

# Missing the Mark: On Sin and Salvation



A Sermon by Rev. Carolyn L. Price  
*Universalist Unitarian Church of Santa Paula*  
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Sin is not a term that Unitarian Universalists take lightly. Many of us turn from it as a vestige of an old, doctrinal, punishing religion that we turned away from as soon as age or reason allowed it. Others see it merely as obsolete, a word no longer useful in today's world. However, the word remains *used* – and used in many cases to condemn, so that one individual or group can claim moral superiority over another. We cannot, in today's world, deny that this powerful word is spoken in the name of religion to demean and to harm. And thus this morning we will speak this word also – sin – and we will use it in an explicitly Unitarian Universalist way, within the context of a liberal religion that values all human beings as part of the sacred interdependent web of life.

Let's look at the origin of the concept of sin, beginning with Jewish and Christian traditions. Drawing on the second chapter of Genesis (2:7), according to Jewish tradition, the Bible states that G-d formed humankind with two impulses: a good impulse (the yetzer tov) and an evil impulse (the yetzer ra).

The yetzer tov can be explained as our moral conscience, the inner voice that reminds us of what is right. This yetzer tov, this inner voice that can tell right from wrong, does not according to many Jews, enter a person until his or her 13th birthday, when he or she becomes old enough to bear responsibility and enters adulthood via the ritual bar or bat mitzvah.

The yetzer ra – that second impulse with which God endowed human beings according to Judaism - is more difficult to define, and there are many different ideas about it. It is not simply a desire to do evil in the way we normally think of it in Western society: a desire to cause senseless harm. Rather, it is usually conceived as the selfish nature, the desire to satisfy personal needs (food, shelter, sex, etc.) without regard for the moral or external consequences of fulfilling those desires.

The yetzer ra is not in and of itself bad. It was created by G-d, and according to Judaism, all things created by G-d are good. The Talmud tells us that without the yetzer ra (the desire to satisfy personal needs), man or woman would not marry, bear children, make a living or be of use in the world. It is only when the yetzer ra is not controlled by the yetzer tov that it can lead to wrong-dong. For example, there

nothing intrinsically wrong with hunger, unless it leads one to steal food. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with human sexual desire, unless it leads to adultery, incest, rape or other sexual misconduct.

The yetzer ra is generally seen as something inside a person, rather than as an external force. The concept that "the devil made me do it" is not how the majority of Jewish thinkers understand this ability to do wrong. Often this kind of thinking is nothing more than a personification of one's own selfish desires, combined with the human weakness to want to attribute our mistakes and wrong acts to some external force.

Judaism holds that people have the ability to choose which impulse, which force to follow: the yetzer tov or the yetzer ra. This is what free will is, and free will is at the center of Jewish understanding of human behavior. Each one of us has the power to make our own choices, according to Jewish belief, and we will ultimately be made accountable for the choices we make.

In the New Testament, the Greek word translated as "sin" is "harmartia," which means "missing the mark." The image is as of an arrow and a target, with the very center of that target being "the mark", being our highest good and purpose, or, in religious language, God's will. Let's explore this concept of missing the mark.

We don't set out to miss the mark. Sometimes we don't even know what the mark is. I remember the men I worked with at the Veteran's Hospital where I served as their chaplain and spiritual guide. All of them struggled with mental illness, usually post-traumatic-stress disorder, and addiction. Most of my job was to listen. And I listened as they told me how it was when their Colonel or Unit Leader ordered them into the jungles, in the sweltering, dense air of in-country Vietnam. They'd tell of walking or climbing or half-swimming into places where they had no or – at best – remote news of the people they were after – (which, ironically, were called a "target") but they had been ordered to go in with guns drawn, prepared to fire.

So these men, many of whom came from the most impoverished parts of America, where the message from their usually conservative church was "thou shalt not kill" heard a more insistent voice than that of God, or even the preacher from their childhood. *Thou shalt kill*, said this voice. *Thou shalt kill or be killed*. And in this place where all non-Americans had been demonized as "the enemy", they did kill. Now, more than three decades later, my role was to sit beside them and to listen as they broke down telling of the women, children, and the old ones that they killed, none of whom – they knew even then somewhere in their souls amid the craze of war – was truly "the enemy". And they had carried the horror of what they had done inside them for all those years, until the sense of sin and shame ate away any peace that might have been possible at war's end, and bit by bit destroyed any chance of a normal life.

