

I'M SORRY

We are past the midpoint in a series of sermons considering the elements of a community. Using the story of Nehemiah from the Hebrew Bible we talked about walls marking the boundaries of a community. We acknowledged that boundary-defining walls were important in helping us feel safe and identified with a particular group. But we also talked about the importance of having gates in those walls so they don't become a prison. Next we examined the concept of hospitality. Using the example of Disney we learned ways in which we could make people who came through our gates feel welcome and included into our community. Last week we talked about the tie that binds us individualist and opinionated Unitarian Universalists together – the tie of Covenant. Today I'd like us to consider a central element of Covenant – the recognition that things will seldom be as loving as we would like. That we will break the promises we make to each other and those broken promises will hurt. Sometimes they'll hurt people a lot. During those times – and again I'm talking about OTHER Unitarian Universalist congregations – we need to develop the ability to say I'm Sorry and have in place the mechanism to make amends. To start again.

Let's start by being clear on what we're talking about. There are several definitions of apology. We are not talking about a very poor or inadequate example of something. Like, "that's a sorry excuse for a sermon". Nor are we talking about a reasoned argument or writing about something – usually a religious or philosophical principle, for example, Plato's *Apology*. What we're going to investigate this morning is the art of apology – of being able to credibly and regretfully acknowledge an offense or failure.

I think what befuddles and irritates some of us is the self-justifying apology that sounds like, "I'm sorry, but..." The defense is embedded in the apology, rendering the sentiment completely unsatisfactory as either regret of an offense **or** a reasoned argument. It says *I regret you are too uninformed/stubborn to see my point of view*. It's a variation on the 'blame the victim' theme. We've all heard it: *I'm sorry you're upset, but I was only trying to help*. Or, *I'm sorry, but you should've looked both ways before you stepped in front of my car*. Somehow the offender twists the apology to justify his/her action, which lets him/her off the hook but does nothing to acknowledge the wound, heal the hurt, and restore right relations.

Then there is the pre-emptive apology, "I'm sorry **if** ...". This is frequently heard in medical offices: *I'm sorry if this hurts you*. It's a warning that something unpleasant is about to happen, and that the inflictor regrets his/her action in advance. The "if" implies an element of uncertainty – it may not hurt as much as someone else anticipates, thus engendering an element of hope. It's a variation on the theme, *I'm sorry to have to tell you this*, which is usually way more unpleasant and long-lasting than an injection or blood letting. The pre-emptive apology can easily segue into the self-justifying apology, as in *I'm sorry if I hurt you, but I told you I might*.

My least favorite form of apology is the one dripping with sarcasm: *I'm sorry???* This is particularly effective when you lower your chin and peer over your glasses with narrowed eyes. Parents are particularly skilled in this form of apology. *I'm sorry – I didn't really hear you call your brother that name, did I?*

Believe it or not, there are web sites devoted to the science and art of apology. I'm not making this up. At www.perfectapology.com you will find all sorts of categories for apologies – business apologies (*I'm sorry I trashed your retirement savings, but my boat needed fuel*) or medical apologies (*I'm sorry your father died of lung cancer, but he really should've quit smoking*). There's even the formula for the elements of a 'perfect' apology. It's pretty good. It includes a detailed account of the situation, acknowledgement of the hurt or damage done,

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taking responsibility for the situation, recognition of your role in the event, and a statement of regret. Then it advises an ask for forgiveness, a promise that it won't happen again, and a form of restitution whenever possible. That's the 'science' part.

The 'art' part of an apology is the manner in which the apology is delivered. And maybe that's where it breaks down for many of us. It's hard to deliver an authentic apology unless one approaches it with a sense of humility... of understanding that we momentarily slipped our moral leash and caused hurt. I think that so many of these public apologies by our public figures seem so inauthentic is that they're lacking in humility. If you remember the Vatican's statements about their troubles with their priests there was a sense of regret, but regret that they had been caught out. Asking all Christians to atone for something a few people covered up seems disingenuous, to say the least. The apology might have carried more authenticity had the Vatican offered to pay the counseling fees of the victims of the pedophile priests. Likewise, the motives of one group of people apologizing to another group of people for an incident that took place several generations ago is suspect. We UU's did this at the 2009 General Assembly in Salt Lake City when we apologized to the Ute nation. The Black Hawk chief who received the apology looked as befuddled and uncomfortable as many of us felt. You can't authentically apologize for something in which you have no direct responsibility or no intention of rectifying. Are we really prepared to give back the land taken from the Ute tribe, or is this simply hollow rhetoric – a sort of ritual cleansing?

