

April Theme
Sin: The Practice of Separation

If one by one we counted people out for the least sin, it wouldn't take us long to get so we had no one left to live with. For to be social is to be forgiving.

~ Robert Frost

Introduction

Sin is commonly thought of as an offense against religious or moral laws, or an act that goes against the commands of God. While many of us grew up in traditions that taught about Biblical commandments being handed down from God and/or the evils of the seven deadly sins, it's fair to say that these concepts no longer resonate with many of us, if they ever did. In light of this, is the concept of sin even relevant to Unitarian Universalists?

In Unitarian Universalism, the concept of God is often quite different than it is in other traditions. Rebecca Ann Parker, in *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-first Century*, quotes the liberal theologian Walter Rauschenbusch: "our universe is not a despotic monarch with God above the starry canopy and ourselves down here; it is a spiritual commonwealth with God in the midst of us." Parker continues: "For [Rauschenbusch], sin is not the betrayal of God's rules but the betrayal of one another. Sin matters not because it disappoints, offends or alienates God, but because it destroys life-giving relationships of love and justice in human affairs – leaving tragedy and broken hearts in its wake. For Rauschenbusch, self-centeredness is the root cause of our failures of each other. When selfishness is regarded as the root of all evil... unselfish love opens the path to salvation. Self-sacrifice, love's most perfect form, saves."

If sin is as Rauschenbusch and Parker describe – the betrayal of one another – it seems that our world today is full of it. In "Our Culture of Contempt", a recent essay in *The New York Times*, Arthur C. Brooks defines "motive attribution asymmetry" as "the assumption that your ideology is based in love, while your opponent's is based in hate". Brooks notes that one in six Americans has stopped talking to a family member or friend because of the 2016 election, and cites a 2014 study that found "the average Republican and the average Democrat today suffer from a level of motive attribution asymmetry that is comparable with that of Palestinians and Israelis. Each side thinks it is driven by benevolence while the other is evil and motivated by hatred – and is therefore an enemy with whom one cannot negotiate or compromise."

The chasm between Republicans and Democrats is just one of any number of examples of the extreme and well-documented separation of people we see in our society today. Much has been observed recently about the stark gaps between climate change believers and deniers, urban and rural populations, the "one percent" and the "99 percent", non-white and white populations, and genders, to name just a few. David Brooks, *The New York Times* OpEd columnist, recently observed "We're a nation coming apart at the seams, a nation in which each tribe has its own narrative and the narratives are generally resentment narratives."

Given the seemingly countless ways in which "life-giving relationships of love" are being separated and even destroyed in today's society, what are we to do? Are these relationships salvageable? If so, how? And how long might it take? David Brooks suggests "[t]he need now is to consolidate all the different narratives and make them reconciliation and possibility narratives, in which all feel known. That requires direct action, a concrete gesture of respect that makes possible the beginning of a new chapter in our common life." If this is right, where would we even begin?

This month's theme was composed by Matt Andrus and the Worship Associates.

Questions for discussion and discernment on your own, or with each other:

1. Our Unitarian Universalist principles provide for “the inherent worth and dignity of every person”; “justice, equity and compassion in human relations”; “acceptance of one another”; and “the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all”. Is it possible to apply our principles to our deeply fractured society, including those individuals and groups who don’t seem to share them? If so, how?
2. Do you agree that self-sacrifice is love’s most perfect form? If so, why? If not, why not?
3. The seven deadly sins (i.e., pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath and sloth) have been described as excessive versions of one’s natural desires. Do you agree? Why? Do the seven virtues, i.e., virtue, charity, chastity, gratitude, temperance, patience and diligence, resonate with you and/or the seven UU principles?
4. Of the seven deadly sins, pride has been described as “the deadliest of all, the root of all evil, and the beginning of sin.” Moreover, Parker suggests that, for Rauschenbusch, “selfishness is regarded as the root of all evil.” Are pride and selfishness one and the same? If not, how do they differ? Do you agree that pride and/or selfishness is the root of all evil? Recently, Rev. Nathan shared a sermon in which he described two local Rabbis saying that they considered pride as the antidote to hatred. How can we square this with the view that pride is the deadliest of all sins?

Quotes

“Segregation is that which is forced upon an inferior by a superior. Separation is done by two equals.”
Malcolm X

“True self is non-self, the awareness that the self is made only of non-self elements. There’s no separation between self and other, and everything is interconnected.” Thich Nhat Hanh

“I think the root of minor problems is separation from a belief system of interconnectedness and compassion and oneness, so when we multiply that over and over again, it turns into lies and chaos and terrorism.” Gabrielle Bernstein

“If the misery of the poor be caused not by the laws of nature, but by our institutions, great is our sin.”
Charles Darwin

“I am against discrimination of any kind, but if I make snap judgments, no matter who it’s towards, aren’t I committing the same sin as someone who profiles?” Jay-Z

“I understand sin to be separation from... one another... and it is something that each and every one of us is capable... of feeling distant from our own best selves and what we owe to one another.” Rev. Heather Concannon

For more on this month’s theme go to: <http://uuac.org/worship/themes-for-spiritual-practice/>

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