

# Sin Boldly!

Sermon for 26 April 2009

“I WAS BORN ... to fortune, endowed with excellent parts, inclined by nature to industry, fond of the respect of the wise and good among my fellow-men, and thus, as might have been supposed, with every guarantee of an honorable and distinguished future. And indeed the worst of my faults was a certain impatient gayety of disposition, such as has made the happiness of many, but such as I found it hard to reconcile with my imperious desires ... It was thus rather the exacting nature of my aspirations than any particular degradation in my faults, that made me what I was, and with even a deeper trench than in the majority of men, severed in me those provinces of good and ill which divide and compound man’s dual nature. In this case, I was driven to reflect deeply and inveterately on that hard law of life, which lies at the root of religion.

“... I was in no sense a hypocrite; both sides of me were in dead earnest; I was no more myself when I laid aside restraint and plunged in shame, than when I labored, in the eye of day, at the furtherance of knowledge or the relief of sorrow and suffering. ... With every day, and from both sides of my intelligence, the moral and the intellectual, I thus drew steadily nearer to that truth, by whose partial discovery I have been doomed to such a dreadful shipwreck: that man is not truly one, but truly two.

“I, for my part, from the nature of my life, advanced infallibly in one direction, and in one direction only. It was on the moral side, and in my own person, that I learned to recognize the thorough and primitive duality of man; I saw that, of the two natures that contended in the field of my consciousness, even if I could rightly be said to be either, it was only because I was radically both; and from an early date, even before the course of my scientific discoveries had begun to suggest the most naked possibility of such a miracle, I had learned to dwell with pleasure, as a beloved day-dream, on the thought of the separation of these elements. If each, I told myself, could but be housed in separate identities, life would be relieved of all that was unbearable; the unjust might go his way, delivered from the aspirations and remorse of his more upright twin; and the just could walk steadfastly and securely on his upward path ...”

With those foreboding words from the mouth of the upstanding Dr. Henry Jekyll, Robert Louis Stevenson brings his novel to a close, and simultaneously captures the ages-old conundrum of the human condition. Are we beings of righteousness, born of original blessing only brought low sometimes by our frailties? Or are we spawn of original sin, our base and brutish cores only crusted over by a thin skin of religious commandments and society’s mores and laws? For Stevenson, the answer is both and not only both, but with the brute the more dominant. And so you’ll recall that poor Jekyll, having loosed the reins on his evil self, inexorably and irrevocably devolves into the debased and disfigured Mr. Hyde.

Before going forward, it’s worth noting that the Jekyll and Hyde story is really a quite good exposition of Manicheism, a theology of dualism gleaned from Zoroastrianism. It postulates

two natures that existed from the beginning: light and darkness – two equal and opposite powers, namely good and evil. The human person is seen as a battleground for these powers: the good part being the soul (which is composed of light) and the bad part being the body (composed of dark earth). The soul defines the person and is incorruptible, but it is under the domination of a foreign power, which addressed the practical part of The Problem of Evil. A human is said to be able to be saved from this power (matter) if they come to know who they are and identify themselves with their soul.

Christianity early on rejected Manicheism (and one of its cousins, Albigensianism) as heresies. But the rejection, I think, was based less on the view of the degenerate nature of the body and more on the heresy's rejection of an omnipotent good god. In fact, despite the church's protestations otherwise, you can find plenty of evidence that it behaved and continues to behave very like Manicheism with respect to the body, seeing our corporal selves as occasions of sin and needing to be tamed. You might be surprised to hear, for example, that as recently as the 1960s, monks and clerics of Catholic religious orders, as I was then, were expected to practice some "mortification of the flesh" daily. And on Fridays in particular, were you to walk the dark corridors of our dormitories after night prayers, from inside our cells you would have heard the sounds of many of us taking the discipline of the lash to our backs and bottoms.

But Manicheism and its lasting trace-effects on Christian thought about our bodies is the stuff of some other sermon. Today, I just want to explore the topic of sin.

The majority of us together in this church today, I'm sure it's safe to say, found our way to UU out of either the Christian or Jewish faith traditions. And so, just two weeks ago we, along with the world's 2.15 billion Christians and Jews memorialized – even participated in – the celebration of the divine salvation of humankind's sinful degradation. For Christians the connection is clear: the theological proposition that in death by crucifixion, God in the person of Jesus offered himself up in reparation for humankind's sinfulness. And in rising from the dead, he ultimately vanquished the bonds of sinfulness whose wages is death as Paul says in his letter to the Romans (6:23).

The connection between sin and salvation in the Passover story is disguised, but nonetheless real. The storyline as told in the book of Exodus is that the success and proliferation of the Jews in Egypt led to Pharaoh's growing anxiety and to his decision to enslave them – God's chosen people. Their successful flight from Egypt, then, is celebrated as God's punishment of their oppressors and their own deliverance into freedom.

The problem is that it probably never happened. Not that there was no exodus of Jews out of captivity. There certainly was. It's just that it was their exodus out of the much later Babylonian captivities (during which the story of the Egyptian exodus was written). But to our point, the ancient Jewish peoples' deportation into Babylonian captivity is recorded in multiple books of the Old Testament as being God's punishment for their lapses into idolatry and their laxity in following the laws of the Torah.

