

## **“Is Sin Even a Thing?”**

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Sin is an idea with a lot of baggage for some of us. Am I right?

Sin, being a *sinner*, has been used to denounce, demean, and shame. How many of us read Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* and learned just how damaging the label of *sinner* could be? Branded with a scarlet “A” for adulteress, Hester Prynne becomes what the book describes as “a living sermon against sin, until the ignominious letter be engraved upon her tombstone.” Such an inescapable fate of judgment against sinners has too often been the tone and attitude lobbied by those who claim the proper moral clarity to levy judgment upon others.

So also, the Christianity of my youth, and perhaps yours, laid out a well-defined map for actions and attitudes designated as “good” and “bad”, “godly” and “sinful.” I knew the “biggies”—don’t lie to your parents, hit your siblings, steal from the store, and, as I became a teen, *don’t have sex* outside of marriage or even *think* about it. We rarely touched on sins of violence like murder because our suburb felt safe. Focused on personal ethical choices, we did not spend much time on structural sins of racial injustice or poverty—although it was a “good” thing to help those less “fortunate.”

In striving to emphasize the importance of *doing* the right thing and *being* good, many teachers, preachers, and parents lay out a moral framework as a guide. Such moral frameworks can be important. Few of us would want to live in a society without some clear moral boundaries denouncing certain actions. Like killing another without provocation or warrant. Or treating another person as less than human, as lacking basic human dignity. Furthermore, moral frameworks can help us to chart our own course of right action—to live faithfully by values we cherish, such as equity among people. Or, as the Golden Rule states, to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. In the Christian moral framework, falling short of the values and boundaries laid out is understood as *sin*. Etymologically, to sin is to “miss the mark.”

And yet, moral frameworks can also wield judgements of sin as tools that *cause* harm. *The Scarlet Letter* says of Hester, “Like all other joys, she rejected it as sin.” Really? All joy is denounced as sin? In this case, the joy refers simply to the pleasure she might have taken in the self-expression found in her needlework. How many times has pleasure and joy been

denounced as sin—especially if it has to do with any kind of self-expression that exceeds social expectations of proper gender, racial, or sexual identity?

I also find harm in the idea of Original Sin found in much of Christianity. Are we truly all irreparably sinful from the moment of conception? The idea of original sin came from Augustine, a church teacher in North Africa in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. If you're not familiar with Augustine, he's a major figure in Christian history whose books *Confessions* and *City of God* are foundational texts for Western Christianity. In short, he argues that Adam and Eve's sin in the garden became biologically passed down to all their descendants, which in his understanding of human origins in this one couple, means that *all* of us are born stained by sin. Consequently, no one is pure and acceptable to God—that is until Jesus is born in a unique way as a “New Adam” who is pure and remains sinless through life. In this purity, Jesus can be a pure sacrifice to redeem all of fallen humanity, given us all a second chance.

But what does any of that have to do with *us* as 21<sup>st</sup> century Unitarian Universalists? A few thoughts.

First of all, sin is real. Which is to say, I have sympathy for the core impulse in Augustine's project that something seems to be *wrong* with humanity in a way that feels inseparable from our very nature. We all manage to screw up—and not just in ways that are “oops” and “mistakes”, but in ways that harm others, even those for whom we care deeply. Yes, all of us “miss the mark” and none of us are “perfect,” but such descriptive statements lack much moral depth. And, unless we are sociopaths, I believe we all feel some sense of moral relationship to others. Which is to say that we care about the harm we cause or that is done to us.

Well, sometimes we care. Sometimes we remain indifferent if the “others” who are harmed feel remote to us. And at other times, we may not care what harm befalls another person or group because we harbor antipathy towards them. The Christian tradition refers to this as having a “hard heart” and counsels countering such hardness of heart by asking again *who is my neighbor?* In other words, reconsider who we care about, who we notice, what harm we notice.

Most people go through life with some awareness that our interactions with each other are rife with harm. We get angry, sometimes even violent. We become indifferent in ways that sustains the suffering of others, often to preserve our own comfort. We lie, rupturing the connections of trust between us. These are not just actions of “oops, so sorry, I screwed up.” These are interpersonal and structural dynamics of harm that fray the interconnected web of life of which we are all a part. These are harms that disrupt the flourishing of life.

And so, while I think Augustine’s understandings of history and sexual biology doomed generations of people, especially women, to shame and unproductive guilt, I still sympathize with his longing to makes sense of ruptures caused by harmful behaviors.

