

A Tale of Two Tattoos
A Sermon Towards Forgiveness for the Days of Awe
Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker
September 20, 2020
Beacon Unitarian Universalist Congregation

This is a tale of two tattoos -- a parable of regret and redemption. There was a man who had been a devout Jew. As a boy and young man, he had joyfully worshipped his God in the village shul, and he kept all of God's commandments and laws.

When he entered his twenties, the man turned away from God, he rebelled against his law-laden religion, and went off to live in a faraway city. Once there, he chose a secular life, and in an act of clear defiance against his tradition, he had bold colorful tattoos inscribed over the surfaces of his arms and chest. Each time he admired the tattoos in the mirror he felt liberated from his restrictive past.

But, one day he awoke and yearned to turn back to his God, to reenter his community. In keeping with tradition, the man knew that he would first have to undergo a mikvah (or ritual bath) in order to purify himself before God prior to entering the temple. He returned to his village and hurried excitedly to the mikvah.

Once he had disrobed and was poised to step into the bath, a community leader blocked his way and angrily admonished him that, according to strict Jewish law, no one who had demeaned and mutilated himself through the act of being tattooed was permitted to enter the mikvah for fear that it would defile the water.

The tattooed man sat dejected on the edge of the bath and began to softly weep. Would he never be reconciled again to his God or to his community? would his tattoos forever be like the proverbial *Mark of Cain*, preventing his redemption?

A second man came upon him crying, and bent down to inquire of his suffering, and the tattooed man explained his plight. The second man held out his arm, upon which one could clearly see a crude row of blue identification numbers that been tattooed there, against his will, by the Nazis at Auschwitz. The Holocaust survivor took the tattooed man's hand and gently said, "Come. Let us step into the bath together."

I love this tale because it is so poignant, and also because it has *everything* to do with what I'd like to get at today in my sermon -- brokenness and wholeness, perfection and humanity, estrangement and reconciliation, forgiving and being forgiven -- the human condition in a nutshell.

First, I'd like you to consider which of the characters in the parable you most identify with. Is it the sincerely repentant tattooed man, whose mistakes have estranged him from his community, but who seeks the healing waters of

forgiveness and redemption? Is it the perfectionistic community leader, who arrogantly steps into the shoes of a wrathful God and is unwilling to absolve the sinner? Perhaps it is the Holocaust survivor, who has somehow moved beyond the heinous trespasses against him despite the daily reminder of his tattooed forearm; a loving comforter who forgives the tattooed pariah on behalf of his community and as a representative of a loving God?

I'd guess that each of us can identify with all of them in one way or another. So why is it that the words, "I'm sorry," the phrase, "I forgive you," and the admission, "I messed up, I am imperfect, please forgive *me*," tend to get stuck in our throats? Why do we often sit dejected on the edge of the bath, when the healing waters swirl nearby? Why don't we hot tail it down the dusty road out of *Grudgeville*, the town in our Touchstone Tale by Barbara Marshman, that you heard earlier in the service.

Yesterday was Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and September 28th is Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement. As some of you know, I was raised in a Jewish home. Yet, during my formative years at Temple Beth Shalom, the High Holy Days were more about "dressing up" than "fessing up." It wasn't until I was a young adult, and estranged from organized Judaism, that I began to grasp both the personal and the universal significance of Yom Kippur.

Now, even though I am a UU minister and no longer think of myself as *religiously* Jewish, I welcome this yearly opportunity for us to join in spirit with the Jewish community to contemplate our transgressions; and to restore our right relation to ourselves, to the Sacred as we each know it, and to one another.

It is a time when we're meant to deal with remorse in a healthy way, as we lift oppressive guilt from our hearts and souls through forgiveness. It is a time to choose the cleansing bath of self-love and renewal, rather than the hair shirt of self-loathing.

The Jewish wisdom text, the Talmud, explains that on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, God opens up three books: one for the completely wicked, one for the completely righteous, and one for those in-between. The completely righteous are immediately inscribed in the Book of Life. The completely wicked are immediately inscribed in the Book of Death.

The average, or "in-between person," (a description that likely fits most of us here at Beacon) are kept in suspension until Yom Kippur. We have ten days, known as the Days of Awe, to make amends, to experience *teshuva*, or turning. A key passage from "The Gates of Repentance," the Yom Kippur liturgy book explains that Nature turns instinctively – leaves, animals, the sun and moon. But, for us, turning does not come so easily.

