

“SIN – WE NEED IT”

a sermon by Preston Moore
Williamsburg Unitarian Universalists
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CALL TO WORSHIP

In the gospel according to Luke, Jesus tells the story of a tax collector and a Pharisee who went into the temple to pray. The tax collectors of that day were despised as enforcers of oppressive taxes levied by the Roman Empire. The Pharisees were among the most erudite of the Jewish people.

The Pharisee stood up and offered a prayer of thanksgiving, saying “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector here. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” The tax collector was standing off to the side, his head bowed. When the Pharisee finished, the tax collector began to pray and simply said, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” Of these two, Jesus told his audience, the tax collector was the one who went home in a state of grace.

What would it mean to us to say “I am a sinner?” What should we make of these labels – sin and sinner, we who have left behind notions of original sin and sin as a list of forbidden acts? Are such words, which have been used so often as bludgeons to make people feel guilty, of any use to us at all? Come, let us look these questions in the eye. Come, let us worship together.

SERMON

Long ago and far away, there was a man who started a highly successful religious movement. People flocked to him with an unusual question. Rather than who he was or where he came from, they wanted to know **WHAT** he was. They queried “are you a god?” He said no. “an angel”? No. A saint? No. “Then what are you,” they finally asked. And he answered, “I am awake.” And so they named him, “The Awakened One,” or, in Sanskrit, “Buddha.”

Being awake to the gift of being alive was the opposite of sin, in the ancient world view. Long before churches developed the notion of sin as a list of forbidden acts, sin was thought of as the inherent tendency of humans to fall asleep spiritually, forgetting their connection to God.

And if you believe there is a spark of the divine in all of us, disconnection from God must also mean disconnection from other people and from our own true selves. An important cause of the disconnection is the universal human experience of being wounded. Some spiritual wounds are so intensely painful that the immediate coping

response is simply to lose consciousness -- a kind of self-administered anesthesia. But our material lives go on; and thus this condition of unconsciousness turns living into a kind of sleepwalking.

The ancient understanding of sin recognized great goodness in humanity, but also recognized that we can become disconnected from our good nature when we are wounded. The word sin actually comes down to us from the Saxon word “sund,” from which we get our archaic English word “sunder”. As in that familiar wedding language that goes, “what God has joined together, let no one put asunder.” To sunder something is to disconnect its parts, and to do so violently – to sever, as in inflicting a wound.

In the Christian church, a very different view of human nature eventually prevailed, reflected in the Seven Deadly Sins -- invented by medieval Catholicism -- and in the harsh teachings of Calvinism: that humans fundamentally are inclined toward evil and must be carefully controlled by promises of reward and threats of punishment in heaven and hell. Calvin planted Geneva thick with laws against sin. He was a lawyer, by the way. This orthodoxy is reflected in fundamentalist Christian churches even today.

Now, there’s nothing wrong with making lists of things that are likely to disconnect us from God, from others, and from self. The Ten Commandments did that. The mischief comes in two ways. The first is in thinking that sin can be reduced to lists of prohibited acts, rather than the condition of falling asleep. A list of forbidden acts is of no use to a sleepwalker. The second is in thinking that sin can be eliminated by the threat of punishment. Threats of punishment are not meaningful to a sleepwalker either. And we can’t help but notice that the ineffectiveness of these lists of sins and the accompanying threats of burning in a lake of fire (or promises of bliss in heaven). Sin is thriving.

In the middle of the last century, a story circulated that the legislature of the State of Kansas commissioned a study of the causes of railroad crossing accidents. Reading in the resulting report that the overwhelming majority of such accidents involved the last car of the train, the determined Kansas legislators passed a law declaring that in their fine state, there no longer would be any last cars on trains. . . . That’s sort of what we UUs have done with sin, isn’t it? We long ago moved away from the heavy-handed list-and-threat-based conception of sin. But instead of developing a new one, we simply dropped the word from our spiritual vocabulary. So now we have a feel-good religion without sin -- as if by banishing the word, we could eliminate the reality. But you can’t throw away wounding experiences, or the traumatic spiritual disconnections they inflict. Like the last car of the train, they can’t just be erased.

