

8 October, 2006 * We All Spill Soup

“Come, come, whoever you are –
even if you’ve broken your vows a thousand times.”
~ Rumi

Call to Worship

Come, come, whoever you are
Even though you’ve broken your vows a thousand times:

the vows that we take in hope, and break in our humanness
 The vows to be more loving, more cheerful, more patient.....
 Our vows to stop making the same mistakes,
 The vows to be a better spouse, a better parent,
 a better friend, a better person...

Come, even though you’ve broken these saintly vows,
Come, and leave your disappointment and blame behind
 In this sanctuary of hope and promise, we welcome you –
 whoever you are, whatever your frailties and failings
As a people of faith, ours is no caravan of despair –
 for we travel together seeking wholeness,
 offering compassion, moving into the gift of this new day.
Come, let us worship together.

Sermon: We All Spill Soup – The Knowing Aspect of Prayer

This sermon is the second in a series of four about different aspects of prayer – “prayer” being the process of “connecting and reconnecting to the source of our lives.”

Each sermon offers a different exploration of a way to find, and sustain, a connection to the source of our lives through four successive aspects of prayer: **naming, knowing, listening, and loving**. Last Sunday I spoke about “naming:” that is, the range of creative, fulfilling ways that we provide names and metaphors for the wider life of which we are all part, so that we live in deeper relationship with the life around us.

The notion of *relationship* is just as central to **Knowing prayer**. “Knowing” refers to knowing ourselves fully, honestly, and lovingly – with all of our flaws, imperfections, and growing edges. To engage in prayer that is Knowing is to “fully reflect on our life as it is today, and...to recognize those places that call for reconciliation and atonement.”¹ Knowing prayer is about gently holding the thousand vows that we’ve broken, and knowing that we’re still called to join the joyful, welcoming caravan that beckons to us.

If finding new ways to re-imagine and re-craft names for the Holy is challenging for Unitarian Universalists, it’s an even more prickly, delicate journey to find our way through Knowing prayer, due to the legacy of language that we’ve inherited, however indirectly, from the Christian tradition: the language of *sin* and *confession*.

If you’re allergic to the word “sin,” you’re not alone. Part of what spurred our Unitarian and Universalist forebears to veer off into our unique religious direction was their “different spin on sin.”² To clarify what distinguishes our own tradition from the harsher strains of Christianity, we can go back to the Augustine doctrine of original sin, which has appeared under the doctrinal name “total depravity” for the last 4 centuries in many Protestant denominations (especially Calvinism).

Total depravity holds that “human sin has affected every aspect of the human character – thought, emotions, will, etc.... [A]n unsaved person is completely unable to find salvation on his or her own. Salvation is only possible if God wills it and causes it through the work of the Holy Spirit.”³

When this theology – in which some people are saved and others are damned, and only God’s choice and will determines which one you are – is woven into prayers of confession, the result can be prayers that, while designed to emphasize the expansiveness of God’s grace, sound harsh to Unitarian Universalist ears. Calvinist prayers of confession *can* (but don’t always!) contain statements that we are “unworthy of God’s care” or filled with a sense of shame.⁴

This language lies in direct contrast to our Universalist heritage in particular, which assures us of our unquestionable goodness as human beings. Two hundred years ago, Hosea Ballou shaped Universalism with his belief that “there is nothing in heaven

¹ Erik Walker Wikstrom, *Simply Pray*, p. 20.

² Jane Rzepka, “Not Perfect Yet?” in her column for *Quest*, the Church for the Larger Fellowship Newsletter, September 2006.

³ Lewis Loflin. See www.sullivan-county.com/news/mine/calvin.htm

⁴ See for example www.mtvwpresbchlv.org/bull.php

above, nor in the earth beneath, that can do away with sin – but Love.” That is, we are all – every person – held within a circle of grace and tenderness; life’s affection for life is so fierce that we cannot remove ourselves from the loving care of the Holy. This theology isn’t exactly a clarion call to repent and atone because, as Jane Rzepka⁵ puts it, “If God loves us as we are...where would confession come in?”

