



Neighborhood Unitarian  
Universalist Church

## The Seven Lively Virtues

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A couple of months ago, Jim preached about sin in a sermon titled, "The Sin of Separation." I have never liked the subject of sin, because I have always so closely identified it with Divine judgment and, as a flaming Universalist, I don't like the idea of a God that punishes us after we die. Unrepentant sinners go to hell, or- worse yet- no need to repent or stop sinning, just accept Christ as "personal" Lord and Savior and entrance into heaven awaits. I do not accept this theology.

Worse still is the notion of Original Sin. When I first began my chaplaincy internship, I made the announcement that I could not, in good faith, perform baptisms. Not only did I object to the theological notion behind it, that all of us are born sinful and need to be washed clean by joining in the Christian faith, but I felt that my performing baptisms would be inauthentic, since I so vehemently disagree with the theology behind it. Surely it would not be fair to the parents, I thought, they should have a chaplain who truly believes in the sacrament.

Then the moment came in which I had no choice. I was the chaplain on-call and was awoken at 4am when paged by a nurse in the neo-natal Intensive Care Nursery. A premature baby was actively dying, the parents lived hours away in another state and could not make it in time, but they were requesting baptism. I was the only chaplain in the hospital. There was no time for lofty theological ideals. There was a spiritual need, an emergency, and it was up to me to address it.

I was half asleep when I entered the NICU for the first time ever in that early hour. The baby was so tiny. About six or seven nurses and specialists of various faiths stopped what they were doing and gathered while I shook as I read the words printed on my baptism cheat-sheet and placed three drops of water from a dropper on a small head.

A few months later, I would be assigned as the unit chaplain on that floor and baptisms would become a weekly occurrence as well as my favorite function as a chaplain. It wasn't that my objections to the theology of sin had changed; it was that I came to understand the ritual more. These babies- most of whom did not survive- were able to share in a familiar ceremony with their parents. I think of all of the ceremonies that their parents dreamt of sharing with them- birthdays, graduations, weddings, and other milestones- and I am overcome and humbled by the thought that I was facilitating one of the only such rituals they would share with this member of their family, their child. It is a sacred humility, one that reminded me of my deep connection with the fullness of humanity, my smallness as well as my value of being. I never once performed a baptism without becoming covered in large goose bumps. I never failed to tremble.

In Jim's sermon, he defined sin as, "Missing the mark, breaking the relationship with the sacred." He said, "We are truly part of an interdependent web... 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." It was ironic that my own theological objection to sin almost cost me the "sin of separation", almost missing the human connection that performing baptisms ultimately brought me.

I liked the idea that sin is a separation from our world. This sermon provided for an exciting discussion of sin at the Chalice Circle group that I facilitated this year. And so, I began thinking more about the concept of sin and opening myself up to its possibilities and lessons. I was excited to learn that in addition to the infamous Seven Deadly Sins (wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy, and gluttony), there exists a list of Seven Lively Virtues. Surely, if sin could equal failure to remember, value, or recognize our interconnectedness, then the Seven Virtues would serve as a road map for reconnection, maintaining connection, and living in right-relationship with ourselves, each other, and our planet. So began a quest to explore the Seven Lively Virtues, find out where they come from, and put this theory to the test.

The Seven Lively Virtues, also called the Seven Heavenly Virtues, are: temperance, wisdom, justice, courage, faith, hope, and charity. They each are a response or a remedy to a corresponding sin. The first four, temperance, wisdom, justice, and courage are often called the "Cardinal" or "Natural" Virtues. They are attributed to Socrates and are also found in the ethical writings of Plato and Aristotle. St. Paul, the Apostle, spoke of three more virtues in chapter thirteen of his first letter to the church in Corinth. He lists faith, hope, and charity. The last, charity- *caritas*, in Latin- is also translated from the original Greek word "agape" as love. Paul tells us that the greatest of these virtues is love.

The early Church Fathers combined all seven virtues to create today's list. It is said that before the Great Schism of the Church in 1054 C.E. that resulted in the splitting of the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church, there was less emphasis placed on the salvific value of the virtues, whether they would assist in avoiding hell for a place in heaven, and more emphasis placed on living ethically in this life. Perhaps this is due to the Eastern Orthodox view of salvation as recognition of oneself as a member of the body of Christ. Father Stephen, an Orthodox priest and blogger writes,

"After the resurrection, Christ appeared to the Apostle Peter. Their dialog must have been the most profound dialog ever to take place between man and God. "Do you love me?" Christ asked Peter. Peter hedged his answer. But Christ responded, "Feed my sheep." For to love Christ and to feed His sheep are not two things but one. For Peter to finally know this was indeed his personal salvation. It is ours as well. Glory to God."

In his letter to the Romans, Paul also wrote that, "the wages of sin is death." This has been historically interpreted as "death" meaning hell, as in, no eternal life with God in heaven. But, if we indulge the Orthodox notion and expand it to be inclusive of not only the members of "the body of Christ" through the church's sacraments, but the church universal, the fullness of humanity, or our interconnected web of existence, we come back to the notion of a virtuous life as one which retains our connectedness or, as Rebecca Parker puts it, a life that blesses the world.

