

Saints and Sinners, Rest Assured:
A Sermon on Good and Evil
From a Unitarian Universalist Perspective



A Sermon by **Rev. Carolyn L. Price**
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To begin this morning, I want to cast my lot with Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wisely observed that “there is a crack in everything God has made.” A hundred years after Emerson, one of Universalism’s theologians, Clarence Skinner, who was Dean of Tufts University further clarified this when he said, “the line which separates good from evil runs not between men (and women), but through them.”

Good and evil are not forces which originate outside of us; apart from the lives of ordinary men and women, or saints and sinners. Not in our religious tradition. As Unitarian Universalists we have long recognized that these forces are a part of us, each and every one. So the good news today is that *we* are the saints. The bad news is that we are also the sinners.

Let’s remember as we go today that language is the domain of the speaker and her or his culture, and that here today we are *not speaking* from locked doctrinal paradigms, but from the strong and old foundations of a free faith, one rooted in reason and inspired by the affective wisdom of love and hope. We are speaking as Unitarian Universalists.

To begin, I want to ask something of you. I want to ask you to remember a time when you acted badly, worse, even, that you’d thought you

could – when you considered, if only for a moment, that you had, possibly, if you used that word, if you believed in that word, *sinned*. Now some define sin as separation from god, or separation from our best selves, as when we forget the full humanity of another person or persons because we are more concerned for ourselves. In an earlier exploration of this topic, we called it “missing the mark”, reminiscent of a song Bruce Springsteen wrote in a troubled marriage when he said, “When I look at myself I don’t see the man I wanted to me, somewhere along the line I stepped off track... One step up and two steps back.”

Perhaps this “wrong-doing” that you recall, this “sin”, was small scale; nothing like the sins of terrorists or dictators who kill thousands of innocent people; nothing even like it, much less in fact – but still the sort of thing that keeps you up at night. Perhaps you only – maybe even without fully knowing what you were doing – destroyed a small piece of another person: a hope, a drive, a dream – and did so in a way that for a time or maybe longer that person was less than they were before. Maybe they blamed you, and maybe they didn’t. But the point is, you remember; in fact, you can’t forget. Perhaps it was not an act, something you did, but a time when you did nothing, when you might have. As Edmund Burke aptly noted, “All that is necessary for evil to succeed is that good (people) do nothing.”

I do not want any of you, or me, to dwell this morning in regret or sorrow about how you answer this question. I believe that it is not easy to be a good person in this world. I believe that we all do the best we can. I believe that sometimes things happen to the people in our lives, including those we love, and that they make choices or are the recipients of circumstance in such a way as to make it impossible for us to act toward them in a way that even faintly resembles saintly, or to truly give goodness to them, regardless of how much we ache to.

I believe, and I hope you do too if you have memories like this, that, as the Unitarian Universalist poet Mary Oliver has observed¹, sometimes the only life you can save is your own.

Albert Ziegler, a leading Universalist theologian of the 20th century, offers us these words about the choices we make:

“If free will means anything significant, it must mean that ... to some degree, man has the ability to act without regard for influences,... without regard to laws of the universe to which other parts are subject...

If, out of (this) freedom of the will, man has chosen to do wrong (and reason tells us that he has done and does do wrong,) there is no force in heaven or earth that can move him from it. His case is hopeless. Even the religion which weeps over his plight is powerless to save him.... The problem of evil, the fact that he does not do as he ‘ought’ to do; in short (is) the dilemma of man’s imperfection.”

¹ Mary Oliver, *The Journey*, from *Cries of the Spirit*, ed. Marilyn Sewell (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 31-32.

But remember here that Ziegler is speaking as a Universalist, as a member of a faith tradition *outside* the orthodox norm of his time.

He goes on:

“The whole (paradigm) fails when we realize that ... Imperfection exists, but it is not a dilemma. Orthodoxy supposed a completed universe, a perfect, finished creation, and so finds a problem in the existence of imperfection in it. Reason and any healthy fate that illumines it, must know that creation is moving on, not running down; that the universe is in process; that life did not begin in perfection, but in the working out of a perfect purpose (and that it) is still moving from chaos into order. What is more natural, then, than that there is imperfection, in the universe and in (each human being).²”

You can see the beginnings of process theology in his words – “that creation is moving on, not running down’ (I love that) ...that the universe... is moving still from chaos to order.” Let me tell you a bit about Albert Ziegler: He was an influential Universalist in America, and one of the best writers of his time. He was a founding member of the group of Universalist ministers called the Humiliati, who believed they had found a new and better way to “do” our liberal religion. This "emergent Universalism," as it was called, posited an inner force or spirit impelling every living thing toward fulfillment and wholeness – toward goodness. – much in sync with the way they saw the universe itself.

