

OUR BETTER ANGELS

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Thomas Strauss

Honor the Sabbath and keep it holy. Marking the Sabbath with worship and prayer is one thread of religious practice that runs without interruption from Judaism through Christianity to Islam and beyond. Though doctrinal disputes have separated some Protestant denominations into Saturday and Sunday Sabbaths, Jews and Muslims share the Friday Sabbath down through the centuries.

Honoring the Sabbath, keeping one day a week for contemplation of the holy- for quiet study of goodness and mercy- for the singing of hymns is still an important practice for Unitarian Universalists. Thus we come, from our too-busy lives, from our lonely rooms, bringing our doubt and our stress, bringing our hopes and our dreams, bringing our sorrows and our joys...we come to this sanctuary- and here we share the celebration of life. Here we open our hearts.

Our Jewish friends and neighbors are in the midst of their High Holy Days, the ten Days of Awe, the Days of Repentance...what better time for us to also consider the place and need of forgiveness in our lives.

Unitarian Universalist worship services and rituals are often light on confession. And rarely do we engage together in the spirituality of fasting or daily prayer. I wish it were otherwise. For do we not all stand in need of confession? Do we not long for forgiveness?

This morning we have picked up stones to hold in our hands as we consider the place of forgiveness in our lives. At times we need to ask for forgiveness for a wrong we have done to others...perhaps we told a lie, or cheated in some way, perhaps we intentionally were mean-spirited or have simply gotten into the habit of speaking harsh, angry words...or perhaps we wronged another through a sin of omission...a kindness we failed to extend, a truth we told only partially, a hurt or resentment that we carried deep inside and never spoke aloud...an opportunity for generosity that we passed by...

During the Days of Repentance, Jews are encouraged to go to those they may have hurt and to ask for forgiveness. This is to be done in a prayerful way, with sincerity and humility. Let us take a moment in silence to confess an act of unkindness or thoughtlessness for which we need to ask forgiveness.

It's also true that we well-intentioned humans tend to be hardest on ourselves...we carry guilt and blame and feel bad for failing to be the person we want to be...

Sometimes our deepest need is to forgive ourselves. Forgive ourselves for our very human failings. Forgive ourselves for our jealousies, our selfishness, our greed, our addiction. Confession is, I think, good for the soul...because it allows us to be kind to ourselves, to forgive ourselves and begin again. Let us take a moment in silence to confess our need to forgive ourselves.

At times, we need to extend forgiveness for a hurt or wrong done to us. Sometimes these hurts are very old wounds...sometimes these wrongs were done when we were children or youth, or very early in a marriage, but it is never too late to heal old wounds, it is never too late to offer forgiveness. Even if the person who hurt us has died, if we are still living with an open wound...if we are still carrying a burden of hurt...it is never too late to put it down, to let it go. Let us take a moment to offer forgiveness to someone who has hurt us.

We must also recognize that there are hurts that run so deep that we are not yet ready to forgive. Our soul, our body, our spirit has not yet healed sufficiently to let go. Healing takes its own time, often we work on it for years...sometimes we need years to pray on the matter...and still we are not ready to forgive. If that is the case, then we must also honor that reality. Forgiveness cannot be forced or faked...it can only come from the heart, it can only come in honesty and with integrity.

For some of us, our anger, our pain, our hurt centers on an institution, a system of oppression, for some it may even extend all the way to anger at God...That too is difficult to deal with, finding healing and wholeness can take a lifetime for some of us...sometimes it seems there is just no way to make it right. Let us take a moment in silence to confess where we may be complicit in systems that hurt or oppress others.

But along the way, whatever our path, our Universalist theology assures us that we are all loved and lovable...and it also acknowledges that we are all in need of healing...and we are all worthy of redemption. We are frail, we are broken, we are human...and we are deserving of worth and dignity...forgiveness is nothing to be ashamed of, it is a universal human need.

There are some spiritual tasks, some healing, which we simply cannot do alone. We need religious community to support our spiritual intentions. We need religious community to call us to our best selves...

Prayers of confession and forgiveness are such tasks. When we are young, or new to a faith, we need the example of our elders to teach, to show us how to be faithful. We need our pastors, our ministers, our lay leaders, our spiritual guides to show us how to pray...how to recognize the holy.

