

FROM SIN TO SALVATION

Talking about sin and salvation doesn't resemble your typical UU sermon topic, but the presence of brokenness and the pursuit of wholeness are real in all of our lives, and every serious religious journey must address them. In fact, today I'm going to tackle guilt and repentance and grace as well, all in one fell swoop.

Let me start with a very intriguing incident that happened to me last season before a Padres' baseball game downtown.

This stern-faced, plainly dressed man was standing on a busy corner in the Gaslamp District. As pedestrians, including myself, hurried on their way to Petco Park, he would solemnly lift his right arm, and pointing to the person nearest to him, intone loudly the single word: GUILTY!

Then without any change of expression, he'd resume his stance for a few moments before repeating the gesture, the raising of his arm, the pointing, and the grave pronouncing of the one word: GUILTY. The effect of this strange pantomime on passing strangers was extraordinary, almost eerie. We'd stare at him, hesitate, look away, look at each other, and then at him again, then hurriedly continue on our ways.

One man, turning to another, exclaimed: "But how'd he know?"

Guilty! Everybody guilty? Guilty of what? Of overparking? Of lying? Of badmouthing God? Of spanking my children? Of not voting? Of unfaithfulness to one's partner? Of ruining the planet? Of evil thoughts or plans?

Our thoughts rambled, turned frantic. Guilty before whom? Is a police officer following? Did anyone see? But that isn't technically illegal, is it? I can make it up. I'll

give it back. I apologize. I wasn't myself when I did that. No one knows about it. But I'm going to quit; I really am!

What's significant about this opening vignette is not that there's some accuser roaming the streets of yet another large city, calling people guilty, but that those who are pronounced guilty, *we* actually feel vulnerable to the accusation. We, the passers-by, don't scream, "It wasn't my fault!" or "Sir, I don't have the foggiest notion what you're talking about!"

Why? Because we have truly wronged somebody, somewhere, at some time, even recently, perhaps that very day, and the verdict of guilty fits you and me, it snugly fits all of us!

Now, to be sure, there's lots of neurotic guilt that pervades our lives, guilt that may be socially initiated but privately exaggerated, guilt that needs to be flushed. Nonetheless, authentic guilt operates in our lives whenever we've intentionally or unintentionally wronged ourselves, others, our universe. In our modern world many of our old guilts are thrown off and rightly so. At the same time, plenty of compunctions are too easily brushed aside, and little remains sacred. Guilt over neglected beliefs can prove harmful; guilt over ignored duties can be useful.

Yes, you bet we've hurt or destroyed property, animals, persons, nations.

Every one of us who dares to love will, sooner or later, violate the personhood of another. Are people only stupid or sick or criminal or asleep? No, we feel guilt precisely because we have, in fact, committed wrongdoings.

You can call it alienation, a shortcoming, or a mistake, or you can reference the Greek word for sin which means "missing the mark." The bottom line still holds. We all

miss the mark, widely and often. We've all sinned and continue to do so, and our sins come in various shapes and sizes. And they're more than just personal peccadilloes. Sin also involves collective irresponsibility: war, economic injustice, racial oppression, environmental degradation—such sins don't only break rules, they damage people and devastate earth.

Naturally, evangelicals and liberal religionists see sin differently. Evangelicals would dwell upon our sin-sick souls, paralyzed by original sin. We're viewed as "miserable offenders," helpless and hopeless. On the other hand, the liberal blind-spot enables us to deny, ignore, or skirt full recognition of our own sinful nature, our complicity in wrongdoing.

Unitarian Universalism, at its truest, would have us avoid either extreme: we must acknowledge our sinfulness without wallowing in it. Yes, we sin, both personally and socially, but we're ever more than our sins. Sin is neither the first nor the last nor the only word, but simply one important word about us, and such recognition and ownership frees us.

There exists a deep driving desire in human nature, I believe, to become morally responsible beings, at least most of us want to do so. In the end, we want to confess, be judged, then, whenever possible, be forgiven. We want to stand accountable in the final analysis: as a person, as a partner, as a parent, as a patriot, and as a religious pilgrim.