And yet.... might not there be a constructive element buried within the Christian concept of sin and confession? Erik Walker Wikstrom reminds us⁶ that the statement “We are all sinners” was never intended to be used as

a condemnation, but a simple description, like “We are all air breathers.” If all of us are sinners then none of us is supposed to be anything else – it’s fundamental to who we are....Rather than an indictment of how far we are from the ideal, the heart of the theology of sin is a message of freedom: We don’t have to work so hard at trying to be – or, at least, appearing to be – “perfect” because...none of us is and none of us ever will be.

It’s curious to me that, in a tradition so fixated on “liberation,” we UU’s fail to understand the great freedom that we gain when we can drop the masquerade and instead be genuine, flawed people together.

I believe that our UU tradition has lost something precious and powerful by turning its back on Knowing prayer, and on corporate prayers of confession (Knowing prayer). We’ve missed out on the chance to winnow out our habits that are life-giving, and those that don’t “serve us or the world we live in;”⁷ to to exchange humility for liberation. In so doing, we’ve given up the practice of our restoring relationships.

let’s explore language – the “how” – of Knowing Prayer before we look any further at the “why.” Let’s go beyond the language of “confession,” and instead speak in terms of our *falling short* of our own hopes and expectations for ourselves. How might we speak of our mistakes, and express regret for them without the language of “unworthiness”?

The best statement I know comes from a T-shirt:

Dear God, help me to be the person my dog thinks I am.

⁵ Jane Rzepka, “Not Perfect Yet?” in her column for *Quest*, the Church for the Larger Fellowship Newsletter, September 2006.

⁶ Wikstrom, p. 22.

⁷ Wikstrom, p. 23.

There you have it: a simple admission that although our beloved pet acts as if we were the most lovable human being to walk the earth, there are days on which we're not even the most lovable human being on our block.

Along similar lines, there's this prayer:

*Dear God,
So far today I've done all right.
I haven't gossiped. I haven't lost my temper.
I haven't been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish, or overindulgent.
I'm very thankful for that.
But in a few minutes, God, I'm going to get out of bed;
And from then on I'm probably going to need a lot more help.*

Until recently, our Unitarian and Universalist hymnals contained prayers of confession. Here is a prayer that our Unitarian cousins used in the 1940s (from the 1938 hymnal; I have changed the formal "thou" language into more familiar pronouns):

*O unseen source of peace and holiness,
we come into your secret place to be filled with
your pure and solemn light.
As we come to you, we remember that...
we have not walked lovingly with each other...
In our weakness be the quickening power of life.
Arise within our hearts as healing, strength, and joy.
Day by day may we grow in faith, in charity,...
and in the larger life of love to which you call us.*

Whether farcical or serious, these reflections all acknowledge two things:

□ We're not perfect. We don't engage in Knowing prayer in order to *become* perfect; we do so to "look to the process we're involved in and the progress we're making....every day as the measure of our lives."⁸

□ In desiring to live a live a life of greater integrity, and to be the people we want to be, sometimes we need help ("*Help* me be the person my dog thinks I am...." - "I'm

⁸ Wikstrom, p. 21.

going to get out of bed and will need more *help...*" - "Arise in our hearts as healing, strength, and joy....").

As an individual practice, then, Knowing prayer serves us by drawing us toward our "inner, often unseen, dimensions of ourselves."⁹ Knowing prayer is empowering because it underscores our faith that, as good as humankind is, we're meant to keep getting better. That is, each time we name the parts of ourselves that we're disappointed with, ***we are really naming our hopes.*** To say, "I didn't handle that well" is to say, "I'm not done as a person," which carries the hope of growing in that direction.

