

## ***Sin, Salvation, and Right Relationship***

**A Sermon by Rob Keithan  
Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockville, MD on  
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### **READING**

#### **The Healing Time by Peshya Joyce Gertler**

Finally on my way to yes  
I bump into  
all the places  
where I said no  
to my life  
all the untended wounds  
the red and purple scars  
those hieroglyphs of pain  
carved into my skin, my bones,  
those coded messages  
that send me down  
the wrong street  
again and again  
where I find them  
the old wounds  
the old misdirections  
and I lift them  
one by one  
close to my heart  
and I say holy  
holy.

### **SERMON**

Ad lib: MLK's connection to Unitarian Universalism.

I love that piece, because as I understand it the poet is transforming her relationship with her past. She is acknowledging that the path of getting to yes; of getting to fulfillment, inevitably leads to—and in fact requires—engaging with the pain we experience in life. This approach flies in the face of our typically conflict avoidant-society, where the dominant message is often that we should suppress and avoid pain at all costs. Where there is a great tendency to explain away our mishaps and mistakes by saying that we weren't our "true selves" when we did that.

I suspect that most of us here today have made bad decisions in the past that we'd like to dismiss with a phrase like: I wasn't myself that day. I wasn't myself that night, or at that point in my life. I wasn't myself.

Have you ever heard someone say that? Perhaps it's been you.

I know I've said it, and at times really wished it was true.

But it's not. And there is great risk in that kind of thinking. According to Thomas Moore, a psychotherapist and former monk, that kind of disowning—that labeling a part of the self as not self—"creates a division in us, and that division becomes an obstacle to authenticity."

So rather than helping us to become our true selves, suppressing our mistakes and problems makes the work harder. The challenge, then, is to find a framework for integrating the bad with the good in a way that enables us to deal with the pain and brokenness without getting stuck there.

So that's what I'm going to talk about this morning: the relationship between brokenness and beauty. The relationship between sin and salvation.

And just to be up front, I'll be speaking directly from my own theological identity as a religious humanist. Now, because Unitarian Universalism and liberal religion generally started as reactions to the extremely negative, sin-and-damnation emphasis of Calvinist Christianity, our faith has always embraced the goodness and potential of human development.

However. However. There is also something very true, and very important, about looking at, and reconciling, our own ability to be selfish, awful creatures. To be..., frankly, evil. And I don't mean that some people are bad and others good, but that all of us, every single one of us, has the capacity to do great things and terrible things. I believe what Alexander Solzhenitsyn writes in the Gulag Archipelago, which is that:

"the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart, and through all human hearts."

But we still need a framework. In my quest to find one, something happened that I didn't see coming: I found that I believed in a version of Original Sin! Not the traditional version, of course, but a version.

My understanding of Original Sin is that we are born into a world that—while indescribably beautiful in some ways—is also horribly broken in others. It's not broken by Adam, through a divine drama passed on through the

generations, but by the simple reality that humans are imperfect beings. As a result, every single human person is born into a world that is scarred by oppression and exploitation and violence. Since this brokenness is unavoidable, I call it original.

As for my definition of sin, I agree with the many theologians who've rejected the notion that sin was intended to or should be used to describe individual actions. Instead, sin is more appropriately understood as a state, specifically the state of separation. Sin is separation.

Here's where the framework really starts. According to Paul Tillich, one of the greatest theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this state of sin, of separation, is threefold: there is separation of a person from their self, separation among people, and separation of all people from the Ground of Being. Sin means that we are separated from our selves, from each other, and from Being.

I believe that we are separated from our own selves by insecurity, by concerns about our bodies and social standing, by the doubting of our own worth and potential that comes so often from someone else saying that we weren't good enough or pretty enough or something enough. We suppress things about ourselves or our past that we don't like. Whatever the means, the end is the same: we question our own value.

Sadly, it is all too easy to find evidence of our separation from other people. And I'm not talking about the superficial variety, like not being able to remember our neighbors name or something like that. I mean deep separation, such as when we truly question the humanity and value of other individuals and groups.

My awareness of human separation is particularly high right now, because late Friday night I returned from a two-week service learning trip to the Pine Ridge Oglala Lakota Indian Reservation in southwest South Dakota. While some of our time focused on the positive and beautiful aspects of Lakota tradition and culture, we were also brought face-to-face—often literally—with the tragic consequences of what white people and the US government have done to Indian people. Our government broke treaty after treaty with the Lakota until they were hopelessly cut off from the lands and buffalo herds which sustained them. One US cavalry officer of the mid 1800s is even quoted as saying "Kill every buffalo you can. Every buffalo dead is an Indian gone."

