

SALVATION
A sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene
Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
December 15, 2002

Reading

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "...God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden...or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food...she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

...the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God...

But the Lord God called..., "Where are you?"

He said, "I...was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself."

He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"

The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate."

Then the Lord God said to the woman..., "I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children...and [your husband] shall rule over you."

And to the man he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you..., cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life.... By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return." (From Genesis 3)

Sermon

This past September, I received a birthday gift that made me laugh.

It was a packet of moist towelettes.... But these were not just any old moist towelettes, mind you. These were the "*Wash Away Your Sins*"™ towelettes, with an anti-bacterial formula guaranteed to kill sins on contact. They are not only handy and

reliable, according to the label, they are also heavenly scented—with aloe, Easter lily and citrus.

On the package holding the half-dozen sin-removing packets, are general instructions: 1) Carry towelettes with you at all times; 2) Cleanse thyself before saving others; 3) Stay alert to sins as they happen; 4) Approach sinner; 5) offer-up a *Wash-Away Your Sins*™ towelette; 6) remain focused and ready to do-it-again.

On the individual packets we receive equally enlightening instructions: 1) Remove moist towelette; 2) Devoutly wipe away wrong-doing; 3) Spot check for stubborn guilt; 4) wipe again as needed; 5) Discard sins in waste receptacle; 6) Go forth purified and moisturized.

Sin and salvation. We laugh, partly because these are not terms with which Unitarian Universalists overly concern themselves, as a rule.

We particularly do not concern ourselves with original sin. Both the Unitarian and the Universalist branches of our family rejected the concept. You were just reminded of the story: Adam and Eve disobeyed God, bringing down His wrath. According to original sin doctrine, they thereby branded as sinners all humanity to come, down through the eons. By this doctrine, we are sinners by heritage. “In Adam’s fall, we sinned all,” went the old children’s reader.

Judaism, from whose scripture the Adam and Eve story is taken, does not interpret it in the same way. They would say the world and people are good creations, partaking of original blessing. Early Christianity did not necessarily preach original sin. Until St. Augustine came along, the jury was still out as to what the church’s official position was on the subject. But Augustine, after leading a young life of lust and carousing, repented and turned to the religious life. He became one of the church’s most influential theologians, and he believed passionately in original sin:

Banished [from Paradise] after his sin, Adam bound his offspring also with the penalty of death and damnation... so that whatever progeny was born (through carnal concupiscence, by which a fitting retribution for his disobedience was bestowed upon him) from himself and his spouse—who was the cause of his sin and the companion of his damnation—would drag through the ages the burden of Original Sin, by which it would itself be dragged through manifold errors and sorrows, down to that final and never-ending torment with the rebel angels.... (in Armstrong, 123)

The doctrine asserts that the only way humans could be saved from their innate, inherited wickedness was for God to send his only son to earth. This son, Jesus, was sacrificed for us, that we might have everlasting life.

Protestants did not change the doctrine when they separated from Catholicism. In fact, many modern Protestant groups maintain the position with zeal, asserting that there is but one road to salvation from our original state of sinfulness, and that is to accept Jesus Christ in the way specified by them. All others will find themselves in the never-ending torment to which Augustine refers.

It is not surprising that Unitarians and Universalists rejected this doctrine early on. It is not surprising that we reject it with some vigor, in the twentieth and twenty-first century. There does not seem to be much joy in a doctrine that says all humans are

basically depraved, in our very nature. Wherein lies the blessing, much less original blessing?

Also, we have always rejoiced in human reason, so we do not take the Bible as literal truth. We study it as a fascinating and complex holy book, written by many people in many times for many reasons.

Further, we choose to affirm the worth and dignity of each human, believing that there is at least potential for good in everyone. We believe that all existence is woven together in unimaginable complexity. A religion that devalues all that is human and earthly runs the serious risk of creating a mess here on earth. It runs the risk of focussing so intently on the supernatural, on redemption from on high, that it can ignore human responsibility for justice, equity and compassion. It can allow us to rape and pillage the environment—after all, it is only material and temporary, inferior to spirit. It can become darkly self-righteous, allowing believers to treat “others” with something less than respect.

Christianity—both Catholic and Protestant—has brought much good into the world. I am not dismissing it out of hand by any means. I call myself a UU Christian. At the same time, the dark side of Christianity can lead, in the twenty-first century, to a situation where men who molest children are protected, where victims are shamed and hushed up.

We Unitarian Universalists reject original sin and the necessity of salvation from above. (I have a colleague who says, “I believe in original sin. The more original the better.”) We choose to see our lovely world as a place where the Divine is made flesh. We search for the Holy in everything, rejecting the idea that it only dwells beyond the sinful human sphere.

And, in the process of all this rejection of irrational and life-denying doctrine, we sometimes display our own shadow side....

Ironically, we as a movement, sometimes display our own self-righteousness and smugness, from which we need salvation. Since we have “risen above” literalistic faiths of the past—the argument goes—we can dismiss theological concepts like “sin” and “salvation.”

But you know what? We can't.

The concept of “sin” came into the world to deal with the human knowledge that there really is something terribly wrong sometimes. We cannot explain it, and we don't know what to do about it.

We have read about rape and mutilation and murder and torture. We have observed with unspeakable horror, a hijacked plane massacring thousands of innocent people. We have watched individuals act vilely: divorcing couples who tear their own children apart; authorities who bully minorities; monsters who willfully hurt animals; governments that keep people in prison for years, without charging them. As individual human beings, we have received cutting, heart-stabbing responses to things we did with the best of intentions. We have stabbed other hearts. We have been betrayed. We have practiced betrayal.