It takes an act of will for us to make a turn. It means breaking old habits. It means admitting that we have been wrong, and this is never easy. It means losing face. It means starting all over again. And this is always painful. It means saying *I am sorry*. It means recognizing that we have the ability to change. These things are terribly hard to do.

Who can argue that self-reflection is not easy, forgiving our imperfection is not easy, forgiving trespasses against us is not easy, renewal and rebirth are not easy? *Teshuva* does not come so easily for us. But the alternative is no cakewalk, either -- not forgiving begets hard feelings, hard hearts, a hard and heavy burden to bear, a one-way ticket to *Grudgeville*, and a hard road back to wholeness.

So, we have arrived at a pivot point where I can't go any further in this sermon without mentioning "sin," a very prickly and tough word to say and hear because it pushes so many hot buttons. "Sin," or what a colleague calls "the second most dreaded word in Unitarian Universalism." Apparently, there is some debate about whether it is the word "evil" or the word "canvass" that takes the top prize!

At any rate... venal sin, mortal sin, cardinal sin, original sin -- it all gives some of us the willys! Unitarian Universalists are *notorious* for avoiding this topic. We even expunged the following line from Rumi's famous poem when we concocted our UU hymn #188: "Come, come, even if you have broken your vows a thousand times. Come, come, yet again, come."

So, what does a nice mystical humanist Jew-nitarian like me mean by "sin," and what does it have to do with forgiveness and with us UUs? In my view, the liberal theologian Paul Tillich got it just about right when he defined sin as our estrangement from the sacred as we each understand it (or what I will refer to in this sermon as "God," since it is the term used in the Jewish context), and the corresponding separation from our best selves and from our community. We lose the relational, we are isolated from meaning; we are left in what Tillich calls, "sin."

Remember that when Cain is driven from the Garden of Eden, he laments: "My punishment is greater than I can bear." As Tillich puts it, sin (as estrangement) becomes its *own* punishment. Don't we see this outcome at work in the despair of the tattooed man, and in the lack of connection we encounter in *Grudgeville*?

I agree with Tillich that if we are to even consider a concept of God, then it is a loving, forgiving God rather than a wrathful, vengeful one who tends the wounded and chastised soul. The Universe wants us to be whole and reconciled, renewed in the warm healing mikvah rather than stuck miserably on the cold hard edge of the bath.

My former husband, a childhood altar boy (who is now a non-practicing Catholic/Taoist/UU), recalls almost viscerally the palpable relief and renewal which

accompanied absolution. "I felt like I was in a true state of grace," he remembers. "There was something so potent about hearing the Priest say I was forgiven -- my sin was lifted; I would walk out of church and the whole world would seem new to me, the slate was wiped clean. "

A UU friend of mine in Pittsburgh, also raised as a Catholic, puts a different spin on confession. She recalls how her Priest would begin each Lenten Mass by bellowing, "We are all sinners here." (and he didn't mean sin in Tillichian terms). For the remainder of the service, she would squinch down in the pew so that he couldn't see her sinful face or read her sinful thoughts. She knew that later she would have to confess her sins to him, and she felt such anxiety and shame.

She told me, "Now I confess my mistakes directly to Universe and to the people I've wronged. I don't want or need a surrogate. I can forgive myself and love myself now in a way that wasn't really possible back then." My friend concedes that it took a lot of practice before she could eventually *internalize* forgiveness without hearing it from the mouth of a minister or a priest.

It may surprise you to learn that the concept of sin figures prominently in the observance of Yom Kippur, as well; so much so that the traditional opening words of the service are: "By consent of the authorities in heaven and on earth, we permit sinners to enter and be part of the congregation." Typically, everyone in attendance assumes those words are addressed to them. Religion and conscience have communicated the idea that they have not always been the people they should be, and it is to Judaism (and the Rabbi) that they turn for an affirming message of forgiveness and acceptance; it is to God (or Yahweh) that they turn for transformation.

The point is that whether we are Jewish, Christian, atheist, humanist, or otherwise, we need to recognize having done wrong, regret it, and resolve not to repeat it. We need to *confess* -- one way or another. And we need to speak louder than the whispering citizens of *Grudgeville*.