A spiritual void is left in modern life by the absence of a meaningful conception of sin for dealing with wounding disconnections. After the initial trauma of spiritual wounds abates somewhat, we start to regain consciousness; and the pain sets in. And our consumerist culture has responded to that void as a marketing opportunity – for every conceivable kind of anesthesia to dull the pain. Not just the obvious ones like drugs, alcohol, too much food, fancier possessions, or too much television; but also things like

impressive job titles and other status symbols. These anesthetics actually drive us deeper into the sleepwalking that used to be called sin.

This has personal meaning for me, in relation to my own history of immersing myself in work. In 1983, I spent what seemed like all my waking hours on a case concerning the court-supervised dismantling of AT&T's telephone monopoly. My son Galen was in first grade that year, and he wrote a little essay entitled "My Dad."

The first sentence read "My dad likes to work." Next, some geography: "He works at One Market Plaza." And then, in the third sentence, a surprise: "He has black hair and blue eyes." I have neither, of course. I chuckled at the essay, but wasn't worried by it. My work was intellectually satisfying. My wife and children had everything they could possibly need.

I was reminded of Galen's essay some years later, when I was living in Japan with my family and working with another team of lawyers on another sprawling case – involving copyright protection of software for mainframe computers. The work was intense and involved frequent trips back to the U.S.

My daughter Marianne was attending a kindergarten for expatriate American kids in Tokyo, and her teacher told me about a funny moment in class, just before the Thanksgiving break. At circle time she had asked the children to take turns saying what they were thankful for. When it came to Marianne, she thought a minute and announced, "I'm thankful that my dad is home for all major holidays."

I laughed – it was one of those "kids say the darnedest things" moments. Galen's little essay popped back into my mind briefly, but Marianne's picture of her Dad as someone primarily associated with "all major holidays" certainly didn't worry me. My work was intellectually satisfying. My wife and children had everything they could possibly need.

Years later, looking back from the vantage point of my path toward ministry, I could see how I had been using my law practice to distance myself from others. I had plenty of daily contact with other people. But hardly ever the kind in which anything deep is revealed. Not even with my family. I was working too hard to have time for that.

And I saw what I was working so hard to do: to construct a public self to place between me and others, to disconnect them from my real self. I wanted to present that public self and say to others, in effect, "this is who I am" – I'm the one who wrote this well-honed legal brief, or gained the confidence of this important new client.

I wanted to present this public persona to myself and say, "I am not that clumsy kid who showed up for high school basketball tryouts wearing the wrong brand of sneakers, or that socially backward college freshman who couldn't be suave with the girl he wanted to ask for a date." Whatever represented, for me, an experience of being wounded -- that's what I wanted not to be.

I wanted to give people something easy to love, a self that would not be rejected as inadequate. This coping strategy was the best I could do in light of my own history of wounds and fears. But it was costly, depriving me of the enlivening experience of letting others get close to me, and vice-versa. And those “others” included my own children. They grew up fine, but I slept through some precious pieces of my own life.

At this point, you may wonder what this story has to do with sin. Being a garden variety workaholic sounds too ordinary, not culpable or dramatic enough to be called sin. But this just shows how deeply ingrained those Calvinist notions of sin really are -- even among UUs. Sin as disconnection often happens in small daily doses, almost surreptitiously. As C. S. Lewis observed, “The safest road to Hell is the gradual one – the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.” Just cruising along in our sleep, “dead to the world.”

Metaphorically, at least, disconnection and sleepwalking represent a kind of hell on earth, rather than in an afterlife. As today’s poet said, “gorging ourselves and starving our neighbors, starving ourselves and storing our grain,” casting our trash upon the waters and then looking around in dull surprise when our environment becomes a hellbroth of pollution. In this hell, life is filled with the head-on collisions and sundering wounds that are inevitable when you sleepwalk, along with simply missing out on the joy of life. And being fully awake to life represents a kind of paradise on earth in which the human capacity for relating on the basis of love is given full expression.

How, then, do we rouse ourselves from our somnambulism, and overcome our condition of disconnectedness? We need to reach out to other people, even though this may lead to yet another wound. This is the only way to get and give the love and acceptance we have been looking for all along.

