

Sin and Forgiveness

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First Unitarian Church of Worcester

Time was, and not even that long ago, that every Unitarian and Universalist church held regular communion services. Maybe not every week; but once a month, or a couple times a year, communion was a regular part of the worship service. In the 1939 Unitarian and Universalist hymnal *Hymns of the Spirit*, there are two communion services included. Our Common Prayer this morning came from that hymnal (Unitarian 42).

Now, communion services are rarer in our churches, but they are still a part of our tradition. I led an evening communion service here during Advent and I'll lead another one on Maundy Thursday, the Thursday before Easter. I get to participate in communion from time to time. For me, my spiritual life is more about practice than about belief. Belief is distant and hard to pin down; my beliefs tend to focus on practicalities, like how we should be kind toward one another, and let go of our worry and anxiety. Beliefs about God and the holy can seem further away.

In communion, I practice the spiritual virtues I hope to attain: shared community experience, confession of the things we have done wrong, being assured of grace, being humble and remembering the life and teachings of my spiritual masters. I don't do it because I think communion, or the practices of Christianity, are the only path toward spiritual wholeness; they're not even the only path for me. I do it because it transforms something inside of me to gather with others and participate in the rituals of my tradition. It is good for my soul to bow to the wisdom of this practice, over 2,000 years old, and wait to learn what it has to teach me. My practices teach me what I believe, rather than the other way around.

One of the things communion has taught me is the value of the prayer of confession. It's not a kind of prayer we often find in Unitarian Universalism, but it has value for our spiritual lives. Confession of the things we have done wrong makes a difference. Now, you might not know this from contemporary Unitarian Universalist worship. We tend to get into a place where it's easy to recognize all the evil out there in the world without ever contemplating that we ourselves have done anything wrong.

There are some good reasons for this in our history. For centuries, Christian church life was dominated by men, and women got the message that they were lesser-than. The feminist movement in our churches, which has led to near-parity between genders in the clergy, emphasized the truth that none of us are inherently sinful and all of us have equal inherent worth and dignity. Many Unitarian Universalists came up in religious traditions that taught them only how evil they were as individuals, and now find peace and comfort in a religious tradition that tells us we're all in this together, none of us evil, all of us trying our best. That's especially important for people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, who have been told by more conservative churches for so long that they were not worthy. We lift up the value of every person and celebrate our diversity.

And certainly we were influenced by the positivism of the early 20th century, believing that if only we learned enough, and tried hard enough, and developed enough technology, human beings could overcome all challenges. A formulation of faith from that period says that Unitarians believed "[in the fatherhood of God; the brotherhood of man; the leadership of Jesus; salvation by character; and the progress of mankind onward and upward forever \(Ross\)!](#)"

But we know more now, don't we? Modern technology didn't avoid war in the 20th and 21st centuries; instead, it has allowed us to become ever more deadly. Greater education has not overcome prejudice and hate, it just gives us more sophisticated excuses for our biases. Our welcoming and tolerant congregations have not turned all of us who love them into perfect people. We still struggle every day to be kind and understanding and to do the right thing. It helps us--it helps me--to have a place in our liturgies from time to time to acknowledge that we mess up in our lives. By having a place and time to admit this to ourselves, it makes it easier to admit it to others, and ask for forgiveness when we need it. It makes it easier to accept apologies from other people and offer them forgiveness. It helps to be reminded that whatever mistakes we have made, this is still a church for us, still a place where we are accepted and loved for who we are. For in Unitarian Universalist liturgies, after the prayer of confession comes the assurance of pardon. We are loved, we retain our worth and dignity, no matter what. Our Universalist heritage assures us that nothing can separate us from the ground of our being. We are accepted just as we are.

In our particular moment in American culture, we are living with a dangerous myth. We're living with the myth that if we only do the right things--perform the right exercises, eat the right foods, take the right remedies, get the right amount of sunlight--we will be able to live perfect lives. A government advisory committee came out this week with new food recommendations. [Eat less meat; eat less sugar; but coffee and eggs are ok \(Aubrey\)](#). You can just hear the apps being coded now, the books being written, to transform your life and help you lose 10 pounds by drinking more coffee and cutting out meat every day but Sunday. We live in a consumer culture that peddles the illusion that we can achieve perfection, if only we try hard enough. We need our faith community to teach us a different truth.

Here, we can finally admit that we are imperfect, and are always going to be imperfect, no matter what. Here, we can confess what we have done wrong. And here, unlike in the consumer culture, we do not find shame or condemnation when we admit our mistakes. Here, in the stillness of prayer or meditation, in the companionship of the person next to us in the pew, in the reminder of the ground upon which we stand; here, we find love and acceptance. Here we practice the relationship with that which is greater than we are alone, and we know that we can never be cut off from that sustenance and succor.