Personal responsibility is key. Even if the proverbial scapegoat (the Azazel from Leviticus) carries your sins, your mistakes on its back, you must go into the desert, too. As Rabbi Gluskin explains in our reading earlier, we are sent along to have the light of the desert shine on our souls while the goat carries our *stuckness*. Notice, though, that the goat does not zip off on its own. Rather, we walk alongside, reflecting and forming an image of ourselves that can survive without the destructive behaviors that created the need for forgiveness in the first place.

Yet, to suggest that we're pardoned by *God* for our misdeeds is not really accurate or even a statement about God's emotional generosity. It is a statement about *ours*. When push comes to shove, will we be the self-righteous community leader or the compassionate Holocaust survivor? Will we thrust forward a hair shirt

or a helping hand?

In our responsive reading earlier, we repeatedly recited: "We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love." *That* could well be a mantra for our times! Especially, since some of us have no doubt internalized a message from parents, teachers, loved ones, and society that we are only deserving of love, praise, or forgiveness when we are perfect or pretty darn close.

It just *isn't* so. In his book, How Good Do We Have to Be, Rabbi Harold Kushner argues that the most valuable phrase in the Torah comes from Genesis 17, when God says to Abraham, "Walk before me and be *Tamim*." Although the *King James* translates "*Tamim*" as "perfect" and the RSV opts for "blameless," Kushner prefers the translation, "whole-hearted." God asks Abraham to be whole-hearted and to have integrity, not to be perfect.

What about us? I believe that if we can learn to embrace *our own* inherent fallibility, and strive for wholeness rather than perfection, then we will also become more capable of tackling the challenge of forgiving trespasses *against* us and against the community (and saying "I'm sorry" for our own).

In the novel, The Brother's Karamozov, the character Ivan recounts in excruciating detail the atrocities he has witnessed on his journey across Russia, and he asks his brother Aloysha, "Is there in the whole world a being who would have the *right* to forgive and *could* forgive such a man? I echo Ivan's sentiments when I ask, How *can* we forgive, how *do* we forgive the unfaithful partner or disloyal friend, the oppressor, the misbehaving President, the neglectful parent, the unfair teacher, the bullying sibling, the rapist, the child molester, the hate monger? When it is all happening to *us*, how do we deliver the goods?

First, let's be clear. Forgiving is not condoning, soft-pedaling evil or downplaying sin. In the end, forgiving is about us and about liberating ourselves from the anger and resentment of the past. Forgiving frees us of the double jeopardy of a miserable life added to the pain of the original wound. Forgiveness is a healing bath that can soothe past wounds that we can neither change nor forget. Surely, we see this notion exemplified in the Holocaust survivor.

He cannot rewrite history or expunge sins against him, but he *can* make choices about his future -- will he be estranged or reconciled; courageous or self-pitying; broken or whole, even when confronted with a painful and permanent scar? The people of *Grudgeville* face similar choices. So, do we.

I'd like to pause here for a brief period of silence in which we each might reflect on these choices. Who needs to hear the words, "I'm sorry" from your lips; from whom do you long to hear the words, "Please forgive me."? How might this change your life? How might you find a way to get there? (Pause for silence)

The time for *turning* is at hand. If you feel like the tattooed man, or like the

Holocaust survivor, or like the mayor of *Grudgeville*, take heart and look around you for a dejected comrade or for an outstretched hand. Your mistakes are no more unforgivable.

Your imperfections are no more remarkable. Even if you have broken your vows a thousand times, come, yet again, come. Consider whether the 10 days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are called the "Days of Awe" because the feeling of forgiveness, given or received, is truly *awesome*.

Forgiveness is *not* a magic pill that fixes everything or changes the past. But it can be that open byway to an unseen future that our painful past has shut. When we forgive, we look into the face of another and raise our voices above a whisper to utter precious words. When we forgive, we hold hands with the Universe, walk over a threshold, and experience the healing that is just waiting for us to make it real.

We take one another's hand, and we step together, into the mikvah.

Blessed be, Blessed we, and Amen.

© 2020 Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker. All rights reserved. Material may be quoted with proper attribution to author and sources.