But its *transcendent* function, its glorious means of weaving our interdependent web more beautifully, is this: Knowing prayer requires us to open our hearts to the help – the encouragement and inspiration – that we need on our journey. That help might come from God, perhaps from our religious leaders, but mainly, I believe, from *each other.*

Here are two ways of describing how Knowing prayer forms the core of beloved community:

Although religious traditions around the world all recognize the need for honest self-appraisal, no faith centers Knowing prayer in community more than Judaism. At sunset last Sunday evening (October 1st), Jews celebrated Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Yom Kippur follows the celebration of the new year, Rosh Hashanah, and a period of ten days often called "days of turning." During these high holy days, "every fall, every year," writes Victoria Safford,¹⁰

the people make their peace with anyone they have wronged or slighted or injured or in any way neglected... The task is not to patch things up, smooth things over, reach a compromise, or sweep mistakes and uneasy memories under the rug; the task is not to feel better. The task is ownership. The goal is truth, for its own redemptive sake. *I did this. I said this to you, and it was wrong. I neglected this. I botched this. I betrayed you thusly. I demeaned you, whether you ever knew it or not. This is the truth in which both of us are living.*

⁹ Wikstrom, p. 24.

¹⁰ "At One," in the UUA meditation manual *Walking Toward Morning.*

In a more secular vein, the poet Mark Nepo¹¹ highlights community by discussing our twin instincts, as humans: to personalize and to project. (“Personalizing is mistaking what happens in the world as always having to do with you....Projecting is the reverse. It happens when we place the things that happen in us onto the world around us.”) Of these two habits (which, of course, could be extended into a long list of unhelpful habits that we all share), Nepo says:

The truth is that no one can avoid [these things.] There are only those of us who are aware of it, and those of us who are not; only those of us who own it when it happens, and those of us who don't. But this difference is crucial. ***Not owning things can end relationships. Owning them can deepen relationships.*** [my emphasis]

Human have spilled soup for eternity, and generations have made excuses, saying, “It was the Earth. The Earth shifted,” and generations have secretly thought, “He meant to do it.” If you want to save the world, then when you spill the soup, simply say, “I’m sorry I spilled the soup.”

Often, we’re too proud to admit that, through commission or omission, however inadvertently, our mistakes push us away from each other. If our communities are built around honoring the “interdependent web” of our community – bringing ourselves into balance with each other – then I believe we do that, in part, by bearing witness to our stepping out of balance. When we can admit, and name, the qualities that make us human, we free ourselves to be more real, and to be more available to one other. The defenses die, giving way to new connections between us.

Notice, please, that this isn’t about *guilt* or self-flagellation. Guilt isn’t constructive, as it rarely motivates us to flourish as we are capable of. The inner search and vulnerability that allow us to say “I’m sorry I spilled the soup,” on the other hand, makes us agents of our relationships. When we say, “I haven’t honored my relationship with you,” we are really speaking of our need for that relationship. Admitting and accepting that “we have not walked lovingly with each other” ***is an act of restoration***; a calling each other back into relationship.

¹¹ Mark Nepo, *The Book of Awakening*, p. 189.

I believe that, paradoxically, it's by naming our brokenness that we reveal our wholeness, as individuals and as a community, weaving ourselves together with the threads of good faith, clarity, love, acceptance. And, I believe that a heartfelt phrase of Knowing prayer affirms that we belong to each other, and are most worthy of the love that we have to offer to one another – even with our thousand broken vows.

“Come, come, whoever you are
Even though you've broken your vows a thousand times...”

The Sufi poet Rumi wrote those words seven centuries ago.
None of us is who we will be, he seems to be saying,
but perfection is not required for us to travel together.

And so I say, this morning:
Come, even though you've broken your heartfelt vows,
Come, and leave your disappointment and blame behind

In this sanctuary of hope and promise, we welcome you –
whoever you are, whatever your frailties and failings

Come, yet again, come....
And let us be revealed as whole.