

Sermon: “The Excellent Self” July 19, 2009
The Reverend Martha Hodges

I’m guessing that you may be wondering... What possessed me to embark on a series of sermons on the Seven Deadly Sins? Those of you who grew up UU or unchurched or in some other environment that didn’t think in terms of “sin” may be thinking that the whole concept of sin is outdated and irrelevant to the modern religious liberal. Others of you grew up or in a faith that taught that human beings are innately depraved and unworthy. You may have suffered emotional or spiritual damage from having it pounded into your head that you weren’t good enough, that you were by your very nature unacceptable. Let me reassure you. This series will be less about sin itself than about these seven ideas: Pride, Greed, Lust, Gluttony, Sloth, Envy and Wrath. Now, those are some interesting ideas. They are windows into the human condition; our human behavior viewed through those windows may tell us something about the moral and spiritual challenges of being human.

The sin *du jour* today is Pride, but before I get into that, I need to say a little more about sin.

What does “sin” have to do with Unitarian Universalism? Isn’t the whole concept of sin abhorrent to us, given our roots as rebels against the doctrine of Original Sin and the belief in the innate depravity of people? After all, our Unitarian side teaches us to look for the spark of the divine in all people. And our Universalist forebears recognized sin, but saw it as finite. As limited beings, our sins were limited – certainly nothing so horrific in scale as to merit eternal damnation.

And the sins that have been singled out as the cardinal errors, the deadly sins? To us enlightened, post-Freudian Americans, gluttony, envy, sloth, avarice... We see these as inevitable human flaws, part of a healthy and realistic assessment of human nature – or maybe not even flaws, let alone sins. Wrath, lust, pride... These are all healthy emotions, at least within reason and in certain contexts. For the most part, we just don’t take our failings -- gluttony, envy, greed -- that seriously anymore. And when we do overindulge in any of these, when they become extreme and therefore cause for concern, we consider them to be symptoms of emotional disturbances or “acting out” more than instances of immorality. In most cases, we see them as self-destructive behaviors that need to be addressed with understanding, with therapy. The sinner of yesteryear is the rehab patient of today.

But maybe – just maybe – we let ourselves off the hook a bit too easily. Some kinds of behavior hurt others. Some of the things we do – all of us – are bad. And we have a choice about some of those behaviors. I don’t want to minimize the innate or environmental roots of our failings. We do what we do for reasons, after all. But neither do I want to minimize our free will. We do, from time to time, choose to do what we know is wrong. We may not want to call this “sin.” The word is too loaded for many of us; loaded with associations of shame and moralistic, holier-than-thou repression. But there really isn’t a better word that I can think of.

But enough about “sin” in general. Let’s get specific and talk about the Mother of all Sins, Pride --. the deadliest of the deadly sins; the sin that, according to the Catholic church, gives rise to all the others, that will send us straight to eternal damnation.

Pride, as far back as the Bible of the Hebrews, was understood to be the refusal to submit to God. The residents of Babel were punished for building a tower that threatened to reach to Heaven. This was prideful and had to be put down. And, according to Milton, Lucifer, the paragon of angels, wanted to become the equal of God and was hurled from the Heavens, condemned to rule the depths of Hell.

And this cardinal sin, the sin of challenging the Gods, isn’t limited to the Jewish and Christian traditions. Over and over in the stories of the ancient Greeks, the hero is punished for his hubris, his daring to challenge the authority of the gods, for forgetting his place in the hierarchy of the universe. From the Hebrews to the Greeks, to the Catholics, to the Protestants, pride is the sin that requires quick and drastic punishment. Pride is the sin that challenges power, that threatens the status quo.

From our perspective, that doesn’t seem like such a bad thing, though, does it? Well, yes and no. Certainly, if we conceive of God as that harsh father-figure, a kind of holy enforcer of the rules, then the idea of obedience, submission to this imagined supernatural being seems like superstition. It seems childish. But let’s, for the sake of understanding the meaning of Pride, re-imagine this God. Let’s define God as the interdependent web of all being, as the connections among us and the creative energy that arises in those connections. If this is how we think about God, the traditional meaning of Pride makes more sense.