² Albert Ziegler, *Foundations of Faith*, quoted in *Is Hitler in Heaven?*, lecture by Rev. Edmund H. Robinson, General Assembly, June 2005, Fort Worth, GA.

Looking closely at their own religion, they saw a crack – to use Emerson’s words –in the hard years following the Second World War. Revelation, they said, was not sealed; not even within their faith tradition.

Theodore Parker, the Unitarian who we heard about in this morning’s story, had been one of the first to say something like this out loud, in a sermon entitled “The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity”. It did not make him popular, though it wasn’t the worst shock he gave the standing order in Boston at that time, which included the more conservative branch of our own Unitarian faith.

No, what really got him ostracized was saying that even Jesus was imperfect, was a human being after all. Parker was, in many ways, before his time, and this cost him. For the rest of his ministry, most Unitarian preachers refused to exchange pulpits with him, the standard gesture of collegiality good will among these early Unitarians. His own church, though, started just to follow him, grew and grew. And Theodore Parker, as the years went on, became a sought after preacher in the wider milieu of Boston, the East, and eventually Europe.

It was Parker’s devotion to the ethical ways of Jesus, to the spirit of goodness made real, that – pardon the pun – saved him. For as Parker saw it, Jesus was a moral exemplar – someone who, while fully human, was able to

consistently hear that voice within (like Parker heard that day, with the turtle) pointing him on the way of the saints – those who do good most if not all of the time. Remember, understood this way, even that the saints are not perfect, Remember, even Jesus lost his temper and got angry. Even Jesus had to abandon the crowds to go off into the hills, leaving needy people behind as he sought, in solitude, the voice of goodness that he called God; as he sought, in tiredness and desperation, a return to wholeness, to the wide embrace of love and belonging. Remember, we do not have to be perfect to be good.

As Universalists we inherit this memory of goodness; we inherit the words and ways of Jesus – not the risen Christ – whose story we rejected as supernatural – but Jesus, the prophet, the one who loved the poor, the mentally ill, the leper, and the tax collector; the one who did not care what you did in a temple, whether the rituals were right or wrong, as long as you lived your life in a way that made the world a good and a fair place for all. As Universalists, we inherit the choice making capacity of this man, this moral exemplar who could have chosen to sit in his appointed place, on the right hand of God, but who instead chose to live on earth as the left hand of god – to work at building what Christians call the Kingdom, or Kin-dom, of God; the Jews *shalom*, what Martin Luther King would later know as *the*

Beloved Community; the Buddhists would understand as *nirvana*, and the Taoists describe most simply as *the Way*.

To be good is to choose to leave our illusion of separateness behind, in whatever circumstance we find ourselves. Even when we could be on Easy Street. Even if we've earned our place there, fair and square. To be good is to choose to live as part of the whole, to remember our place in the family of things.

To be good is to feel the universal, uncompromising, and radical love of god, by whatever name we choose. To be good is to know that this love is the bedrock of our faith; and the source of our greatest strength. Sometimes, I am afraid that we are so smart, so intelligent, especially on our more-heady Unitarian side, that we forget or put in second place the love that made us.

Did you know that Martin Luther King, and his wife, Coretta, seriously considered becoming Unitarian Universalists? Only after significant deliberation did they decide not to. One of the reasons they did not was that at the time our theology of evil was too idealistic for the all too real world that they, and the other African Americans whose battle they would wage, inhabited. But there are many Unitarian Universalists today, including several of my professors in seminary in Chicago, who can tell stories of walking and talking, preaching and protesting with the venerable

Dr. King as allies in the long struggle for goodness – as imperfect saints who helped lead the way toward equal rights for African Americans.

Dr. King's theology was inspired by the words of one of our greatest preachers, whom he admired – Theodore Parker. *The moral arc of the universe in long*, said Parker, whom King would later famously quote, *but it bends toward justice*. Neither King nor Parker were ever willing to admit that sin or evil would have the last word.... that the revelation of goodness or the power of human beings to change the world could ever be fully sealed. In a sermon delivered in 1954, King put it this way:

“All I'm trying to say is (that)... This universe hinges on moral foundations. There is something in this universe that justifies Carlyle in saying, ‘No lie can live forever.’ There is something in this universe that justifies William Cullen Bryant [a Unitarian] in saying, ‘Truth, crushed to earth, will rise again.’ There is something in this universe that justifies James Russell Lowell [another Unitarian] in saying, ‘Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne. With that scaffold sways the future. Behind the dim unknown stands God within the shadow keeping watch upon his own.’ There is something in this universe that justifies the biblical writer in saying, ‘You shall reap what you sow.’”

Lest anyone get too comfortable here with our own saintliness, including me, let's return to the sinners among us. Or at least to the subject of sin, and its larger force, evil. Sin is not, in a Unitarian Universalist paradigm, a superpower which takes over us, as we become possessed by the God's dark and wretched twin, Satan. And sin is not, in our understanding,

anything that we can count on to disappear in “rapture”, when the human embodiment of the Divine returns to earth. Sin is alive and well, and in us.

