

sermon
September 28, 2008
Ellsworth, Maine
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Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the high holy days of the Jewish calendar, are late this year, or we were early. But they are finally approaching, these days of atonement when names are inscribed in the book of life for the coming year, and when all wrongs must be righted, and all amends made. Sin is a concept more closely associated with Christianity than with Judaism in popular culture, but the idea is there, violations of law for which one must repent and be forgiven. As we come down from that long and venerable religious line, we could have inherited it, we might have inherited it, but we certainly don't talk about it.

I think we're afraid of sin.

I think we're afraid of sin even if we don't believe in it. In fact, it's especially scary, then. It's scary because if we don't believe in it then we don't know what it looks like, can't fight it, can't name it. We know there's something big and bad out there but we don't know what it is; we might accidentally meet it, or talk with it in the street, invite it home for dinner. We don't know what happens if we forget and let it in, because really, it's not there.

We Unitarian Universalists never really talked about getting rid of sin, not as a planned proposition. We talked about getting rid of hell, and agreed that probably made sense, given that whole bit in the New Testament about a loving god; we talked about authority and where it comes from and we even talked about getting rid of god--although we never did come to agreement on that, the discussion is robust, with a respectable history. But we've never brought sin front and center.

Sometimes it seems like we did, back when we were talking about hell. But believing that god, if there is a god, is too good to damn us, no matter what, is different from believing that we're too good to be damned.

If there is such a thing as hell, and if the world worked on a strict eye-for-an-eye system of checks and balances, a lot of us could be in a lot of trouble. We all make mistakes, errors in judgment, little ones and sometimes big ones. Even if we set aside those people who, for reasons too complicated for us to understand, become violent and consistently mean, we are still left, not with some kind of perfect elite a la the Puritans, but with a flawed and messy bunch of people--of us. Sometimes we don't know what to do; sometimes we know but we can't bring ourselves to do it. Sometimes we act fast and don't think until later. And some of the mistakes we make are really just mistakes--minor upheavals in the fabric of our lives. Others, however, are bad.

They're really bad. We don't like to think about it; we certainly don't like to talk about it. But we do have language for it. Old language. It's called sin.

The word "sin" has a fascinating etymology, coming to us from the Germanic line. The words retain their sense of "trespass" or "offense" back through the years until they suddenly shift to meaning "true". It seems likely that the origin is "to be truly the one who is guilty". So *sin* comes from *truth*. (From the Online Etymology Dictionary)

Now we have this scary thing that we might not believe in that is derived from that which is at the very core of our sense of reason, which in turn is at the core of how we practice our faith. That should make us feel nice and secure.

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Imagine one of those classic Christmas mornings, just before the sun rises, children in their beds but raw with excitement and not having slept a wink. Nearly every family that celebrates Christmas has a gatekeeper event, something to keep the festivities from starting in the middle of the night. So imagine that the cock crows or the sun rises or grandma gets up to make her tea, and suddenly the place comes alive, feet pounding down the hall to stockings and breakfast and presents. The energy, the excitement, the pleasure are built up to bursting.

This is no accident. Anticipation is the amplifier of pleasure and pain. All those 364 days of waiting (365 in a leap year) pile up behind the door, waiting to fall through when the moment comes. It's an incredible amount of force, an incredible amount of potential energy, an incredible amount of joy--or disappointment.

Pain and fear work the same way--a horror novel worms its way into the subconscious long before the first person dies; every sentence is a little trap, a little hint, a drop of anticipation for the shock that's coming. We anticipate the awareness of wrongdoing like we anticipate that killer around the corner--it takes vast amounts of energy and time from our days. What if we knew what it was, we knew where to expect it, and we knew how to fight back?

What if we started by admitting it was there?

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So if it's there, what is sin, anyway?

Is it possible, as some believe, to sin without doing anything? Can thinking be a sin? Can someone with no sense of moral code sin?

Is sin an act of intention? Is it possible to sin by accident?

Where is the line between a bad mistake and a sin?

Is it possible to sin without hurting anyone or anything, including yourself?

That's where I usually start, with the concept of harm. It's older than Christianity, this idea of "harm none." It shows up in almost every religion and in many civil codes. The difference between religious and civil manifestations is that ultimately the civil ones come down to proof: can it be proven that you harmed someone or something. If not, the case fails. In religion, though, the question is not one of logic and sparring but one of deep personal conviction. Do you know that what you did was harmful? If you do, then you are guilty, and you know it. If you know you did no harm, then no civil court in the land can convict you of that deep transgression against self and sacred. It is that strength of faith and character that leads to martyrdom. In Arthur Miller's play, *The Crucible*, one of the characters, accused of being a witch in 17th century Salem, refuses to confess and refuses to implicate others; he is executed for it but his wife understands that he would rather die with his conscience clear than live without honor. He is accused of sin, but he has not sinned, and he knows it.

By long tradition, we believe that such questions are between you and whatever calls you to a life of the spirit--your own sacred nature, the world around you, your god. This is our religious and moral heritage. Nowhere does it let us off the hook. Quite to the contrary, it holds us to a stricter standard than any *other* can hold. We are capable of knowing, within a tiny fraction of an inch, what we are doing, what it means, whether we are transgressing common or personal moral code. To engage with religion is to choose to wrestle daily with that awareness, to refine one's sense of right and wrong, and to make the necessary adjustments. In this faith in particular we do not believe whatever we want; we believe what we *must*. We believe that we are all capable of and called to that ongoing process of discernment which leads us ever deeper into a life in which every minute is precious and sacred and every minute can be a manifestation of the holy in the world.