So, in these most central events of these great faith traditions we see that their theologies and histories are anchored in the proposition that we are a sinful lot in need of redemption and

saving. A view of ourselves painted and repainted throughout the Bible – in 1027 passages on sin and its punishment in the Old Testament, and even in the New Testament’s 306.

Nor was it enough in the minds of the Bible authors and their subsequent generations of interpreters and clerics to simply trust us to the common-sense wisdom of the 10 Commandments and the Golden Rule. Certainly not! Instead, to protect us from our debased selves we have 60 Chapters of Leviticus and Deuteronomy – that’s fully one-third of the Mosaic books – laying out in detail the rules of righteous Jewish behavior. And when it comes to Christianity, God only knows how many rules there are to be broken with consequence to your soul’s salvation. Thanks to Catholic legalism, for example, there is a codex of moral and canon law that rivals the US Penal Code in breadth, nuance and levels of offense. Not to be outdone, Protestant fractionalism has often taken moral proscription to ever finer dicing. Did you know, for example, that were you Amish, you could find yourself condemned and excommunicated if your pants or shirts used red buttons? Or that, if you were a Mennonite, driving a car of any color other than black – bumpers, too, by the way – could get you banished? On the other hand, you might just be able to slide over to a sect that was Ok with red buttons or chrome bumpers. And going the Penal Code one better, you don’t even have to commit the offense to be sinful; you’re already there just for wanting to! Think Jimmy Carter’s confessing that he had harbored lust in his heart.

So, while the Jewish and Christian traditions differ radically on the issue of “original sin” -- with Judaism rejecting and Christianity embracing – both traditions label as sinful any act that is proscribed by their scheme of moral code or their body of prescribed behavior. Their force of authority being your risk of separation from your group and your god for some period – or perhaps forever.

A heavy price for a button or a bumper!

“What’s the problem, “ one might ask, “in having a clearly-marked pathway to leading a righteous life?” Certainly that would be the argument that the most orthodox of either faith tradition would make. My answer is that if you are a Manichean who truly believes that your only choice in life is between being the hemmed-in Dr. Jekyll or the rampaging Mr. Hyde, then choose Jekyll and carry your god’s little rule-book with you at all times. But there is a deeper problem with this approach to living. As the great theologian Paul Tillich observed, too often it leads to mistaking moralism for morality, and too often that leads to a life of holier-than-thou condemning rather than confessing. It’s that hypocrisy in the Pharisees that Jesus loathed and lost no chance to expose.

Small wonder then that even St. Paul elsewhere in his letter to the Romans (7:7-13) observes that “before the law, there was no sin.” Small wonder, too, that while present-day Unitarian Universalists continue to debate about what they call *sin* and *evil*, many would agree that, to the extent UUs believe in such things at all, our ideas are far from the conventional understandings of these terms. With good reason we stand in a long line of liberal, rational thinkers who reject the notion that dismissing -- or if you prefer, violating – prescribed moral codes is a sin.

We are blessed that our Unitarian forebears developed a theology with greater emphasis on the actions people take. We are indebted also to our Universalist forebears for their doctrine of universal salvation. We present-day UUs continue to disagree with those who view evil or sinfulness as an inherent, God-given state of being. While recognizing human limitation and weakness, we UUs are far more likely to characterize people's actions or inactions as just good or bad rather than righteous or sinful or evil, placing a continued emphasis individual conscience, individual choice, and individual deeds. Sin and evil, in the current UU conception, thus tend to be viewed as the result of both human actions and failures. Salvation, as it were, also lies largely in the hands of individuals — in the cultivation of character leading to positive actions—strengthening individuals' potential to be positive forces in the world.

But have we so enshrined the sanctity of individual conscience that we really do believe that “we are lamps unto ourselves?” Rejecting the hypocrisy of moralism is all well and good, but not at the price of hubris. Is there a middle way?

I think the answer is yes, and it begins with reexamining the bible, or more specifically looking carefully at the Hebrew and Greek words used in the bible to describe what we translate as sin. Our word, sin, is defined as:

an offense against religious or moral law, especially when deliberate ... a transgression of the law of God ... a vitiated state of human nature in which the self is estranged from God.

But connotations of disobedience, moral failing, and evil are not so clear in the original language, where both the Hebrew word, *het*, and the Greek, *hamartia*, both literally mean “missing the mark.” Now, think about that. Doesn't missing the mark imply that one was aiming for the mark in the first place? You wouldn't say that you missed the target, if you weren't even aiming for the target. So, in contrast to the usual interpretation, the original texts assume, I think, a fundamental rightness of intent. (Parenthetically, our actual word, sin, etymologically traces its roots to the Indo-Aryan “sun(d)jo which translates as “it is true;” think about that why don't you.) But I digress.

