

Service Delivered by Rev. Sarah Tinker
at Essex Church, 16th January 2011

Sinfulness for Unitarians

Good morning everyone and welcome to Essex Church, where this community known as Kensington Unitarians meets for worship each Sunday. We join together for an hour of reflection through music and words, prayer and silence, each with our own lives to reflect upon yet aware of the shared path of human existence that unites us in community. Ours is a community of all those who walk through our doors and whether this is the very first time you have been here or this has been your spiritual home for many years now – for this time we spend together we are connected by our shared humanity, companions together on the journey of life.

So let's now take a moment to take a conscious breath and as we let go of that breath we can focus for a few moments on how we are right now. Let us pay attention to ourselves (pause). Some of us may have difficult issues that are going around in our minds or bodies that are hurting in some way. Some of us may have exciting news or possibilities that we are aware of.

Whatever state we find ourselves in I light this chalice, this worldwide symbol of our liberal religious Unitarian community, I light this chalice to remind us that as it has one flame so there is one humanity and that what we share is the gift of life itself.

Story: *(from the Native American tradition)*

An old grandfather is telling his granddaughter about a fight that is going on inside himself. He said it is as though the fight is between two wolves. One is evil: Anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority and ego. The other wolf represents good: Joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith. The granddaughter thought about it for a minute and then asked her grandfather, "Which wolf wins?"

Her grandfather simply replied, "The one I feed."

Reading:

From Elaine Pagels, Adam, Eve and the Serpent, Vintage Books, New York, 1988:

"For unlike all other views, the Augustinian theory of original sin claims that our moral capacity has been so fatally infected that human nature as we know it cannot be trusted. Consequently, Augustine does not urge people to remedy their situation, as the Hopi shaman might, nor, like a rabbi, does he call them to moral reform; for humanity's moral disease is not only universal, but also, apart from grace, incurable... From the fifth century on, Augustine's pessimistic views of sexuality, politics, and human nature would become the dominant influence on western Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, and colour all western culture, whether Christian or not."

Address:

I don't know if any of you have heard about this - that one day, apparently, God was looking down at the earth and saw all the terrible evil that was being committed by humanity. So God decided to send an angel down to find out what was going on. Were things as bad as they seemed? On returning to heaven the angel told God that the situation on Earth was indeed pretty dreadful. The angel estimated that 95% was bad and 5% was good. God thought for a little while and then decided to send down another angel to get another point of view. (Another point of view? Clearly God does have Unitarian tendencies!) So, when this angel returned he confirmed that Earth was in terrible decline – he estimated that 95% of humanity was well and truly bad and a mere 5% was good. God thought about what to do and decided to send a letter to the 5% of people who were good with a little pep-talk, something to encourage them, something to help them to keep on the straight and narrow path.

And do you know what the letter said?...

... Oh! You didn't get that letter either? *(from JokeEmail.com)*

Sin and evil are not words often heard in Unitarian services; even in the Victorian era when sin was a particularly common topic for preachers to focus upon, Unitarians apparently tended to avoid it – preferring to preach a more hopeful view of human existence. This little, but remarkably helpful, book ‘Unitarian What’s That?’, written by Cliff Reed our minister in Ipswich, explains our current position well I think –

“Generally speaking though Unitarians share a positive view of human nature and human potential. While not being blind to human weakness and our capacity for evil, we do not see human beings as inherently depraved or corrupt. We have little time for the doctrines of ‘original sin’ and inherited guilt. Rather we see human beings as having inherent and equal worth.”

Cliff Reed mentions original sin and no address on this topic of sinfulness could fail to mention this concept. We all know the story - of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, disobeying God’s command not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge, and through their disobedience being banished from the garden, condemned to a life of suffering that would end in death. This powerful myth is of course originally from the Hebrew Scriptures and I’ve sometime wondered about the different interpretations of this myth made within Judaism and Christianity. Karen Armstrong points out in her book on Genesis that the later Hebrew Scriptures do not particularly dwell on this original sin and states that *“the Jewish tradition has laid no particular blame on either Adam or Eve for the human plight. The writer was more concerned to depict the timeless human predicament: Adam is simply ‘everyman’. Eve and the serpent are both aspects of humanity. Sin is simply a fact of life, not an unmanageable catastrophe. By plucking the fruit, human beings become conscious of their capacity for good as well as for evil.”* (p.29 Karen Armstrong, *In The Beginning* 1996)

So what happened to Christianity. What gave us the idea that we were sinful, bad to the core, and, there was not much we could do about it? In the reading from Elaine Pagels’ book that we heard earlier on, St Augustine of Hippo is clearly cast in the role of the bad guy. And today is not the day to start defending him. Suffice to say, in my view Augustine had many fine qualities as a theologian, not least of which are his descriptions of God as love. But in his grappling with the thorny issues that face all of humanity - *Why do we suffer so? Why is life so hard? Why do we die?* - Augustine was very much a product of his age.

He lived from 354-430 C.E., and was the Bishop of Hippo in North Africa. He lived at a time when philosophers generally were pursuing an ascetic path; he was far from alone in thinking that bodily desires were a human weakness. There were many reasons for this, but one clear cause was the early Christian Church’s need to set itself apart from, and morally superior to, the pagan beliefs that were still prevalent at this time. Augustine transformed thinking on freedom, sin, sex and redemption for all future generations of Christians. And how did Augustine achieve this? He decided after great amounts of study and contemplation that Adam’s sin in the Garden of Eden corrupted humanity’s whole nature; that Adam’s guilt and his punishment were passed on to all of his descendants, all of humanity. According to Augustine all human beings are born in a state of sin; sin is then passed on to each generation through the act of sexual intercourse. Humanity is, therefore, inevitably pre-disposed towards sinfulness, towards evil acts. We do not have free will in this. Only the grace of God and the salvation offered through Christ can save us.

