

Tying the String

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Story *Amazing Grace, the Story of John Newton* (Portions adapted from Heather Forest, *Wisdom Tales from Around the World*)

Reading *On Turning* by Jack Riemer (STLT #534)

Sermon

There's a story about Calvin Coolidge, the US president of notoriously few words. His wife was sick one Sunday, so he went to church alone. When she asked him later what the sermon was about, he said, "sin." "What did the minister say about sin?" she asked. Coolidge replied, "He was against it."¹

I'm against it, too, although "sin" is not a word I often use. "Sin" has been used (still is used) to harm people – from the doctrine of original sin (which our Unitarian ancestors flatly rejected) to the ways some religions wield it to shame and dominate. As with any evocative religious language that has been misused, it can be tempting to avoid it altogether ourselves.

But sometimes, if we do that, we lose a powerful word that gets our attention and calls us to action and accountability to something beyond ourselves. And sometimes in rejecting a word, we lose an important idea, or the ability to learn from other faith traditions that use it. I know there are varying levels of comfort with this here today – we saw this in one of the exercises at yesterday's start-up workshop - but today I am going to use the word "sin" as I understand it.

For me "sin" has nothing to do with violating rules, cultural norms or religious decrees; or with expectations of obedience. It has nothing to do with judging someone else. For me, sin is about separation - from one another, from Love, and from what is truest in ourselves and the Universe. Sin is when we act as though we are not interconnected, abuse our power, and create suffering and injustice. Sin for me is the actions (and inactions) that keep the world we have separate from the world of beloved community that we seek. And the deeper sin is when we fail to take responsibility for what we do, and don't do.

I'm against it. And, I do it. We humans are beautiful and inherently worthy, and our sins do not define us. But we do it. We sin as individuals against one another and ourselves. And we sin collectively – in what we're doing to our planet, in our exploitation of the least powerful and tolerance for systems of oppression; in the humanitarian crises – the new ones, and the ones that have been going on so long we've lost track of them. These ongoing sins are causing harm - and (in the words of Unitarian Universalist minister Nancy McDonald Ladd) "killing us by a thousand tiny cuts to the integrity of our own souls."²

We're against it. But it happens. So what do we do?

John Newton, when he realized his sin, first responded by making the conditions for the people he kidnapped a little less appalling. That change probably made him feel good – and it had an impact ... fewer people died on his ships. A few years later, the inadequacy of that response became clear, and he left the slave trade altogether. Then, his conviction that slavery was wrong sat silently in his soul for 34 years, where it didn't get in the way of his livelihood and his status. By the time he wrote his anti-slavery pamphlet, England was ready for it – even welcomed it. He was kind of a hero.

We humans like to distance ourselves from sin – even if we're aware, we may decide it's not really our responsibility - we minimize the harm, blame someone else, protest that we mean well, or feel so powerless that we can't think about it. Or we do something that makes us feel like we've taken action, might even win us praise, while avoiding actions that would come with a cost.

¹ Retold, e.g., in Rebecca Parker and John Beuhrens, *House for Hope*, 79.

² Nancy McDonald Ladd, *After the Good News*, 79.

But the Jewish High Holy Days remind us that there is another response available to us - a healing response. In the language of Yom Kippur, atonement.

Atonement is not an apology or judgment or shame - it's accountability. It's noticing the harm we do and (setting aside excuses of intent or provocation) confessing our role and making amends – righting the wrong, as best we can. And it's turning - working to change ourselves so we don't do it again. Our atonement might help someone that we harmed, or repair a relationship. It might even inspire forgiveness.

But at its core, atonement is a deep religious practice of repair and connection that we do for ourselves, to save our own souls, if you will, from estrangement and isolation; we do it to restore our integrity.

The Indian Jesuit priest Anthony de Mello speaks of a string connecting each of us to God. When we sin, he says, we cut that string. In alternate language, we cut the connection between ourselves and the sacred, or what we know to be true, or the rest of the interdependent web. When we realize that we've cut the string, and atone, then (going back to de Mello's language) "God ties the string again, making a knot – and thereby bringing us closer. Again and again we cut the string," he says, "and again and again God reties it. With each knot our strings become shorter and shorter, and we are drawn closer and closer to God."³

Whether or not our theology involves a God, this knotted string is atonement. It can't restore what was before. But it can reconnect us - even bring us closer - to truth, Love, one another and what matters most. It is a kind of returning to covenant with ourselves and the Universe.

I don't think I ever thought about atonement until I had children. I lived, as we do now, in a world that values winning over accountability – where people with power and prestige often seem incapable of basic self-reflection, much less atonement. I didn't have models for atonement. I cut strings and left them dangling.

When I had children, I was determined to be the very best, kindest, wisest, most loving and caring parent there ever was. I tried. And. There were times when I raised my voice, when I didn't give respectful attention to something that mattered to my child, when I was impatient, or said hurtful things. I finally had to accept that the best I could do was to own my mistakes. To say something like – 'you know that thing I said to you earlier? I should not have said that. That was hurtful and you deserve better. Here's what I can do to make things better now and to change so I do better in the future.' Or, more often, some highly imperfect variation of that.