While it is altogether fitting and proper that we celebrate human worth and dignity, there is more. If we do not acknowledge that sin dwells cheek by jowl with all this worthwhileness, our faith is merely feel-goodism. Until we come to grips with the human tendency to turn away from the good, we are guilty of the wishy-washiness of

which our detractors accuse us. We do not believe in original sin, but we are blind indeed if we do not believe in plain old ordinary, garden-variety sin.

How, then, shall we be saved? I only have six of my *Wash-Away Your Sins*™ towelettes. When they are gone, what will I do?

Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk, reframes the word “salvation”: “...realizing your connection to the whole... real belonging; that is salvation.” (Capra, 26) Other modern-day theologians tend to agree. One calls sin “willful turning away from God” (Hick, 60) Breaking the connection. Formerly Catholic priest Matthew Fox—now Episcopalian—coined the phrase “original blessing”. He holds that salvation lies in working actively to contribute to the harmoniousness of creation, working actively to keep the connections strong; sin lies in injuring creation’s order and balance. (119,121, 295) He says that salvation lies in persistently facing the darkness of disharmony; sin in refusing to participate. (162, 159)

Sin is doing harm where no harm is necessary. Breaking the connections of the interdependent web.

It’s like the old comment about pornography: we may not be able to define it with precision, but we know it when we see it. And we know it when we do it—not always at the time, but usually later, if we are honest with ourselves. Almost all of us are capable of discerning—ultimately, anyway—when we are out of right relationship with our highest values.

I hark back to some sins of my own, trying to see how it was I got saved from them (when I did). I see community, those others willing to speak hard truth in love. I see self-honesty, at least ultimately. I see genuine repentance, and a desire to atone if possible. I see persistence. (Remember, the towelettes tell us to wipe away wrong-doing, then spot check for stubborn guilt, then wipe again as needed.)

I am thinking of a friendship many years standing. In the early years, say 1976-1985, I was pretty much the Boss of Everything in the relationship, getting to be right or to have it my way if there was disagreement.

Yes, it takes two, and she colluded in the inequality. Yes, I was unaware at the time that I was disrespecting her, discounting her opinions, ignoring them. But those excuses don’t change the fact that I was, however unconsciously, puffed up with my own arrogance—surely a turning away from the good, given how much more there is on heaven and earth than my puny philosophies can dream. Those excuses don’t change the fact that I treated another human without much respect, as though her heart and mind and spirit were somehow inferior—surely a sin, when my glimpses of The Good assure me that the Holy shines through all, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear. Those excuses do not justify my refusal to acknowledge depth of connection.

We both changed over the years, and she gradually came to realize how angry she was at me. We parted company. She would not attend an event if she knew I was going to be there.

In 1985, I went to seminary, where rigorous self-examination is not only encouraged, it is nearly impossible to avoid. Loving friends and a gifted therapist helped me become more aware of my self-righteous streak. I realized how much right my friend had to be angry. In about 1989, I wrote her a deeply apologetic note, expressing my regret without qualification. No answer. Two or three since, I have written or e-mailed,

just saying, “I’m sorry. I understand if you don’t forgive me, but I’d like it a lot if you did.”

The humility of my regret—which is still there (the regret), even though I have forgiven myself—was the start of my “salvation,” insofar as I am “saved” in this one situation. Because of real, chagrined repentance, I could go forth as the *Wash-Away* toweletes promise: “purified and moisturized.” However she chose to respond. That was good—but that’s not enough. In a theology of original blessing, salvation is ongoing. If I fall back into my bad old ways, I will be sinning once more. (Polluted and dried out?) There is an important part of me that really, really likes being the Boss of Everything, and I do fall into it easily. But the part of me in tune with the Whole, the Harmony, the Great Whatever-It-Is knows what I need to do and be, to try and stay close to the path of salvation.

In this particular arena of my universe of sins, I have to remember to listen. I have to remember to breathe, drop my defenses, and remember that all others have ideas and sentiments from which I can learn. I have to honor my relationships—my connections—and respect the equality implicit in them. I have to realize that I genuinely need others: people to help me see my own sins: to let me help them do the same; people to walk beside, shoulder to shoulder, sharing the commitment to make the world a better place; people to laugh with, expressing the joy at the heart of creation.

Maybe you, as a fellow not-very-original sinner, need some of the same things.

Friends and loved ones who will respectfully speak the hard truths: community. The grace to let self-righteousness go, trust the source, open the ears. The humility to admit sinning. The courage to apologize, to atone. The strength of character to learn, to become different and at least a little better. Lightness of heart enough to forgive ourselves and go forth rejoicing.

The process is, by and large, its own reward. But sometimes there are actual other rewards. Just a month ago, at my mother’s memorial service in a Unitarian Universalist church in the Seattle area, I looked over the congregation, and there was my friend. She came to the gathering at the house afterward. I walked her to her car.

Sources consulted

Armstrong, Karen. *A History of God: the 4000-Year quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994.

Capra, Fritjof, and David Steindl-Rast. *Belonging To the Universe*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991.

Fox, Matthew. *Original Blessing*. Santa Fe, New Mexico: Bear and Company, 1983.

Hick, John. *Evil and the God of Love*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978.