



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

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## The Sin of Separation

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Ever feel broken? Take this stick – imagine it is your life. It has its bumps and irregularities, strong in places and not so strong in others. It shows some wear but it is still whole. There is a beauty to it – the bark, the grain of the wood suggests an integrity, a usefulness. It has a wonderful quality of being supple and strong at the same time. The suppleness lets you adapt to things that happen, and the strength lets you be clear or firm and give way too much.

But sometimes – snap – our lives are broken. Sometimes the break is big, sometimes small. Sometimes we break it and sometimes it is broken by others. Tragedies happen; loved ones die or suffer; love itself ends; we lose a job or direction; sorrow overwhelms us; anger builds, and ‘snap.’ Sometimes drugs or sometimes alcohol; sometimes our own selfishness. Snap – lives are broken and we are separated from what sustains us.

Some years ago now, a member of the church I formerly served was head of the public library system and she decided to subscribe to and have available in the library the Blade – the newsletter of the gay and lesbian community. My guess is that the year was about 1996. The congregation had recently voted to become a ‘Welcoming Congregation’ – meaning that we affirmatively and pro-actively welcomed gay and lesbian members and sought ways to confront prejudice and bias on the basis of sexual orientation. It was in suburban Washington DC.

1996 was soon after Newt Gingrich was feeling his oatiest and the religious right was beginning their public ascendancy, and of the Blade being in the library and available to children became an issue – our poor dumb innocent children might be exposed to, gasp, this – well they had many words for ‘this.’ There was a public hearing with the County Board of Supervisors and I testified. It was a stirring speech with references to Jefferson and Adams, and, I am sure, utterly unconvincing to anyone – minds were already made up.

Afterwards as people gathered in the vestibule, including about a dozen or twenty members of my congregation, a pediatrician came up to me, planted himself no more than a foot from my face – I had run into him before at meetings with the school board about the sexuality education offered – he was against and I was for. He had also testified before the Supervisors arguing the Blade not be available. And he said to me – ‘You know what is wrong with you people?’

Don’t you love phrases like that? ‘You people’ – this is always said in arrogance – you people are not real people, are lesser people, are wrong people – not real Americans, etc etc etc – he said ‘You know what is wrong with you people?’ And, surprise surprise he did not wait for me to answer, but answered his own question and said ‘You people don’t believe in sin!’ And leaned back in triumph. Pride – one of the seven deadly sins!

Like hah, gotcha. Stunning use of argument, don’t you think?

I answered ‘Oh but we do.’ And I am not sure who was more startled – him or the members of my church observing the interchange. ‘We do believe in sin. We believe that anything that breaks relationships, or breaks our connection with the creation is a sin. That is why taking the Blade **out** of the library is the sin; it breaks relationships with members of our community and with the creation.’

Hah – and I leaned back in triumph. He sputtered and we went on a bit and went our separate ways, absolutely unchanged.

This is our theological theme this month. Sin. Missing the mark, breaking the relationship with the sacred. Sin – not a word we use a lot around here. Long ago, we – we UUs that is – claimed there was no such thing as original sin. Our first principle – the inherent worth and dignity of everyone is in direct counter to the idea of original sin. All, it was claimed, are born sinful or born in sin. No, we said, maybe not perfect, but not sinful. We have said that is an abominable belief. We are born innocent and throughout our lives we do good and bad; we all sin in the sense of

breaking a relationship with the creation or missing the mark but we are not born sinful. But it is not inherent. Still, it is not a word we often use, and probably will not use, but it is a meaningful concept.

Breaking the creation, breaking lives, missing the mark. Snap. That we all do.

Steve Ellison – our musical genius for the day – at one point in our discussion about the service told me that the song following the sermon was upbeat and so might not fit right. I said ‘So you think my sermon will be a downer, Steve?’ After all, sin has a long history of being the theme for grim sermons – sinners in the hands of an angry God, thundered Jonathan Edwards:

‘The wrath of God burns against them, their damnation does not slumber; the pit is prepared, the fire is made ready, the furnace is now hot, ready to receive them; the flames do now rage and glow. The glittering sword is whet, and held over them, and the pit hath opened its mouth under them.’

Seven deadly sins: wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy, and gluttony. In a 2009 survey men admitted most to the sin of lust and women to the sin of pride. There is no data for Unitarian Universalists. I took an online test and found that I am in the forgivable range, but that I should be most aware of gluttony and pride.

In the Book of Proverbs lists "six things the Lord hateth, and the seventh His soul detesteth." namely

- \* A proud look
- \* A lying tongue
- \* Hands that shed innocent blood
- \* A heart that devises wicked plots
- \* Feet that are swift to run into mischief
- \* A deceitful witness that uttereth lies
- \* Him that soweth discord among brethren

Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians, includes more of the traditional seven sins, and, because it is Paul, more is added: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, "and such like." Such like – perfect.

Ghandi had a different list:

- Wealth without Work
- Pleasure without Conscience
- Science without Humanity
- Knowledge without Character
- Politics without Principle
- Commerce without Morality
- Worship without Sacrifice

So here we are – spring is here, Mother’s Day is in a week; we had a terrific day yesterday on Big Saturday with hundreds of us doing good – let’s hear it for Les Hunter and crew! – stand up if you took part yesterday! Sloth was not in evidence yesterday.