I think it's the latter -- Ritual Cleansing. This notion of ritual cleansing leads us directly into the theology of wrongdoing ... of sin and atonement. I know this sends shivers up the spines of some of you, but let's unpack it for a minute. If we can accept the premise that none of us are perfect all the time -- that all of us come into the world with the potential to do harm, then we are able to catch a glimpse of our interrelatedness as broken people. It is comforting to me to think of myself as part of the great mass of humanity that often falls short of expectations of ourselves and others. And it's also nice to know that when I mess up, I have recourse for my shortcomings. I can apologize. I can atone.

One of the foundational documents of our Unitarian Universalist movement is Hosea Ballou's "Treatise on Atonement", published in 1805. Very simply, it counters the Calvinist view of trying to pacify an angry God. Ballou regarded sin as finite, and therefore he took it far less seriously than did the Calvinists. He said, "[sin is] the violation of a law which exists in the mind, which law is the imperfect knowledge men have of moral good." Ballou thought that the most that human beings can do is come to the best understanding of moral good that is possible for them and act accordingly. To sin is to do otherwise. He held that Jesus' mission on Earth was indeed to save us from our fallen and sinful selves through his life and teachings which can call and guide us from our less-than-perfect selves to a more holistic and restored and reconciled-to-God state of living. Jesus' death was held up as an example of what it can sometimes mean to remain faithful to your principles, values, and calling, rather than as an act of atonement for the sins of humanity. Our theologian James Luther Adams stated this rather more simply 150 years later by observing that Unitarian Universalist Christians are distinguished by following the teachings OF Jesus, rather than the teachings ABOUT Jesus.

I hope you've noticed that nowhere does this theology of universal salvation let us off the hook from apologizing for our wrongdoings. But as we become freed from the hellfire and damnation and images of an angry Deity who sees all and punishes all, I think we have become less careful about checking our moral compass in the ways we relate to one another. I do wonder what Ballou might have thought about our current "best understanding of moral good".

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Remember 200 years ago the Universalists were Christians. Christians devoted to reason, to be sure, but still people who relied on something greater than themselves for their moral compass. In this secular age we rely on each other to reign us in. How's that working for you? How's that working for US? For me I see our *best understanding of moral good* as somewhat confused, and easily swayed by convenience and conformity rather than moral conviction. Without a communal understanding of moral good at our center, we have rude shouting matches with with no one actually doing much listening. Consequently there's a lot of anger and fear circulating in modern life.

You have two bandages in your Order of Worship. Let's take them out because we're going to use them to illustrate our Unitarian Universalist principle of atonement, informed by our Jewish heritage. There are two aspects of atonement: repentance and forgiveness. The repentance part says, "I'm Sorry." It's hard to admit you made a mistake. It's even harder to admit you make a mistake that you knew – going into it – was going to result in hurting someone. But the hardest part of saying you're sorry is that it only works if you mean it. It doesn't matter how justified you think you were. You have to truly be sorry that your actions (or non-actions) resulted in causing hurt. And here's the real kicker to repentance: *You have to be sorry without an expectation of forgiveness.* You have two bandages. I'd like you to consider giving one to someone you suspect you may have hurt during the past year. Do it this week. Better yet, do it today.

The second part of atonement -- forgiveness -- isn't easy either. Here's what forgiveness is NOT. It's not forgetfulness. You've no doubt heard the phrase, "Forgive and Forget." That's nonsense. Forgetfulness is a lot of things -- old age being one of them -- but it's not forgiveness. Our memories and the scars we bear from living our lives are what define us. Let's keep our memories as long as we can. You have another bandage. If you can remember a hurt that was done to you, please put that bandage on yourself as a remembrance. Do it right now.

Another thing forgiveness is not is revenge. I wish it were because then I'd feel so RIGHTEOUS for having balanced the scales of justice ALL BY MYSELF. But that's not my job. I don't think it's yours either. We don't have a bandage for revenge.

I think what forgiveness IS is compassionate remembrance. I've had plenty of chances to practice this -- and I'm still practicing. But here are four steps in a forgiveness process that I find helpful. The first step is to forego. Just leave the event alone -- don't pick at the scab. Find something else to engage your mind -- a person or project to capture your full attention. Whenever I feel like picking at my wounds I go find an opportunity to feed people or visit with someone. A little perspective is very helpful.