It's tempting to see official mistreatment of Indians as thoroughly in the past, but it's not. Just days ago, I had lunch with a Lakota woman who was taken from her family as a child and sent to a US government-run boarding school where she was prohibited from practicing her culture. She and her classmates were actually punished if they were caught speaking their native

language. The following is still hard for me to believe, but it's nonetheless true that Native Americans were not guaranteed the free exercise of their religion until 1978, when President Carter signed the American Indian Religious Freedom Act.

Today, Pine Ridge is one of the poorest communities in the entire United States. Unemployment runs about 80% and half the population lives below the federal poverty line. Alcoholism, drug abuse, and chronic diseases like diabetes are rampant. In many cases, it takes only a few steps—if any—to trace these problems back to policies imposed and promises broken by our white-run government.

As such, even today, the relationship between white people and Indians is profoundly distorted. This distortion, this brokenness, is just one example of how, according to Tillich's formula, we live in a state of sin. We live in sin because people are separated from our common humanity.

The final part of Tillich's equation deals with separation from Being, which could also be summed up as separation from God. Personally, I think my separation from Being manifests itself most as a lack of gratitude and appreciation for life. This is especially true for those of us with relative wealth and privilege. It's so easy to move through the world at breakneck speed, forgetting that the most important things in life aren't things at all.

As a counter to his formulation of sin, Tillich lifts up the concept of grace, but I'm going with salvation. To me, if there's sin, then there's also got to be salvation. And if sin is separation from one's self, others, and God, then I submit to you that salvation is right relationship with one's self, others, and God.

In traditional Christianity, salvation is a destination that some people—or, if you're a universalist, all people—would or could arrive at after death: ultimate, eternal right relationship with God. In my humanistic Unitarian Universalist perspective, I view salvation—right relationship—as a dynamic, ongoing process that happens in this life as a result of our human choices. God may or may not play a role; I don't feel like it's my place to make a definitive judgment on that. But I feel quite comfortable saying that we humans can and should choose the path of right relationship for ourselves. We can and should choose to love ourselves, and others, and the Ground of Being.

So why can't we just focus on right relationship and doing good? Why all this talk of original sin? It's because, as much as we want to or try to do good, we are, both consciously and unconsciously, also doing bad. That's the nature of human brokenness; it's inescapable. Regardless of our intentions, we're still part of larger systems that exploit and oppress. I had no part in creating the

sad conditions which exist on the Pine Ridge reservation today, but I—and we—are still part of a system and a government that makes progress difficult. Right Relationship with others demands that we see the whole picture and take responsibility for our role in it.

Let me share a personal story about trying to do good, but not understanding the full picture.

Ad lib: Activist; spoke up a lot. Eventually learned how that wasn't helpful; that I was part of the problem. I try to listen now, but it's still a struggle.

The bad news is that figuring out how to be in right relationship with ourselves, others, and Being is hard work.

The good news is that we don't have to do it alone. We're all in this together. All human beings are flawed, so there's no reason whatsoever to pretend that we're perfect. Everyone makes mistakes. Striving for perfection is hopeless, and in my experience leads us to do senseless and damaging things in order to protect the myth.

Being in right relationship with ourselves requires honesty, and it requires love. And so I ask you: What would it look like for you to be in right relationship with yourself? What old wounds—or new wounds— would you lift to your heart and say, holy, holy? How could you take care of yourself better?

Being in right relationship with others also requires learning, and it requires listening. Are we seeing the whole picture? Are we hearing other people's stories?

I've already said that we don't have to find right relationship alone, but for me the more important truth is that we cannot find it alone. Because we're imperfect, limited beings, dependent on each other for survival, we can only find salvation together.

So let's help each other out. Let's love and learn and listen and be grateful together, so that we—and all people—can find right relationship. Yes, our world is broken. But it can be beautiful too.

Amen.

## **BENEDICTION**

**Rob Keithan**

One of the most common elements in Lakota prayers is a simple phrase that reminds us of our connection to each other. And so, with gratitude for my

time at Pine Ridge, and mindful of all the work still to be done, I say this:  
Mitakuye Oyasin. We Are All Related.