Years back, there was a television skit showing a woman behind a table and in front of her was a long line of people. The woman behind the table addressed the person at the head of the line and said in a somewhat bored but otherwise business-like voice:

“Of course, you know that you are dead. So, all you have to do now is go through the entrance on your right behind me marked heaven or through the left one marked hell.”

The dead man looked incredulous. “You mean, that I, uh, am to choose whether I want to go to heaven or to hell?” “That’s right,” said the woman behind the table.” “But, is there no judgment or final reckoning?” he inquired. Doesn’t it count how I’ve lived, the good things I’ve done as well the bad things?” The woman behind the table showed the first signs of impatience. “Look sir,” she said. “I can’t spend the whole day on you. People are dying, the queue is lengthening. Come on, make up your mind.”

The dead man by now was in a panic. “But I’ve done some wrong and bad things during my life. I want to come clean, I want to confess, I want to be judged fairly; and, yes, I want to be forgiven...” The woman behind the table no longer could hide her impatience. “I’m not interested in your sins, and nobody else around here is either. Just make up your mind, that’s all I’m asking of you.”

The dead man looked horrified. He buried his face in his hands, then he stepped forward past the table and disappeared through the entrance on his left marked “hell”.

The point is that, in the end, we want to be held accountable. In the final analysis, you and I want to own up and come clean. In the end we want a reasonably just and full evaluation of how we’ve lived our lives. For all of us have done things we shouldn’t have done or omitted doing things we should have done.

We Unitarian Universalists don’t focus on any literal hell, and historically we’ve believed in a loving God who will somehow reconcile us all, “rest assured,” as our Universalist forebears put it. Yet we still want, don’t we, some sort of reckoning: a time of summing up the character and conduct of our days? For isn’t it true that if everything

is allowed, then it makes no difference what we do or don't do? And as moral beings, as responsible creatures, we want things to matter, we want our lives to matter, we want our specific days and nights to make a difference.

So that's the heart of my message today: we've wronged ourselves and others, but we're ever more than our wrongs. Furthermore, at heart we want to make amends, start over, become whole. And that process is called "salvation." And it's best done, or at least started, right now on earth rather than waiting for some presumed "judgment day".

Moving from sin toward salvation, moving from brokenness toward wholeness, demands recognition and ownership of our flaws, then engagement in the arduous process of repentance, which includes confession followed by genuine change in behavior. But, alas, too many of us want the pain of our wrongs to go away, but we don't really want to make any changes. But real growth necessitates real, substantial, spiritual change. Calling ourselves victims or blaming others for our lot in life, is to stay trapped in the status quo, is a moral copout.

The older I get, the more important I feel confession is. It can be cathartic and liberating to voice my offense, directly either to the actual person or to an impartial listener. Clearly one can over do it. Plus sometimes confessing to oneself is sufficient as is reported of the prodigal son in the New Testament parable when "he came unto himself." However, despite confessing to a therapeutic other, our sense of sin still needs to be dealt with in the private courts of our inner heart before any fresh start can be navigated.

So, I challenge us liberals to take another look at the concept of repentance, the bridge between sin and salvation. It's a noble word and a worthwhile process.

Repentance doesn't mean breast-beating, wallowing in guilt and shame. It simply and literally means to stop what we're doing, to turn around, to change directions, to make restitution, and to get back on course. In the parlance of 12 step recovery groups: to take a fearless moral inventory, to admit where we're wrong and to make amends whenever possible.

As Unitarian Universalist minister Suzanne Meyer puts it:

Such is the real meaning of repentance: not trying to blame bad genes, bad parents, or bad role models, or other environmental factors, but owning up to the fact that you made a wrong turn and are in need of a moral course correction. The objective of repentance is wholeness, reconciliation and reunion. Repentance in the end is all about taking the most direct way home.

Unitarian Universalism is a realistic yet positive faith: a life-affirming and hopeful religion. We truly believe people can change, turn around, renew, forgive, become stronger than ever precisely where our bones or hearts have been broken. But such regeneration doesn't come easily, without a cost, without change. Real, lasting change demands repentance and amends.