So, do the Lively Sins help us to do this and thwart or avoid their "deadly sin" counterparts? The first is Temperance, whose counterpart is Gluttony. With temperance, comes self-control and restraint and the prudence to consider and to balance the needs of others with our own needs. Temperance need not mean selflessness, for certainly our needs are important, too. But, it certainly requires unselfishness. I think of the instructions that are given at the beginning of each flight illustrate this, "if cabin pressure decreases and the oxygen masks drop, place the mask over your face first, then secure it over a child's." Help yourself. Take care of yourself. But, remember others. Save enough of whatever it is to be shared for others.

Wisdom's counterpart is Lust. This one confused me a bit until I thought more about it. I do like that Lust's opposite is not chastity, as much of Christian history has regrettably declared sex to be sinful. It makes some sense for wisdom to counter lust, for through wisdom comes maturity. It is not that we become shameful for having intense sexual desires, but wisdom teaches us to be honest with ourselves and in our relationships.

Justice is the next virtue. It is a word we are accustomed to hearing from this pulpit and something that we, as Unitarian Universalists, pride ourselves on working toward. Its sin counterpart is Wrath. In junior high, I had a bumper sticker on my locker with the words of Pope Paul VI, "If you want peace, work for justice." When thinking of justice as the solution to wrath, the phrase could be reversed: if you want justice, work in peace. Doing so shows us patience and mercy. This is the means of justice seeking of non-violent resistors like Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Cesar Chavez. Recently a UU congregation in Cleveland combated wrath through this means of justice seeking. Remembering how loving activists shielded mourners at Matthew Sheppard's funeral from the wrath of anti-gay protesters, they organized an angel brigade and formed an interfaith wall of angel wings along the edges of the parade route, blocking the signs reading "God Hates Fags" from the parade participants.

Courage is the counterpart of Pride. This has always been a tricky one for me, especially following that last story. Pride cannot always be a sin, something that separates me from connectedness. As a lesbian, it takes courage for me to be proud of who I am in the face of such hate. This is why we have Gay Pride month. But, of course, the rub comes when pride becomes arrogance. It sometimes takes courage to have humility, to lay our egos aside and admit that we are not at the center of the universe. This is especially true, I believe, in our relationship to our earth and its other inhabitants. We have enjoyed our place at the top of the food chain and intelligence spectrum for so long that we have abused this place of privilege, forgetting our connectedness.

On a side note, I am very excited that, in an attempt to remind myself of this, I am spending next Sunday, one of my only Sundays off of the year, petting rescued livestock at The Gentle Barn, an animal sanctuary in Santa Clarita. The founders of the sanctuary understand this concept, and focus much of their effort in a program that allows “at-risk” children to pet and help care for the animals. Their website reads, “Incorporating the simple concepts of kindness and respect into their lives, and teaching the children to respect and protect even the smallest and weakest among us, will help them value themselves and one another.” Like the animals that come to The Gentle Barn, many of the children have been abused and neglected. They learn pride without arrogance and the courage required for humility and compassion through reverence for our fellow creatures.

The next three virtues, Paul’s “Theological Virtues”, each go hand in hand. Faith is the virtue that counters Sloth. Through faith, we know persistence and integrity. Faith need not mean belief, or blind faith. When we call ourselves a “people of faith”, we are usually referring to ourselves as a body that shares basic ethical principles and ideals in which we place our hopes for the present and the future. Faith counters sloth in that, when we are weary from the journey and the odds seem stacked against justice, we continue on as faithful people.

The virtue of Hope, the counter of Envy, is often translated into Latin as *Humanitas*, or kindness, humanity. How does kindness equal hope? Is this too much of a stretch? Is kindness or hope the counter to envy? This one could be its own sermon, but I do know that, when I witness examples of compassion, it brings me loads of hope. Also, again, speaking for myself, I tend to be less resentful or envious of others when I have taken the time to sit with them in compassion. I find that the grass isn’t always greener and that we are all managing our best in all of our brokenness.

The seventh virtue, which Paul says is the greatest, is Charity- also known as *caritas*, in Latin, or *agape*, in Greek. This virtue, said to be the equivalent of love, is the counterpart of Greed. Through charity we learn generosity of our time, talent, and treasure. We make sacrifices for the benefit of others. We call our Unitarian Universalist campaign against oppression “Standing on the Side of Love,” with this in mind. With this love we maintain temperance, gain wisdom, work for justice, keep courage, have faith, give hope, and exemplify generosity.

There is certainly overlap in all seven. Seven is a magical number in the Jewish and Christian traditions and many others. The Bible’s genealogies records people “begetting” others in sets of seven generations. As Unitarian Universalists, we embrace Seven Principles. But, there are other means of remaining connected to the divine, other lists with varying numbers of virtues. Buddhists have the Noble Eightfold Path; Hindus have the nine modes of *Sattva*, and so on. Perhaps each of us will have our own magic number of virtues that connect us, and of sins that separate us from our web of existence. It seems that Paul was onto something counting *agape*, love, as the greatest of all. Maybe that one word is list enough?

In her book, *Blessing The World: What Can Save Us Now*, in which today’s reading serves as the benediction, Rebecca Parker writes, “maybe in the end love will save us all, but it has a lot better chance at the beginning.” Whatever your list of virtues, be a blessing to the world, and begin with love.