In the end, it is our own faith development that calls us to lead religious lives, and every day is a new choice to be deeply religious.

The space between bad judgment and sin is one of degree. A bad choice may simply be a bad choice, or it may be so grave that it rises to the level of sin. Sin has powerful, loaded implications--implications of irreparability or severe damage are laced through our cultural understandings. But in this faith, in the end, it's up to you. You may believe that no human is capable of anything that is bad enough to be called sin. Perhaps nothing warrants that label. Or you may believe that any transgression of faith is a sin no matter how small, and that all your life is guided by your faith.

In order for any of this to work, we must have some internal sense of faith. The books of Jewish

law in the Bible--primarily Deuteronomy and Leviticus--are very clear about what practices constitute faithful living and which are departures from good religious life. But it is a rare Christian or Jew who adheres to all of the law without fail, and there are still books and books of commentaries and interpretations, because even with chapter and verse there is so much unspoken. Even those who have a written law are left to encounter the law, its meanings and its possibilities, in the quiet of their own hearts.

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Once upon a time in a land far far away there was a god, and this god was bored. So this god decided to create a world. The world had earth and trees and flowers...but something was missing. So this god made a person, and made some animals. But the person was lonely, and the god understood what it was to be lonely, so the god created another person. And the god put the people in the most beautiful part of the world. Now there was plenty to eat and drink, but there were a few trees that the god didn't want to share. It might have been a metaphor--one tree had fruit that was knowledge, and one tree had fruit that was life. So the god told the people, don't eat from those trees, okay?

Now if you ask me, the fall from innocence starts right there, when the rules start showing up. But the story says that it didn't happen until the people, for whatever reason, decided to try some of the forbidden fruit. The god got mad and locked them out of the most beautiful part of the world, and made their lives harder, as punishment. At least, that's what the story says.

Common interpretation of the story of Adam and Eve ties pursuit of knowledge tightly to the first sin. Scholars have argued, and continue to argue, about whether the first sin is disobedience to god or getting too big for one's britches or listening to bad advice or poor self-control, but for thousands of years knowing things was suspect. Wanting to know things was dangerous. Best to just sit down and let someone else tell you what the rules were, unless you were willing to devote your entire life and being to understanding the power you were messing with. In fact, that idea--that learning was sacred and that knowledge could be dangerous if misused--was clearly supported by some kind of universal human experience, because shamans and priests and teachers were all one and the same in a number of ancient cultures, and they usually held extra power and extra responsibility because of their knowledge. If they knew things, they had some kind of obligation to use that knowledge for good and not for bad, especially if the community supported them so they can spend their time in study, learning things that the community needed them to know. A life of knowledge necessarily becomes one of service--not one of transgression. Knowledge moves us beyond unthinking obedience and requires us--calls us--to use our own awareness of the world and our own moral code. It asks us to judge for ourselves and then live with the further consequences of having made a choice for ourselves. Those consequences include bearing responsibility for our mistakes. Living with that can be harder than any external consequence. Some would rather die with a clear conscience than live at the

expense of their own integrity.

Knowledge is not the sin. Failure to seek knowledge is a sin. If we do not know right from wrong and we deliberately choose not to know it, then we are, by consequence, choosing to make all of the errors that result from our un-knowing. We are choosing to perpetrate harm and, worse, choosing not to take responsibility or live with the knowledge of what we have done, because we may not even know that it is wrong.

I have been sitting with sin for an entire week now. For a Unitarian Universalist raised agnostic by atheists, that's a lot.

A week.

And I find that sin is not in itself drugs or greed or need or rock-n-roll; it is certainly not sex; it is certainly not pleasure. Sin is a failure of spirit; a distancing from self and and community; sin is forgetting who we are. And so sin is abandoning the sabbath. The concept of sabbath--of a day of deliberate rest--must have seemed odd when it first appeared. The idea of bringing one's bare subsistence work to a halt is a tremendous act of faith.

When I lived in Portland, Oregon, snow was a rare thing. One night we got four inches, and the city came to a halt. It was two days before they realized it wasn't going to melt and they'd better plow, but those two days were bliss:

no cars.

no work.

no shopping.

just visits with neighbors, calls to friends, and the sweet silence that only a massive shutdown can bring.

It was sabbath.

It is in those times of sabbath that we remember what we mean to do--who we are--what is important. It is in those times of sabbath that the silence makes room for us to breathe. We need the sabbath--as Jewish law teaches, no matter what--to stay connected to the still, small voice within. That voice helps us know what to do. That voice helps us know what is right. that voice helps us become--and stay--whole.

And that is why the rabbis say, "remember the sabbath and you keep all of Torah". Of all the laws, and there are many, the one law that takes care of it all is observing the Sabbath. Take that

day and do no work. Till no field; gather no firewood. Drive as little as possible, or drive not at all. Cook nothing. Require no work of others. From the time three stars are visible in the Friday night sky, take a whole day to be one with yourself, with your family, and, in Jewish tradition, with your god. Read Torah. Pray. Be in good company and sweet conversation. But be attentive; be mindful; do not work. If your god can rest in creating the world, you can rest also.

For it is in that time of rest; it is in that time of peace, it is in that time of quiet that you shall truly know what is holy. If you have a god, it is in that set-aside space that your god will come. If you need to hear your spirit, it is in that time that your spirit will speak. We are not innocent. It is with the sabbath that we *savor* the fruit of that tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We have that capacity, and that knowledge transforms us. It makes us able to live good lives, even--or especially--in this hard and hurting world.

Keep the sabbath. It is the heart of faith. It is the heart of hope.

Blessed be
and amen.