I have made the most inroads at understanding sin, or missing the mark, in the Christian tradition, through process theology. Process Theology came out of liberal Christianity, and is a different model of understanding the world, humanity, and the divine – or the forces that defy rationality. It is a Unitarian Universalist-friendly theology, emphasizing the relatedness of human beings to one another, to the earth and living creatures, and to the energy of creation itself. It is a model of theology borne of and inseparable from the interdependent web. Thus, there are UU affinity groups of process thinkers.

Process thought holds a view of sin that many of us perhaps can take to heart. In a relational world, it declares, no one is inseparable from any one else, or from all that lives. And within each of us lives a desire to serve the whole, to move the inherent goodness of life all around and forward. Some say this force is from God, and they term it the “lure” of the divine. Others, the thinkers rather than the theists, see the force as emanating from the energy that made the cosmos, and which ever seeks to grow, to build and to embody in us the power of creation.

Sin in process thinking is still to “miss the mark”. But the mark is distinctly different from Judaism or traditional Christianity, where it is the will of God that we defy when we sin. In process thought, we sin when we betray the highest good – when we act against the forces that hold us together in an interdependent web of all creation. We sin when by our actions we (intentionally or not) injure or oppress ourselves or another. You can see that this model fits well with our own UU guiding principles that affirm the worth and dignity of all people, and see life within the context of a living whole.

In process thought, relationships form us, just as we form them. Nothing is one-sided or one-dimensional. There is an interconnectedness even to time, to the sweep of history past to present to future. In a process world, we carry the past with us. And we inherit sin from the past not in a personal form, but in a societal form. This is what comprises original sin – sin that began before we were born. But the process understanding of original sin is not the traditional view of sin as something we inherited in a mythical garden under an apple tree. The process view sees this impersonal, original sin as literal, grounded in real recorded time, arising out of the actual deeds and misdeeds of our fathers, and our mothers – and those before them. According to Marjorie Suchocki, a leading process thinker and my teacher at Claremont School of Theology:

“Process theology suggests a more tragic view than the traditional understanding of original sin, naming the cumulative acts of human beings in society as the source of sin and evil, though we are each individually born into a society we did not create; insofar as it contains powers of destruction, these originate prior to our being. Thus in a process world, the past can be understood as the conveyer of original sin and the demonic evil. All the “ism’s” in society are understood, in this process model, as carry-overs of earlier sins. The people and groups who are the bearers of these sins (which we see in the various forms of oppression, i.e. racism, sexism, classism, etc.) were born into a world that was already oriented against them realizing their full humanity. It is important to understand that though they still retain free choice about personal sin, individually missing the mark, their present has been shaped “toward an impoverishment of spirit held in bondage to the past.”<sup>1</sup>”

Now, what of personal sin, of “missing the mark” by our own volition? Process thinking has some specific views on this that I want to share with you. The first, which resonates well with our own Interdependent Web, is that even when we “miss the mark” or choose an action that is one we know, on some level, does not serve the highest good, we are not the only ones to feel the effect, even though the choice originates with us. Remember, there is no complete separateness in this world view. I am connected to you, and to you, and you to me, and to her, and to him, and to all the people who our lives touch, directly and indirectly, which is a very great number indeed. None of us exists in isolation.

So the first place we can miss the mark is in relationships. With ourselves, we can “sin” when we refuse to grow, when we do not engage to the best of our ability in the world around us. This can be as simple as shutting ourselves off from possibilities, or believing we have all the answers, that we, like the pope, are endowed with some form of infallibility. Ego plays a role in personal sin, especially when it places our own worth or intelligence, ideas or spirituality above that of others. This is a sin because it alienates us from best in ourselves, and from the holiness, as theologian Martin Buber described it, of the “I/Thou” connection in human relationships. As in Buddhism and Taoism, often we sin at the selfish hands of the human ego. The way out of this is through honoring our inalienable connection with the “other”, whether we call that other *the dharma* or *sangha* or the community or *the tao* or the truth or God.