Love is the willingness to see and accept the truth in others and to be seen and accepted for the truth we are by others. Love happens when we reveal ourselves to one another, and tell the whole truth about ourselves to one another, including our wounds and all of the hurtful things we do in the pain of such wounds. And then accept one another just the way we are -- flawed, messy, and capable of wounding and being wounded.

Love engenders aliveness, and yet, humans are deeply ambivalent about this kind of encounter. The fear of revealing ones self fully and being rejected, of yet another wounding experience, is deep. The religious word for what happens in this intense encounter is confession, another word that liberal religions find repugnant – even though, like sin, it need not carry any implication of guilt. Imagine the courage it took for that tax collector in the temple to offer up a prayer of confession in front of an unfriendly audience. The idea that real love requires confession is frightening.

And so the dilemma: if you reach out to others for those encounters that are the only way to experience loving and being loved, accepting others and being accepted by them, you may be wounded yet again. But if you do not reach out, you will continue to

sleepwalk your way through hell on earth, having wounding collisions with other people – and missing the paradise on earth that being truly awake and alive can bring.

In emotional terms, there is no such thing as a safe place to start working our way out of this bind, but some places are less threatening than others. Right here in our own spiritual community should be one of those less threatening places. And we are working to make it so. Next Thursday, our Committee on Right Relations will present a detailed proposal to the Board to bring into being a group dedicated to preventing and healing wounding encounters among members of our own community. This is holy work, and however named, it is all about dealing with sin – dealing with what happens when we fall into sleepwalking and sleeptalking, acting out of old wounds, doing and saying things to each other that don't represent who we really are – things that afterward bewilder even the people who did and said them – almost as if they had been somewhere else when the collision happened.

We UUs are sometimes jokingly referred to as considering ourselves too good for God to damn to hell. Might we be missing some of that paradise on earth that comes with being truly awake? Who knows what we might discover if we looked inward to see whether a part of ourselves here or there has fallen asleep, become disconnected, while our attention was turned elsewhere. We might even find something that calls for confession – not as an acknowledgement of guilt, but rather as a revelation of self.

If we did these things, it would not mean an end of sin in our lives. As the ancients recognized, it is our nature to doze off, disconnect, sleepwalk. But it is also our nature to wake up again. It's just that sometimes we need a little help. We need to support each other in not missing the paradise on earth called being truly alive and truly awake.

Now, you may be thinking, “Yes, this sounds important, but we need to find a new WORD, because the fundamentalists have ruined words like confession and sin.” Well, maybe a new word IS needed, or maybe we should reclaim the old one, precisely because it does have a history that needs to be set straight. Either way, we need to engage the world on this subject. We need to see our church as a platform from which to say publicly what sin is really about. And what it's not about.

If we are serious about our values and our religion, we can't set up our own private club with its own enlightened conception of sin under a different name, leaving the orthodox one to determine what sin means out in the world.

Far from being permissive, the notion of sin as disconnection actually sets the bar much higher than the lists of forbidden acts from the Calvinist tradition. Like any law, these lists of sins implicitly permit everything they do not explicitly forbid. This is a lazy spirituality. Sin as disconnection, on the other hand, calls on us to aim much higher, by opposing anything that takes us away, anything at all that blocks the natural human gift for love, truth, and forgiveness. Even the careers that keep our families secure and free from material want. Even religion itself – like the religion you heard about in Kirstin's

testimony today. A religion that can cause a little girl to feel like she has to tell her best friend she's going to go to hell for not being a Baptist. We need to make ourselves heard on this subject.

We are a small religious movement. To have the impact we are committed to having in the world, we need leverage. The thin rhetoric of secular ethics will never give us that leverage. There is a reason why the language of religion often makes people uncomfortable: it has power. Explaining the principle of leverage, the ancient Greek mathematician Archimedes waxed poetic, saying, "if you will but give me a place to stand, I will move the world." As religious people, we find that place when we declare what is for us sacred ground. An essential part of that sacred ground is sin. Without sin, nothing is sacred. Without sin, the differences between awake and asleep, between connected and disconnected, indeed between paradise on earth and hell on earth would lose their meaning. May we spare ourselves this impoverishment.

AMEN.