The second step to forgiveness is to forebear -- to abstain from punishing. Don't pick the scab off someone else. This is not to say that people should remain silent in the face of injustice or mistreatment. It is one thing to use passive resistance as a political tool, but quite another to be silent in order to survive an impossible situation of corrupt or unjust power in the family, community, or world. But remember that this is not about revenge or setting the universe on your highway to the way things should be. Our greatest temptation is to try to change other people instead of ourselves. Resist this temptation to punish or change another. Just as you leave your scab alone, leave theirs alone, too.

The third step to forgiveness is allow the event to be relegated to the background or move off stage. Change the bandage color to a flesh tone and go on about your business. This refocusing it is an active endeavor and is central to the practice of centering prayer and other

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forms of meditation. What it does is lay the emotion surrounding the memory to rest. You don't forget the event – you deprive it of emotional fuel.

The fourth and final step to forgiveness is to consciously decide to stop harboring resentment. All emotion, even rage, carries knowledge, insight, what some call enlightenment. So allow yourself to be taught by your hurt. Learn from it. Forgiveness does not mean giving up one's protection, but one's coldness. Forgiveness means giving up your coldness. Check under the bandage to see if the wound has closed and scar tissue has formed. If it has, take the bandage off.

Forego. Forbear. Refocus. Forgive. The cycle of rage is like any other cycle; it rises, falls, dies, and is released as new energy. You'll know when the cycle is complete – when the wound is healed -- when you feel sorrow over the circumstance instead of rage. You will feel sorry for the person rather than angry with him, understanding that suffering drove the offense. The wound is healed when you have nothing left to say about it. **YOU ARE NOT WAITING FOR ANYTHING. YOU ARE NOT WANTING ANYTHING.** Only when the cycle of rage is remembered and repented can the energy required for the work of reconciliation – atonement -- begin.

The electronic age has widened the scope of ways in which we can hurt each other. Back in the day penmanship was taught in the schools and people handwrote their thoughts. The process was slow enough to give one time to think about what one was communicating. I don't know about you, but I can't remember the last time I got a handwritten letter. Now we have email, and the SEND button is way too convenient and seems to always take precedence over the DELETE button. We blog, we text, we twitter, we tweet and most of the subject matter is ME, ME, ME. Now we have the internet, with no oversight whatsoever on what gets posted. Now we have cable television. I won't even begin to address the lack of restraint in **that** medium.

All this makes it easy to exercise our freedom to say whatever comes into our rugged individualistic heads. And often our internal braking monitor – *our best understanding of moral good* – seems broken. So if we are going to exercise the responsibility that comes with our freedom to express our opinion when-and-however we wish, we are going to spend a lot of time apologizing to members of our beloved community for our thoughtlessness.

Back in the 1960s there was a book called “Love Story” about a rich young man who marries a poor young woman, only to discover his new wife is dying. They made a movie out of it starring Ryan O'Neal and Ali McGraw. The marketing folks called it the ‘story that defined a generation’. If that's true it would explain a lot about the shallowness of my generation. One of the memorable lines in this truly maudlin tale was, “Love means never having to say you're sorry.” I beg to differ. That's only half the story. Love means ALWAYS having to say you're sorry.

We Unitarian Universalists have promised each other – have covenanted – to stay in relationship and work on loving each other even when we don't like each other very much. I'm sorry to break this to you folks new to Unitarian Universalism, but we come to this community, not to find people we love, but to love the people who are here. We are here --- in this place -- at this time -- to love the people who are here. This is the essence of covenant. In this close relationship, we will eventually and inevitably have disagreements and say things that wound. None of us are exempt from hurting and being hurt. That's why love means ALWAYS having to say you're sorry; not from a stance of groveling, but from an authentic attitude of humility and a willingness to restore right relations ... to mend fences.

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A mended fence will look different from the previous one. Some of the pickets are slightly askew. Some are elegantly nailed back onto the frame. Others are strapped to the frame with wire or even duct tape. Some are affixed with a glue that comes unstuck as the humidity level of our lives fluctuates. Other pickets are still torn, with pieces flapping around waiting to be mended with whatever apologies we can muster from our hearts. This fence may not win any beauty prizes. But as long as us pickets are still clinging to the framework of free religion and are willing to be mended – to say *I'm sorry* – we will strengthen and renew and grow into the Beloved Community for which we say we yearn. May it be so. Enshallah. Shalom. And Amen.