But sinning is subtle and sneaky and infects everyone. All of us, whether we're active psychological or physical abusers, have, in small, even unconscious ways, violated the personhood of others, especially our loved ones. And continue to do so. That's why my UU buddy, Tomas Firle, while involved in our *Stopping Gender Violence* working group at First Church, developed a card that could be carried in our wallets as a reminder.

It says:

My Interpersonal No-Violence Pledge

I will not raise my voice or use threats to dominate others; I will not raise my hands in an intimidating manner. I will not hit or hurt anyone, physically or emotionally to get my way. Instead, I shall seek help when I

feel moved to the point of violence; speak out when I witness abuse by others; encourage others to take an active stand against violence.

And then you sign the card and keep it on your person as a moral reminder! That card will remain in my wallet all my life.

And here's another example, from American history, of the goal of moving from sin to salvation..

Perhaps you know the story of the hymn "Amazing Grace" and its author. In any case, it's worth repeating, because it shows how personal changes in our behavior can affect widespread social results.

John Newton grew up in a rough and tumble family of seafaring folk. They had little, and without education or privilege they clawed out from the sea what they could. Following his harrowing childhood, Newton experienced a terrible career as a sailor.

He jumped from more than one ship in a foreign port, was forced into the British navy, and engaged in mutinies and rebellions galore. Newton eventually begged, borrowed, and stole enough to become the master of his own ship, and became, not surprisingly, a slave trader. He went to the west coast of Africa and bartered there for slaves. Most often it was the village elders who traded off youth and children for petty and pretentious possessions. Alcohol was one of the big items, but fancy textiles, metal utensils, and clothes were the common coin of trade.

Captain John Newton would cram 250 slaves into the hold of his small ship and take them in chains to America, where they were sold for cash or bartered for objects of high value in England. His ambition was to make enough money to be so well off he could ask for the hand of a high class lady. He managed in ten years to put enough money

away to become wealthy for the rest of his life. He sought out and then married the woman of his hopes.

The story takes a turn. While at sea, between Africa and the British colonies, Newton's ship encountered a raging wild storm. They were loaded to the gills with human cargo. The slaves screamed in delirium and terror as the ship heeled over on its side, out of control and unmanageable by any crew, no matter how heroic. Sea water poured over them, and the sailors staffed the pumps in desperation and exhaustion. Newton's officers told him all was lost.

They were speaking to a man who loved his wine, women, and song. Newton, in fact, comfortably described himself as a full-fledged libertine and one who ran neck and neck with Satan. Newton's announced goal was to take the rest of humanity with him to hell. He mocked all things religious or moral and had no use for feelings of remorse. His motto was get mine and to hell with you. But, as they all faced a savage death and at the end of their strength, in the face of the worst storm he had ever known, Newton smiled strangely and said, "Well, I guess we'll just all have to put our trust in God!"

Miraculously, the ship survived the storm, and this foxhole incident caused John Newton to reflect on his life and the possibility that there was something of significance beyond his own arrogance and greed. Newton began to think about others. He even changed the way he treated his slave cargo; he became more humane. He treated his crew differently too. Newton became fair and reasonable, launching a process of change that continued for the rest of his life. In short, Newton repented, moving from alienation toward repair, from sin to salvation.

Newton eventually left the sea and became a minister in the Church of England. He was sent to Olney and there, with his friend, the poet William Cowper, wrote and published a book of hymns. John Newton is known in the history of the Western Church as a leader of the revivals of the mid-18th century. He wasn't a theologian or scholar. Newton's primary method of preaching was with his hymns. The one for which he became best know was his confession of his own journey.

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

Newton called himself a poor wretch, and although we have predictably produced two options in our UU hymnal, “soul” or “wretch”, I no longer instinctively choose soul without remembering John Newton's wretchedness and yes, my own culpability in racism and countless other personal and social wrongs.

Amazing Grace. Yes, authentic, enduring salvation requires our grit and effort, it surely does. It also requires the support and guidance of other sisters and brothers. But enduring transformation of the kind that Newton experienced needs grace, the gift of a power and presence beyond our creation and control.

Am I guilty, you bet I am? But is there sufficient grace and hope, you bet there is!

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