Knowing that we do things wrong but never having any space to admit it leads to shame and isolation. It leads us to imagine that everyone else is doing it right and only we are struggling. Ironically, being able to admit that we make mistakes eases our shame and regret. It helps us move forward. It helps us recommit to all the ways we are kind and helpful, even though we know we will still make mistakes. Saying the prayer of confession and hearing the assurance of pardon with everyone with us in church, everyone who has also come to this spiritual way-station, helps us remember how to do our best and know we are not alone.

We need to know we're not alone. We need a way to put our hearts and souls back together when they have been broken. Our prayers help us to do this. [One man tells a heartbreaking story about the disorder in his heart and soul when he came back from war](#). His story is heartbreaking, but we can imagine that he is not alone among our veterans in these experiences or feelings. Michael Yandell served in the Army from 2002 to 2006. He was an explosive ordinance disposal specialist in Iraq, which is a long way of saying he and his unit were in charge of finding and disarming roadside bombs. He couldn't sleep when he got home. He had trouble figuring out what was normal after serving in Iraq.

Yandell uses a phrase more and more veterans are using to describe their experiences: moral injury. In the war, he did the things he had to do. He pulled civilians out of their houses, he helped imprison people indefinitely and offered them no recourse, he used his gun to terrify

people and get them to do what he wanted. He was 19 years old. He believed then, and still believes now, in the importance of America's military power. He believed then, and still believes now, that joining the Army was the right thing to do. But it messed with his sense of right and wrong. He did things in Iraq, for the right reasons over there, that he would never do, and could never do, in civilian life. He needed a way to come to terms with his service. He writes, "Such a monumental shift in one's perception of the world, however, cannot be temporary. I expected to be able to return to the solid foundations of the world I had left, with its understandings of moral truth. But when I arrived home, I could not. Everything was laid flat. I returned, like so many others, to sleepless nights and to the thoughts and memories of war."

Now, Michael is in seminary, training for the ministry. His faith is helping him write essays like this one, where he confesses his experience and recognizes that it does get better, with time. He didn't do wrong, exactly; he did what was expected of him. He fulfilled his duty. But he feels it was wrong, and he needs a way to say that. The language of faith gives him that opportunity. Our churches are a place where we can acknowledge that our hearts are broken, and reach out through that brokenness to love one another.

In traditional religious language, the thing a person is confessing in a prayer like the one we said earlier is "sin." And "sin" is a very loaded word, one we don't use very often in liberal religion, one that I am reluctant to use. Michael's deeds in the Army weren't sinful, even though he does feel they were not right when weighed against goodwill for the world. Our own shortcomings are not necessarily sin. For me, the concept of sin is most useful in recognizing that evil acts and evil intentions do exist in the world, sometimes beyond all individual responsibility, and we all get caught up in systems of wrongdoing that we would rather avoid if we could.

We almost all drive our cars even though the exhaust chokes the air; we all pay taxes that support Michael's war even though it is deadly; we all find ourselves short of temper sometimes even though it sows ill-will; we all are part of the world even when the world is no good. We may not use the word "sin" for our individual actions, but the weightiness of the world's problems can feel heavy enough to need that big word, and we know we play a part in them.

We try, every week, every day, every hour to make a better choice, to take the better path before us, to play our small part in bending the arc of the universe toward justice. We try to carry out our divine agency in the world by becoming co-creators of the world's beauty. In some religious traditions, people say a prayer of confession in order to cleanse their souls and become, at least for a moment, perfect. In some religious traditions, it is believed that God chose a very few people to be perfect at the beginning of time, and the rest of us are out of luck. In our tradition, we believe that the majesty and infinity of Love will always win out, will always hold us, will always be with us no matter what we have done. We look to spiritual leaders who start with love, who tell us, as the epistle writer did this morning, that there is no greater truth than love. In our tradition we remember our shortcomings to also remember, in the same thought, that by saying them aloud we are uniting ourselves with every person everywhere who is struggling for something better. The only ones here who help the world turn toward grace are ourselves. We, in all our brokenness, are the ones we have been waiting for.

I will tell you a secret: no one is perfect. When we all said our common prayer earlier, everyone here felt in their hearts that they have "feared what is not terrible and wished for what is not holy." We are together in our brokenness. It is our brokenness that lets us reach out to one another in love and compassion. Understanding what it's like to try our best, and make a mistake, and trying again; knowing how to confess our shortcomings and ask for forgiveness; offering forgiveness to someone else because we have compassion for them; all these are the source of our love for one another and our connection to each other. Making confession is not something we do because it's a rule of our church (which it's not) or because someone is

checking it off a spirituality list (no one is); we do it because it is out of the knowledge of our fallibility that we remember our love for one another. We can love each other more in our humility and openness than in any other way.

Please join me in the spirit of prayer.

--To know how to love each other.

--For the humility to know when we have done something wrong, and the courage to try again in a different way.

--For a deep knowledge of all the affection and respect around us, from each other and from the ground of our being.

Readings

1 John 3:14, 16-18

From [A Treatise on Atonement](#) by Hosea Ballou

Sources

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