I didn't call it atonement, but that's what it was. Accountability and repair. Bringing me back into relationship with my kids and my integrity. And the spiritual practice of atonement doesn't require perfection. In words attributed to Rumi (and sung here this morning): Though you have broken your vows 1000 times come, yet again, come.

Atonement is something we all can do. And in a covenantal community, we have to. What holds us together is a shared understanding of what we value and how we will be with each other and in the world. That shared understanding is as aspirational as my parenting goals. We will always fall short, needing to return over and over to relationship with each another and our shared vision. It's not easy, but part of the power of this kind of community is that here we can practice. For there is no shame in falling short, if we then do the work of tying the string - taking responsibility, making amends and changing.

Where it gets more challenging is with collective (or societal) sins like colonialism, slavery, genocide, land theft, exploitation of people and resources, and environmental destruction.

This service is inspired by the Jewish High Holy Days. This is not a Jewish community and I am not a Rabbi, but I am drawn to a truth about collective atonement that is embedded in the Jewish practice. Ahead of Yom Kippur, Jewish people are encouraged to practice personal atonement in their relationships with others, and to make amends. But on Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, they have a chance to set things right with God, the Universe.

And on Yom Kippur, they do so as a community. The litany of atonement that the congregation recites contains a long list of sins.⁴ Everyone confesses to them all. It's highly unlikely that any individual has

³ Elisa Davy Pearmain, *Doorways to the Soul*, 75, adapted.

⁴ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/yom-kippur-in-the-community/>

managed to do all those things, but that doesn't matter. Recognizing that their fates are intertwined, the community, as one, takes responsibility.

When it comes to collective sins, this is a powerful practice. None of us created the white supremacy in our society. And if we think solely in individual terms, it seems unfair to expect any of us to atone for it. So we get stuck, even as this collective sin continues to kill with a thousand tiny cuts to the integrity of our soul.

But if we come at this from the perspective of healing rather than blaming, and with an awareness of our intertwined futures, and if all of us together – as one - take responsibility ... now we can do something.

Atonement begins with acknowledging the harm and our connection to it. It begins there, but it does not end there, it cannot end there. Without some form of restitution and “turning,” nothing is happening with that cut string, no matter what we say.

When those of us who are white say Black Lives Matter, or pass the 8th Principle, and then stop there, that's not atonement. Yet.

Here in New York, just this year, a commission was created to study the longstanding impact of slavery and discrimination, and recommend some form of reparations. That would get us closer to healing for us all.

And many of our churches are considering their own reparations. That, too, would get us closer.

(On the topic of reparations I also refer you to Dr. Alice Green's June 30 sermon from this pulpit.)

Or consider Indigenous land acknowledgements, which seem to be everywhere these days. We have one –in your order of service – an acknowledgement that we gather on land stolen from the Mohican People.

Atonement does begin with acknowledgement. But if it ends there, we are in effect saying “What was once yours is now ours.” That's language from Elisa Sobo, Michael Lambert and Valerie Lambert.⁵ “What was once yours is now ours” could come across more as a painful reminder of an unjust status quo than an attempt to do something about that injustice. Author Graeme Woode says that “A land acknowledgment is what you give when you have no intention of giving land.”⁶

I'm not suggesting we give up our land acknowledgement. But, in this month where we focus on our value of justice, and in this week leading up to Indigenous People's Day, I invite us to notice the possibility that it might seduce us into a “self-satisfied complacency,” where (says Woode) it “relieves us of the responsibility to think about Indigenous peoples, at least until the next public event.”

Atonement asks something of us. I can't tell you exactly what that is in this case, but it's safe to say that if all we're offering is these words, we're not there yet. But perhaps these words can draw us deeper into a process where we ask with curiosity what might move us closer?

Even if it costs us something. Because a failure to atone also has a cost – both to the people who have been wronged and to the integrity of this country and all of us who have ever benefitted from systems of oppression and exploitation. As always, we won't return to what was, or what could have been – but we might tie a knot that brings us closer to each other and what matters most.

And that is the good news of atonement - at any moment, we can turn toward renewal, and healing. And we have this community in which to learn and grow ... and practice.

My invitation for this week is to reflect on the cut strings in our life. Is there one that's ready for a knot? In this season of repair, how might we tie that string, and bring some healing to ourselves and the world?

Though you have broken your vows 1000 times, come yet again come.

May it be so.

Amen.

⁵ Elisa Sobo, Michael Lambert and Valerie Lambert, Land Acknowledgements are Not Enough, <https://www.sapiens.org/culture/land-acknowledgments-sovereignty/> (Oct 20, 2021)

⁶ Graeme Woode, “Land Acknowledgements are just Moral Exhibitionism” in The Atlantic, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/11/against-land-acknowledgements-native-american/620820/> (Nov. 28, 2021)