If acknowledging the brokenness and harm that pervades human relations is the first step in discussing the idea of sin, then the second step is the question, “so what do we do about it?!?”

The answer to that question pervades billions of pages of theological treatises, sermons, and devotional books. Some say there is nothing *we* can do about it—only God acting through Jesus and/or the Holy Spirit can address the problem of sin. Some say we *must* do something about sin and work with great devotion to improve or sanctify our lives. Some say our reconciliation to God is only accomplished by the blood sacrifice of Jesus as the “Lamb of God.” Others firmly reject blood sacrifice as a violent departure from Jesus’ gospel of love—that we are redeemed by Jesus’ way of living and his love that inspires our own renewal of living rightly and justly.

While it may be impossible to simply sum up the entirety of all the answers to “what do we do about sin” in the Christian tradition, I can offer yet another framework of responding to sin by Christian writer Anne Lamott. If you know anything about Lamott, you probably know that she’s funny, a bit crass (I had to ‘bleep’ a word in the reading), and a recovering addict who is frank about her struggles. When I needed to find a reading about sin, I thought, surely Anne Lamott would have something to say.

As you heard in the excerpt from *Dusk, Night, Dawn* read earlier, Lamott approaches sin not with an effort to eradicate it entirely, but rather asks, “how do we live with sin?” In response, she describes heading to the beach with a group of Sunday School kids. There at the beach they find the beauty of sand and shells sullied by garbage. Reflecting on their encounter with the harm to the beauty of the beach, they wrestle with emotions of sorrow and disgust, fear and hopelessness. In response, they do what they can in restitution, cleaning up some part of the beach. Returning to their classroom, they lay both beautiful shells and bits of trash beneath the arms of the cross. Doing so, explains Lamott, places all of it within the context of a larger story.

In Christianity, the story of the cross is one of redemption and hope. While an instrument of death and torture, the cross also reminds Christians of Jesus’ willingness to die for a vision of a more loving and life-giving way of being human—a vision he described as the Kingdom of God in which love of God and love of neighbor define the moral framework. In this way, the cross contains both love and suffering, hope and despair, loss and possibility. Placing

both the garbage and the beauty from the beach beneath the cross acknowledges that all of it is part of a larger struggle for how we will be in the world with others.

Indeed it is a struggle to wrestle with the harm and brokenness in our world while also seeking to hold fast to fragments of beauty, love, and goodness. As residents in a shared world shot through with injustice, indifference, and, yes, evil, we all must learn to live with sin, with the inescapable reality of harm done to others and to ourselves.

I worry that as Unitarian Universalists, we have been too quick to reach for visions of a better world without making space to wrestle with sin—our own and others. For good reason, many of us resist the judgmental baggage of denouncing sinners, keenly aware of the harm such judgments can wield. But, in seeking distance from such judgmentalism, I fear that we've not always developed language and rituals to make sense of the harm that we feel we've caused or that has been done to us. I wonder what is our "cross", our larger narrative that might hold these realities?

I can't pretend to have *that* all figured out, but I suspect an answer may lie in our commitment to covenant and in our practice of sharing Joys and Sorrows. The covenant, which we recite each week, calls us to show up for each other without promising that we are all going to think alike or act alike. Our story as a non-creedal liberal faith means that again and again we have to figure out how to be in loving, open-minded relationship with people that differ from us. But, covenants can also be used to call people back into right relationship—which is to say that if one of us is *not* showing up in a very loving way to another, we might remind them of our covenantal promises of how we aim to be. In this way, a covenantal framework calls us to work out with each other how to be together in mutually life-sustaining ways.

We are reminded of that wrestling with life each time we share or witness the ritual of Joys and Sorrows. To me, this ritual is the equivalent of the trip to the beach: life is full of beauty and crap. Naming all of this openly in a framework of shared support is to offer a witness to the reality of life—to the reality of living with beauty and with harm, hurt, and brokenness.

My hope is that we might wrestle with the presence of this harm—this sin—in and around us as we seek the language and the rituals that enable us to live with this reality. Just as in the voluminous, centuries-long debate in the Christian tradition, there are no simple answers, just an ongoing search to make sense of our experience of living in relationship to ourselves and others, all of whom consistently screw up and cause harm, but who also come together to clean up some small corner of the beach, of our shared world.

So it is. Amen.