Now we may not agree with this but I would suggest that this concept, which eventually became enshrined as the doctrine of original sin by the early church, – this concept has had a profound and largely negative effect on western civilisation and therefore on the history of our world.

But if Augustine of Hippo had not lived and had not chosen to explore the meaning of original sin would someone else have come up with the same ideas? Possibly they would. Scholar Elaine Pagels suggests in her book that the reason the early Christians embraced the doctrine with as much enthusiasm as they did was partly psychological – that when we humans try to make sense of the terrible sufferings we may face in life - we would rather feel guilty than helpless in the face of these difficulties. The other key reason for this doctrine’s acceptance was, Pagels explains, that in making people helpless it helped to assert the authority of the Roman emperors over their subjects. Original sin helps to maintain the political status quo. If we are all inherently bad then we must be told what to do, we must obey – obey the rulers of the church, obey the rulers of the state.

But not everybody agreed with Augustine. One English monk, Pelagius, who deserves a whole service to explore his interesting ideas; Pelagius disagreed with Augustine at a fundamental level. He asked why God would create humanity in his own divine image and yet allow us to be evil at our very core. Pelagius argued that we humans have free will and so have the choice of how to behave. We are not being punished by the existence of death – rather death is part of the natural order. And we are not led into depravity by the sexual act – for sex is again part of the natural order of existence. Pelagius’ views held sway for a while in the early church but were eventually deemed to be heretical and original sin, as a concept, was here to stay.

Now there is no doubt in my mind that evil exists. Sin, however we define it, exists. We humans have the capacity to do truly terrible things to one another and to our world and to the whole of creation. If we stop for a moment and think – of evil acts and evil people – we could all quite quickly come up with a lengthy list (*pause for a while*).

Now I am sure that some of the people committing some of these dreadful acts knew that what they were doing was so terribly wrong – but I think it is worth remembering how often it is that people who commit evil acts genuinely believe that they are doing the right thing. We have a frightening human capacity to justify our behaviour. Simone Weil puts it well when she writes that *“evil, when we are in its power, is not felt as evil but as necessary or even a duty.”*

I wonder if you remember when you first became aware of what happened in Europe during the Holocaust of World War Two? I remember my shock, my disbelief and then slow understanding of some of the Holocaust’s horrors. I also remember exploring the issues of the cold blooded cruelty and the systematic annihilation of fellow human beings in my own mind, hardly daring at times to read just what depths of depravity we humans can sink to. And I remember at some point having to ask myself ‘what part might I have played in this ghastly time if I had had the misfortune to be alive then; would I have had the courage to stand up against its injustices?’ Such self examination for most of us probably brings the answer that we cannot know how we would have behaved, followed by an acknowledgement that in the wrong circumstances at the wrong time many of us would have at the least condoned evil acts, or committed them ourselves. As the quotation from Alexander Solzhenitsyn on the front of today’s order of service says

“If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”

The potential for evil, for sinfulness, lies well and truly within each and every one of us.

I spoke earlier of the hopefulness of Victorians generally and Unitarians in particular. It was an era in which the phrase ‘onwards and upwards for ever’ gave a sense of society’s optimism, a belief that great advances in health and engineering and education would help to make this a better world for everyone. Such optimism was seriously challenged by the world wars of the 20th century and by the revealing of the damage caused by colonialism. Modern media makes it hard for us to avoid the painful realities of humanity’s capacity for wrong-doing, which some may describe as sin.

But what do we mean by sin? The word itself comes from the Greek archery term meaning to miss the mark, to fall short in some way. We may see sin as separation perhaps – separation from aspects of ourselves, separation from others, separation from that which we hold to be divine. The antidote for sin could then be described as being in right relationship – right relationship with ourselves, with others, with God and with the environment in which we live. Instead of pushing away that which we dislike – we bring it towards us – embrace it, understand it, make it part of us in some way.

If we all have the potential to do wrong then there is a clear need for self reflection and self awareness, to know and understand ourselves better so that we might better avoid the pitfalls of existence that can lead us to harm our world, others and ourselves. To engage in such self examination requires an acknowledgement of our frailty and our brokenness. The German mystic and theologian Meister Eckhart expresses this beautifully when he writes that

“The shell must be cracked apart, if what is in it is to come out. For if you want the kernel, you must break the shell.”

And to help us in honestly facing up to our failings there is great value, I think, to be found in rituals of confession and in seeking forgiveness – structures that support us in opening our shells and exploring within. Such explorations may bring interesting insights about the duality, and perhaps the inevitability, of the existence of good and evil. The Hindu sage Ramakrishna, when asked why is there evil in the world replied, ‘to thicken the plot.’ The existence of evil, the human potential to behave very badly - this gives us something to work on. It is both the backdrop against which our human lives are played and the very script which we write within our hearts. How we shape the plot, given the wonderfully scary gift of free will that we have – well that is the very stuff of life and what a gift that is.

Benediction:

In the week ahead may we be aware of our flaws and our foibles,
generous in our observations of ourselves and one another,
willing to learn and grow, willing to say sorry and start again in love;
Amen, go well and blessed be.