscover an inner strength and start listening to my inner voice.”<sup>3</sup>

That inner voice, some call it a connection to Spirit, or our higher selves, our conscience, or God—whatever we call it, is an expression of truth that will lead us from separation to connection, from sin to atonement, from brokenness to wholeness. That inner voice is what we have to listen to for it holds the key of willingness that may just allow us to turn, once more, so that we may love and be loved. So that we may return once again and be connected to what truly grounds us.

I'm going to invite us all now to participate in a communal ritual of healing, based upon teshuvah. Turning, returning, as an invitation to atonement.

In a few moments, we will be passing out stones to everyone who wants to participate. As you wait to receive your stone ask yourself these questions for what, to whom, do I need to atone?

Where have I fallen short of my ideals...lost connection to my values and the ground that I stand upon.

Who have I hurt? Whom have I been unwilling to forgive?

What truth have I been unwilling to speak? What do I need to release in order to feel joy again?

---

<sup>2</sup> Dorff, Elliot, *Love Your Neighbor and Yourself* 2003, Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, Pg. 215.

<sup>3</sup> Irving, Debbie, *Waking Up White*.

Anya will start our ritual by sharing a brief reading. The stones will be distributed, and then I'll talk you through the rest.

## RITUAL

### **Bold, Humble, Daring**

Today we stand before the Mirror of All  
to see ourselves as we are.  
We come with no gifts, no bribes, no illusions, no excuses.  
We stand without defense and wait to be filled.  
What will fill us?  
Remorse, certainly, So much error and needless pain.  
And Joy: remembered moments of love and right doing.  
We are too complex for single-sided emotions.  
And we are too simple to be excused by our complexity.  
Let us be bold enough to see,  
humble enough to feel,  
daring enough to turn and  
embrace the way of justice, mercy, and simplicity.

### *After stones are delivered*

If you would:

Take a moment now and close your eyes, or soften them and allow them to look gently at the space in front of you.

Holding the stone in your hand, ask yourself:

For what, to whom, do I need to atone?

Where have I fallen short of my ideals...lost connection to my values and the ground that I stand upon.

*As you see any answers or situations, or people, imagine just putting them into your stone.*

Who have I hurt?

Who have I been unwilling to forgive?

What truth have I been unwilling to speak?

What do I need to release in order to feel joy again?

As those images come to your eye, imagine yourself sitting with the person that you have hurt, or to whom you are asking forgiveness.

Find in yourself the words to acknowledge the harm that stand between you. Have done to them. Imagine them moving right from you into the stone in your hand. A stone that can hold these transgressions, imperfections, and pain. Place in your stone the willingness to set this straight, to make amends for all of these things, and to change your ways moving forward.

Now as you hold these things in your stone, I invite you to stand, as you are willing and able, and turn to face the back of the sanctuary.

Listening to words from our responsive reading this morning:

*"But for us turning does not come so easily.  
It takes and an act of will for us to make a turn.  
It means breaking with old habits.  
It means admitting that we have been wrong; and this is never easy.  
It means losing face; it means starting all over again; and this is always painful.  
It means saying: I am sorry.  
It means recognizing that we have the ability to change. These things are hard to do.  
But unless we turn, we will be trapped forever in yesterday's ways."*

Close your eyes, speak silent prayers or intentions into your stones. A willingness to do better, to be different, to try again, to say I'm sorry, to speak your truth. To let all of life into your circle, and to be open to the circle becoming unbroken.

Turning with intention, promise and hope.

May this turning be a symbol made whole. May it give you the strength to heal your broken promises and to speak your truth anew.

To seal your intentions, you are invited to move toward the waters back by the pews and place your stone and all that it carries into the waters. Waters, waves of renewal, atonement, and love.