

***Banished from the Garden*****A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation****By The Rev. CJ McGregor****Delivered on June 21, 2020**

Our messages this month are exploring good and evil and I think you know where I'm going with the theme Banished from the Garden-the story of Adam and Eve as told in the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament. Many believe that Adam and Eve were banished from the garden because they ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge against God's will. As the story goes, that did happen, but it's not the reason Adam and Eve were sent out of the garden. You see, there were two special trees in the garden. The tree of knowledge and the tree of life. God didn't want Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of life like they had of the tree of knowledge, so he guarded the tree of life with a golden sword. He then banished the couple from the garden. To eat from the tree of life you need to be innocent. Adam and Eve had already screwed up. They were no longer innocent knowing shame, envy, extortion, and war. These are all known to them because of their stolen knowledge. So basically, God said you are both losers and I'm getting you out of here before you do more damage. And so, we have a context for sin and evil.

We Unitarian Universalists seem not to have much use for sin – the concept or even the word. Why is that? In my experience, we most often refer to the theological doctrine of Original Sin as being completely useless and probably damaging to the human spirit – our own for sure, and probably for everyone. A. Powell Davies, minister of All Souls Church in Washington DC, sums this up nicely. He says, “In times of stress, people do strange things: useless things, futile and unavailing. A drowning man, we are told, will grasp at a straw. He is unable to help it. He knows perfectly well that the straw will not keep him afloat, but his hand goes out compulsively. He cannot keep it back. People have been willing to go to almost any length to avoid looking at realities. I have never agreed with those who tried to tell us that the whole idea of sin is out of date. To the best of my observation and belief, sin is highly trendy, and we are all up to our necks in it.

But this doesn't mean that to avoid drowning in sin, we must clutch at theological straws. It doesn't mean that we must surrender all attempts at swimming our way to shore. Nor does it mean that there is nothing left to do but call for a miracle.” Sin is useless for two reasons. First, to suggest that each and every human being is conceived and born in sin and then carries that sin until a designated holy person washes that sin away is irrational at best and downright terrible and mean at worst. Second, and perhaps more important for Unitarian Universalists, the notion that a loving God would place the first human beings in a beautiful garden and then set them up for almost certain failure by highlighting the marvelous nature of the trees of knowledge and life and then forbidding them to touch them .... Well, that sort of manipulation insults us. If God is this mean and terrible, then we have no use for that God. We reject this mean and terrible God and throw out the concept of original sin as being completely inconsistent with a loving and merciful God.

What happens if we do away with sin altogether? We end up not having a useful religious understanding of sin within our Unitarian Universalist world view.

My colleague, the Rev. Barbara Beckman, tells a story where she was chatting up some of her minister colleagues at Northern New England minister's retreat. A couple of them asked what she would be preaching about that day and when she said, "sin" the common response was "Woa – really? Good luck with that!" Even her near-by colleague and friend, Lane Fisher, looked at her curiously and said "Really, that's brave. What will you say?" They chatted for 40 minutes. Finally, she said, "Ok, that would be worth listening to." When we ministers are stumped, she says, it's no wonder we don't talk about sin in UU company. Yet, I think we must.

In times of social and moral trouble, like the time we are living in right now, it's time to talk about sin. It's time to re-envision our notions about sin and create a useful process for responding to evil in our world. What happened to bring us to this place? We tossed out the whole notion of sin because we have such a deep aversion to Original Sin. We tossed out the useful along with the useless. The baby with the bath water. Liberal theologians wrestled with the reality of evil and the rejection of original sin over the decades and we now find ourselves in a curious place where we ought not to be. In rejecting original sin, we have – for all practical purposes – rejected sin in any guise. This is a problem for contemporary people of faith – especially for people of liberal and progressive faith.

Amy Butler of Riverside Church says that because we progressives have so much difficulty with traditional conservative Christian descriptions of sin, we can't talk about it at all, in any even progressive way. The result? – those with the very theologies we find so problematic have taken over the entire conversation about sin – and it is most often cast as the personal sin of "others" or "them" which is not infrequently, you and me! The Greek word for sin – means missing the mark. As an archer shooting the arrow toward the target misses the bullseye mark, our behavior can miss the mark of correct behavior. This happens individually and collectively. In this understanding, a wrong has been committed and consequences follow.

Opinion Columnist, David Brooks, wrote a piece in the NYT "The Case for Reparations" in which he describes sin as "anything that assaults the moral order." I can go with that understanding. It provides room for personal misdeeds and collective misdeeds – by both acts of commission and acts of omission. So we can talk about personal acts of racism as sin and we can talk about our nation's sin of historical and institutional racism – for example. There is another richer concept of sin. Sin is a problem because with sin comes loss. Too often in our world, rather than placing our attention on that which has been lost when we recognize sin, we have focused on punishment and retribution. Let us reject this way of understanding sin and therefore the consequences of sin. Let us change our viewpoint and begin to look for what is lost through sin or misdeeds. When we begin to appreciate and understand what is lost, we may find much more productive and life-affirming ways of responding to sin that bring us ever closer to restoration and wholeness.

If we begin to see sin as resulting in loss and brokenness then we are not served by throwing out sin altogether. As Powell Davies reminds us – evil is real, very real real, and evil acts have very real consequences. Have you been following our President lately? Grasping at straws or burying our heads in the sand is not helpful. So what is the helpful way of confronting evil – within

ourselves, others or our collective historical, cultural or social evil? Look for what we've lost. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge. We think that was the sin. But no, the sin was acting in a way that resulted in the loss of their relationship with their God – for the consequences of their actions only became real when they refused to take responsibility and work to restore what was lost or broken. Remember in the story, with their newly acquired knowledge, Adam and Eve covered their nakedness? When God saw them in their new fig leaf finery, God knew something changed. God asked Adam about it and Adam denied, deflected and redirected. That is what angered God. Adam was not willing to engage in the process of restoring what was lost.

Seen differently, if the story paid attention to the loss suffered, relationship with the divine and easy living in the Garden of Eden, it might have gone in a different direction. This is a morality story, not history, so let's not quibble about the details and lose the point.

When we fall short, we suffer a loss. Usually, this is a loss of relationship. The next thing is to work for restoration. To make whole the relationship. But if I have thrown out any meaning for sin, then there is no need for the process of restoration. And the loss remains. The brokenness becomes permanent.

We have no theological or philosophical way to talk about or deal with the results in a life-affirming way. We punish and cast out the sinners. Relationships are broken – forever. We suffer the consequences of living with faith crushing, life limiting brokenness. In another mode we see evil – personal and collective. We do have a way of talking about it – as a loss of something we cherish and value. We strive to find ways of restoring what is lost or repairing what is damaged. Sometimes, maybe even often, we can rejoice in that renewed wholeness.

May it be so.