That said, the Universalist in me is also alive and quite well and banishes the very thought of returning to a Calvinistic world view, in which all people are born evil, save for a select few. But I no longer believe, as some have done before me, that we are born fully and forever good. That we are given goodness with the blessing of our birth, I would stake my life on. But along with the goodness we inherit – we inherit as well the capacity to do harm, to ourselves, to others, to the world community. And only by choice, what theologians call free will, are we saved from *acting* on this capacity.

The Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker, President of our Unitarian Universalist seminary in Berkeley, has said: “I think our humanism is our best resource when it helps us understand that our freedom of choice means that all of us are capable of evil acts as well as wonderful acts ... (She adds) We need religion not to protect us from this world but to enable us to engage in a way that repairs and restores life....³”

³ Rebecca Parker, quoted in *UU World*, www.uuworld.org/2002/01/feature1/html

In Judaism, this repair of the world is the foundational purpose of faith, called *tikkun olam*. In Buddhism, the greatest achievement is to refuse nirvana, ultimate freedom and enlightenment, until all beings are free.

How do we do this “repair of the world”? How do we as individuals choose goodness over evil? How can we (at least more often than not) enact the saint, not the sinner – in small, individual ways and in larger corporate ways - ones can change the world?

One way is to trust that, imperfect and inconsistent as we are, there is a knowledge in us that exists to help us choose, however we name the source of that knowledge and its voice: god, conscience, ethics, instinct, truth, Spirit of life and love. It is to trust, as the young Theodore Parker trusted, that something inside us can bring our best selves forward. Of course this is one thing if you are young and holding a stick over a helpless turtle on a sunny afternoon, but quite another if you are an adult being asked to walk a picket line for fair wages; give more money to your homeless, hallucinating cousin; protest against a war you don’t believe in or to completely change how you live your days.

As a young adult, Parker was a schoolteacher. A number of parents of his students pressured him to expel a little colored girl from his classes.

Parker's courage failed him and that little girl then; but years later the memory of his failure may have helped him choose another way.

It is not easy to be good; to choose the right road, the path with heart. It is not easy in the best of times. It can be difficult almost beyond our ability to bear it when we are trying to be good with those we love whose choices or circumstances have carried them down the roads of addiction or mental illness, crime, or worse, roads which cast anguish to those who must walk them. But here too, is another voice – one we can hear in the Oglala Sioux, who have a saying that, roughly translated, tells us that in life: *there is the road of good; there is the road of difficulty; and where those two roads meet – that place, that place is a holy place.*

Religion can help us to hear that voice inside us. It can help us to hear, and listen, and trust. Even when times are hard. Even when we think the world is too much for us. Even when we are lost and grieving. Even when our courage has utterly failed us.

Theodore Parker's passion for the Unitarian ministry and his saintly leadership of the abolitionist cause led him to die early – as did so many of our ministers in those founding days. Actually, Parker died at the age I am now, something I find rather sobering. Albert Ziegler, the Universalist, who may have witnessed the outcome of such dangerous overwork, and changed

his ways a bit, lived somewhat longer. His theology evolved beyond the "emergent Universalism" of his Humiliati days, to a simpler place.

"Yes, there is a something," he wrote in his later years. "There is a purpose in the cosmos beyond our own, out of which we came, by which we are maintained and by which we are moved ... Things happen that we cannot fathom, great as we are. ..Of all the myriad attempts to define this something, I am most comfortable with one of the most ancient, the teachings of Tao(ism). . . . And of all the ideals of human conduct I am most moved by the description of the perfect follower of Tao:

He is cautious, like one who crosses a stream in winter. She is hesitating, like one who fears his neighbor. He is modest, like one who is a guest. She is yielding, like ice that knows it is going to melt. He is unfinished, like wood that is not yet wrought. And so forth and so forth ..."

When Ziegler's died in 1991, a memorial service was held at Ferry Beach in Maine, the Universalist camp and conference center. One of his favorite phrases, "Rest Assured," was the theme of Ziegler's memorial, because all those who loved this man – just as all those who loved Jesus, who loved Buddha, who loved Parker, who loved Martin – as well as all of us who love the saints before us want them to go knowing that others will remain to carry on. We want them to go knowing that we will be here, and that others will come after us, to do the work we were born to do.

We may not do it perfectly – for there is a crack in all things that god made – and in us too – but revelation is not sealed, and we are never without the capacity to choose a better path, and to begin again in love. To this day,

as Unitarian Universalists, we walk that path proudly, trusting still in the power of human goodness that has inspired our faith, and the people of our faith, for generations.

So for all the saints, for all of you, for today, tomorrow, and as long as there are ears to hear, and hearts to feel, rest assured. Rest assured.