We need stories from diverse faith traditions to offer wisdom and examples of right living....we need the stories that are gathered up in religious communities to reassure us of our sacred paths...to help us on our way.

None of us can do the work of the spirit, the work of love, the work of right relationship on our own. We need community...we need religious community.

Thus we come on the Sabbath to this our spiritual home.

Thus we come each year carrying our stones of forgiveness.

Sometimes we carry a rather large stone together as a congregation. We have been carrying such a stone the past few months as we try to discern the answer to a question that feels to some of us like a big question. To others it feels quite small. It is the question of what to name ourselves. It is the question of the "c" in UUCR.

The Board has struggled with the question and with the process of decision making. Should our name continue to be UU "church" of Rockville...or should we change it to UU "congregation" of Rockville? And how do we decide?

This question came up a couple of years ago, and we talked about it and did a small survey...and of course, we got a range of responses.

For those who favor changing to congregation, the centering motivation is to be more open and inclusive, especially to those of Jewish backgrounds. It is hard for those who spent years going to a temple or synagogue to get comfortable with going to church. Or to explain it to their families.

For those who favor retaining church in our name, the centering motivation seems to be one of alignment with our UU Christian roots, and a desire to be consistent with our own past and how we are known in the larger community of Montgomery County.

For some, the question becomes emotional. It feels like something may be lost...lost if we do make the change, lost if we don't. For some, the conversation itself feels like a diversion to our larger purpose of outreach ministry and our social justice work. And so, the Board had hoped to bring it to closure sooner rather than later.

The Board has been moving toward encouraging members and friends of the church to express their views and desires on this question. And they were planning to bring it to a vote, or perhaps a straw vote at a congregational meeting in November. They have been discussing the need for a super-majority if a vote is taken and what the percentage of a super-majority should be. They have been talking about consensus and the pros and cons of that approach. They have been considering how to create multiple avenues for people to give input.

At our Board meeting this past Monday evening, after a lengthy discussion, the Board decided to step back from what was feeling more and more like the brink.

As Unitarian Universalists, we sometimes relish our differences...we rather enjoy our sense of being outsiders...we like to prove our uniqueness...we love those Garrison Keillor jokes. And when we come to decision making, we extend debate, set up pro and con microphones...we are comfortable with dualistic categories and taking a vote appeals to our sense of democracy and fairness...

And yet, life doesn't always sift out neatly into winners or losers, rights and wrongs....poll numbers and survey results.

Discernment about our name is also discernment about who we are.

We are one church. We are one congregation. But what is it that unites us...what is our commonly-held core? I believe continuing our discernment can be a rich and profound experience. What will we learn about who we are as UUs...what will we learn about who we are together

So the Board has decided that we need to carry this big stone of the "C" in our name...a little while longer. We don't know what to do next. We don't want to cut off dialogue; the Board will still be happy to receive and ponder your emails. But let's not rely on emails...let's talk about this in our small groups, over our lunches and dinners together...in our committee meetings. We don't have the answer to how to move forward on this...trying to bring it to closure doesn't feel right. Staying open to new revelation, staying open to the spirit of love, staying open to listening well to one another...this feels right.

Annie Dillard tells of a man who lives on an island...he has chosen a quiet life, a life in which he can spend a good deal of time listening. He has a special stone. A stone he keeps on his mantle...it is a palm-sized stone...dark grey, I think, with a lighter band of grey encircling it. Several times a day, he takes that stone from the shelf and tries to teach the stone to talk.

I can picture him...lighting a candle, sitting on a cushion, the stone on a low altar as he meditates...and prays...I can picture him waiting, waiting season after season, for the stone to talk.

Waiting for the wisdom locked in the stone to speak to him. Waiting for the divine light hidden deep inside the stone...to shine forth and speak.

Can we wait together...for our big stone to talk...can we be patient...waiting to discover what it is that lives inside this community of faith...what it is that draws us together and makes us so much more than we could ever be apart?

Discernment, like any spiritual ritual, requires sacrifice. Not a strong suit for Unitarian Universalists.

What is required of us as we grope toward deeper understanding? What must we give up? What must we forgive? What must we trust? How shall we speak and listen to one another?

Will the better angels of our nature bless and keep the bonds of our affection?

We have much to discover within our stone.

Blessed Be/Amen/Shalom