My friend Rob Hardies tells this story:

"A Pope dies and goes to heaven. At the Pearly Gates, St. Peter greets him warmly and welcomes him in. "Allow me to show you to your new home, Your Holiness."

St. Peter ushers the Pope to a rather crowded and dingy neighborhood in heaven and finally stops at the door of a small apartment in an unflattering building. Needless to say the Pope is confused and disappointed. He was expecting something a little grander.

As the Pope surveys the apartment he peers out his tiny window and notices on a nearby hilltop a sprawling mansion. With three decks and a swimming pool and Jacuzzi. "Who lives there?" asks the Pope. "The Unitarian minister," replies St Peter. "Well why does he get such a great place, I'm the Pope. He's just a Unitarian."

"Look it, Your Holiness. We get lots of Popes in heaven. We've only got one Unitarian minister. And we treat him well."

Rob goes on to say that in Islam sin means primarily to forget. We forget what is right to do; we forget our relationship to the Holy; we forget that we can be better often than we are. How many times do we say that to ourselves: I knew better than that. How often do we say that to others: they knew better than that, or to our children, you know better than that. I sure heard that often enough as I grew up, and I did know better.

Why is it that we sin, that we do wrong, when we all do know what is right and what is wrong? We know that to treat others unfairly is wrong, to hurt others is wrong. We know that to use the resources of the earth in a way that is not sustainable is wrong. We know that hatred and prejudice and unwarranted pride, that arrogance is wrong. So why do we err, miss the mark, forget our better self?

Paul says the good that I would do, I do not, but the evil that I would not do, I do. I understand that.

But why? Forgetting – I find this intriguing. Sin as forgetting, and I believe Rob is on to something.

So what is it that we forget? I want to suggest that what we forget is our essential unity, our essential and radical relationship with others and the world. And that when we break that relationship, we sin. We forget what we claim in our seventh principle – our interdependence. We forget that we are tied together; as Martin Luther King said: We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.

Here is what I mean, and, as I have in the past, I want to refer to Martin Buber for the theology. Buber claims that all life is a dialogue – we relate to the world in one of two ways – either as I-It or I-Thou. For Buber it is impossible to be isolated completely – that is the same as death. We are minimally related to our own self – we breathe, our heart beats, we have thoughts and feelings. And we are related to the world – we walk out in the sun or rain; we see the trees and hear the birds or the traffic; we eat food; we watch TV; we hold hands or close our fist. We cannot not relate.

And Buber goes on to say we relate in these two ways – we relate to the world [or even ourselves] as an object. There is nothing wrong with this; scientist to this to understand the world; we do it to navigate traffic or cook a potato.

But the world also presents itself to us as a subject, and, Buber says, when we meet the world this way, we have an I-Thou experience – we are wholly, and holy, in relationship – subjects, not objects, equal. And at times like this, we catch a glimpse of what is sacred.

Buber is saying, and I am saying, that we are truly part of an interdependent web – our 7<sup>th</sup> principle proclaims this, and when we break that interdependence, we sin; when we forget that interdependence we sin. It is the breaking of relationships – with our own self if we violate our own principles. With others if we treat others as objects, with the world when we do not care for it.

I am sure that nothing I am saying is news to you – taking care of ourselves and others and the world, loving our selves and others and the world – well what else is new? When we fail at that, or deliberately do the opposite, we sin.

Now I doubt that we will suddenly start to talk about sin here – but about separation we should pay attention. How are you separated from your own best self and how can you re-connect? How are you separated from others and how can you re-connect? How are you separated from the world and how can you reconnect?

It is in dividing ourselves – the ‘you people’ kind of thinking – that sin enters. And for which we need forgiveness. You know the Beatles song – I am you and you are me and we are all together? [Goo goo ga joob?].

This is the danger we face – we seem to have entered a time in our culture of more and more separation – ‘you people’ thinking – and increasing tolerance. The recent law signed in Arizona is just the latest manifestation of this. Everywhere there is a punitive response to the ‘other’ in our midst. So much anger, so much hatred, so much judgment.

Ghandi’s list is a good one, because each item points to our relationship with others, to losing a sense of the ego, of taking our own self out of the center of the universe and placing our selves alongside others. If we turn them around, they might be a means to redemption:

- Wealth with Work
- Pleasure with Conscience
- Science with Humanity
- Knowledge with Character
- Politics with Principle
- Commerce with Morality
- Worship with Sacrifice

So Steve, no downer message here – like your songs, we can discover our essential connection with each other and with the world; we can stand by each other, listen to each other, help each other. We can work in our communities; we can support our houses of faith; we can love our children; we can accept each other. We can say thank you for all we have and take care of what we have been given. We can see life as a blessing; we can know we are connected, one to another and with the deep well of the sacred.

We can be better. Here, we can be better – in this house of worship we can be better, in this community of faith we can be better. Open to your own self, to others, to the world. Love the earth, the sun and the animals. Love yourself and your neighbor and your God.

Go forth and sin no more.

Amen