In life, the prospect of death looms ever over us. In Process thought the term to describe this is “perpetual perishing.” This refers to the reality that death waits for us, for everyone, there is simply no getting out of it, not for ourselves nor for those we love. And we sin not through fear of death but rather when we consciously or sub-consciously close ourselves off from living, when we deny the life that is still possible for us, all the way up until the moment of death. This can happen when someone we love dies but it can also happen when a relationship ends, though actual death is nowhere in the picture. As Suchoki puts it:

“The paradox that physical life continues despite the demolition of the emotional life occasions a strange form of imprisonment, for we can take refuge in physical life as if it were the only form of existence. The relationship is over, and the reality of existence is the throbbing ache of the loss (this passes in time, finally) and one continues to live in a world where there are relationships. But how can one dare to risk such pain again? And so one can draw deeply inside, allowing only the “safe” forms of relationships to continue. While this can be appropriate in the early stages of healing, there comes a time when it turns to sin. This is when the refusal to go beyond the surface is not for the sake of healing but for the sake of protecting the present against a future that is too threatening. This being in a place of hiding becomes a sin against the self.<sup>1</sup>”

Sin is often understood as a prison in process theology<sup>1</sup>. We imprison ourselves, or allow ourselves to be imprisoned, by actions or patterns of thought that deny the highest possible life experience for us and for others in this rich, relational world. We say no to possibility and creation, and instead we choose to *subsist*, to live below the optimum level, often because of fear or worry or anger or sorrow. These emotions, the negative ones, have a purpose in life – to give expression to feelings which, if trapped inside, can turn us into wounded, half-souls like the veterans I described earlier in this sermon. But we do not like these difficult emotions, we turn from them, and in so doing we can refuse to yield to our own growth process. To escape this prison, to decide not to sub-sist, but to choose full-blooded existence is demanding. Sometimes we can do it, through more effort than we knew we had. But sometimes we cannot.

Now – enter another theological word, which could be a full sermon unto itself – but which no sermon on sin is complete without – and that word is grace. Other words for

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<sup>1</sup> See Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *God Christ Church: A Practical Guide to Process Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), Chapter 2.

this, less theologically loaded, are synergy, synchronicity, or plain old good luck. I prefer grace, as I prefer to use the words God and sin, because they have the power of the ages behind them, because to reclaim them as a liberal religious being feels to me a critical part of what it means to be alive at this point in time on our planet, and to be member of and a minister in this free and responsible faith.

There are times, in this relational world, when we cannot do what is needed to escape the bondage of missing the mark on our own. There are times when we another person does for us and with us what we could not do for ourselves. Certainly that is what the Unitarian Albert Schweitzer meant when he said these words: "Sometimes our light goes out but is blown into flame by another human being. Each of us owes our deepest thanks to those who have rekindled this light." We have all, I hope, known people who have done this for us. Let us take a moment to silently give thanks for their presence in our lives. Schweitzer had another point, for those of us fortunate enough to live relatively free of pain and suffering. He believed that, in a relational world, out of this freedom comes responsibility. He put it this way: "Whosoever is spared personal pain must feel himself called to help in diminishing the pain of others"

So grace can come in fully human forms, which the humanists here today will understand and appreciate. It can also come in forms that do not yield so well to rational inquiry, which you may find less comfortable, but which I hope you will recognize as no less true. Grace can come when we wake up one morning, days or months or even years after a terrible loss, and we see the world anew. Its beauty astounds us, and reminds us of what it was to be young. We see possibilities again, where before there were none. Grace can come when one moment we look at the face of our spouse or our friend or even our enemy and we see light and glory rise up and we remember what it means to truly love one another.

Grace can come when out of a weariness that we thought would kill us, one day we feel energy move again in us again and return us to life's embrace. Grace can come when that place below our breast, right here where our heart is, where for so long we had felt only a hollowness of ache, without warning fills again with passion, and the hurt we feared to drown in is replaced by an inexplicable, immeasurable joy.

Grace can come when we least expect it, whether we have a word for it or not. It can come when we need it, when we seek it, and even when we refuse to believe it is possible. Whatever language we give it, however we explain it, there is no human loss that grace cannot hold and there is no missing the mark that grace cannot change. Through grace comes salvation and the strength to be born again. Through grace comes the power to do our highest good, and to touch the holy. Through grace comes the awe and wonder of knowing god, however we understand god to be, here among us, in this place and time.

May the blessings of grace be in you and among you, on this day and for all the days to come.