Continuing with our main line of thought, I suppose that there are a host of ways of missing a target because your aim was a bit off, but I'm interested in only two – aiming too low, or aiming too high. Aim too low and you'll fall short of your goal every time. Aiming too high, you might also miss, but at least there's a far better chance of hitting the mark, hitting your target. We'll come back to this. But first we have to ask ourselves, “What is the target?” What is the moral good to shoot for, the principle to strive to be in harmony with? It can't be god's law if you reject the notion of god. It can't be dogmatic rules when you reject dogma. And surely it can't be simply what feels right. If that were true, then Mr. Hyde would be a saint.

As I began to refer to in my January sermon on the view from the center of the universe, to my thinking the goal, the target, is to lead a life in harmony with the life-principles of the universe. And in these matters of moral behavior, I believe that Whitehead's process-philosophy offers the clearest insight. Contemplating the dynamics of the universe, Whitehead makes two observations. The first is that all things in the universe are in dynamic relationship with each other; nothing is a force or an object insulated from effect on and by something else. Second, the

universe seemingly has no restraints or constraints on its creativity. It relishes variety, diversity. Turning the merely possible into something actual appears to be the driving force of the universe.

And so, Whitehead's philosophy begins with the premise that the ground of being is relationship (ie process) – ours with ourselves, with each other and (Whitehead was a Christian, remember) ours with god, and god's with us. He makes the point that “while independence is a positive idea ... our concrete moments of experience are richer to the extent that they include others ... our joy emerges out of its inclusion of the joy of others.”

A key next premise -- and I know this is a bit heady -- is that enjoyment is a function of both harmony and intensity, with harmony as opposed to discord ; intensity as opposed to triviality ; and intensity as amplified by complexity. He brings these strands together by pointing out, first, that our moral goal, in harmony with the universe, is to add to the variety and intensity of life, to do all that we can to increase the potential for lives of expanded possibility and joy.

So, envisioning our lives through the lens of process philosophy or theology we would say that the target that we're shooting for, our moral imperative and the standard against which our lives be measured -- indeed our very reason for existence as co-creators of the universe -- is to contribute in every way that we can toward creating harmony and beauty, toward advancing truth and freedom, and toward expanding the opportunity for all people to lead lives of joy, dignity and well-being with the interests of none being subordinated to the interests of others – including ourselves. That is the great work to which we are all called. The mark, the target, to which all of us are challenged to aim.

But Whitehead also cautions that the increased complexity that amplifies the possibilities for greater zest, greater joy, greater potential, also makes possible greater suffering and discord. And not only possible, but guaranteed. Furthermore, he warns that “the fearful obsession to avoid that discord or suffering promotes excessive triviality.” We can choose to decrease our emotional dependence on others by minimizing the quantity and intensity of our relationships, but in doing so we inhibit our ability to engage sympathetically. We can shape our lives according to a rubric of safe “shalt nots”. But to choose these is to choose a trivial existence – to choose the self-imprisoned life of

(T. Elliot's) J. Alfred Prufrock.

That, to my thinking, is the “sin” of aiming too low – miserly or fearfully giving less than your all, less than your best to the great imperative of co-creation. Aiming too low is the sin of those who shirk the challenges of life and diminish themselves, playing it safe by simply submitting to the rule book. Aiming too low is the sin of the formalist minister or preacher whom Emerson condemned in his Divinity School address, saying:

“... Whenever the pulpit is usurped by a formalist ...the worshipper (is) defrauded and disconsolate. ... Not one fact in all his experience (of life), had he yet imported into his doctrine. ... (just) thoughtless clamor.”

Aiming too low is the sin of the erstwhile moral person too lukewarm in the commitment to justice and to a better life for all that Martin Luther King, in his letter from the Birmingham jail, decried as:

.... more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; .... Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection."

In this season of Easter, most believers' attention is focused on a cross and on a tomb. But I find little value there. Focus instead on a life, because I can think of no greater rebuttal of the moralistic, of the formalistic, -- of aiming too low -- than the historical Jesus. His was the model of a life boldly lived, a life of radical, scandalizing -- and some would've said sinful -- inclusiveness, love and boundless uplifting generosity -- generosity of spirit, time, energy, wisdom, -- of all that he had.

My friends, if the true purpose of life is to join with the universe in multiplying the opportunities for all -- for ourselves and for our neighbors both nearest and most distant -- to enable all to lead lives of joy, and dignity, and well-being, then it is a sin to do less when you readily could do more. It is a sin to choose to be Prufrock when you could choose to be (Tennyson's) Ulysses. But being imperfect creatures, we know that we'll often fail to live up to our ideals -- perhaps more often than less. And if "missing the mark" -- *hamartia* -- is the definition of sin, then sinners we all are and sinners we all shall be. So accept that and live boldly even at the risk of sinning boldly. Boldly give yourself over to being profligately generous of your love, your time, your resources, your self in the great work of building a world of justice and joy and prosperity enjoyed not merely by the few, but by all.

Dwight Moody, another 19<sup>th</sup> century American preacher whose life briefly overlapped Emerson's, once said that only one out of a hundred people will read the bible; the other ninety-nine will read you.

And so before we bring our service to a close today, I invite you reflect for a moment and ask yourself, "When they read you, whose story will they be reading -- Prufrock's or Ulysses'?"

Blessed be!

Dr. James M. Walters