Pride, in this understanding, is not the rebellion against arbitrary authority, and humility is not unreasoning submission or self-abnegation. Pride is the refusal to see our connections to the web of being. It’s the self-delusion that we are independent beings existing in isolation. Untouched, unrelated, set apart by virtue of our uniqueness, our superiority. This is pride, not as self-worth, but as arrogance, as hubris. The kind of pride that is a sin separates us from others and from “God” if you will, or from the totality of Being. Humility, in this understanding, is not demeaning; it is recognition that we do not exist alone at the center of this web of connection.

This kind of pride always has an element of competition, of superiority and domination of others. Think of it this way. Suppose you have gorgeous green eyes. You’re proud of your green eyes. But what if every person in the world had identically gorgeous green eyes? Would you be proud of them then? No, because your eyes would be no different from anyone else’s – not special, not superior, just... average. In order for us to be proud of some attribute, we have to believe that it sets us apart, that the attribute in question makes us special... and better. So is it a sin to be proud of your green eyes? Maybe it’s a little silly, but if it’s a sin at all, it’s certainly not a big one.

But what if the attribute in question is the color of your skin, your religion, or nationality? Is it wrong to be proud of being an American, or of being a Unitarian

Universalist? Of being descended from someone famous? How about being proud of being an African-American, or of being gay? These are also characteristics that make you, not unique, but that emphasize specialness.

Well, if the distinctive trait is not of your doing, if you can't take credit for it, does it make sense? It depends. "White Pride" is abhorrent to us, but "Gay Pride" or "Black Pride" is not. Why is that? I think it's because we've gotten into a whole other kind of pride here. This is the kind of pride that refuses to be belittled, or dominated, or dehumanized. This is the kind of pride that says, "No, I am not less than you." This is pride as self-defense. This is not the pride of the dominant majority, but the pride of the oppressed who refuse to participate in their own oppression by internalizing the demeaning message.

This pride is not arrogance, but self-esteem, or self-worth.

Self-esteem may, on occasion, be exaggerated or unearned. We want to raise children who respect themselves as well as others. Who take pride in their achievements. Who believe in their basic goodness and worth. But critics of the self-esteem movement warn us of over-praising our children. If we tell our children that every scribble or half-hearted exercise is marvelous, how will they learn to value their best work over work that is careless? Will they grow up believing that every half-baked thing they do deserves admiration? In that case, they will have moved beyond pride into arrogance. .

The pride of the in-group, of the powerful, is this kind of arrogance. It's certainly common enough. We see no sin in being proud of country or religion. But maybe we should. We can feel love for our country. We can feel affection for our Norwegian or Russian or Italian heritage and traditions. But if we feel superior because we are American, or Unitarian Universalist, we might rethink the implications. Is it because Americans, or UUs are better? Does this pride in a characteristic that places us among the privileged allow us to forget our larger loyalties?

National pride, for example, is hard to resist when our country does something worth celebrating, when we rise to our founding principles. But most of us did nothing to become Americans. It was the luck of the draw, the luck of birth. We can't take credit for it. What's more, it weakens our conscious connections to the rest of the human family, to the interdependent web, to the Holy.

In its extreme form, this kind of nationalistic pride becomes a threat to the world. A people that believes they are ordained by God to play a special part in history can convince themselves that the ordinary rules don't apply to them. Leaders can convince themselves of the same thing. We see it all the time: leaders who believe they are above the law because they have been blessed with a vision, a superior view of history and of their personal destinies. These leaders and, sometimes, the people they lead, may believe they are the center of the web of connection to the rest of the world, that the community of earth exists to serve their purposes rather than the other way around.

This is essentially the same mistake that any anti-social individual makes. The bully on the playground, the genius at manipulation, the Wall Street swindler, the athlete who abuses women, the leader who violates a people's civil rights, have all lost sight of their place in the web of life. In more traditional religious language, they have committed the sin of Pride.

And what of the rest of us, who are not in a position of power? Our erroneous pride may have less drastic effects on others, but we would still do well to monitor this all-too-human tendency to see ourselves as the center of the Web. We, too, are prone to arrogance: the dismissal of others as ignorant or naïve, the belief that we have a corner on wisdom; the illusion that we control others and the spiteful behavior we sometimes indulge in when our plans for those other people are stymied; the unexamined assumption that the world is here to serve us, rather than the other way around. Few of us are innocent of sometimes making these mistakes. We may not call this kind of natural egotism "pride" but that's what it is.

Unitarian Universalism offers us a key to understanding this human tendency. Take a look at the principles stenciled on our wall here – at the first principle and at the seventh. We believe that every person has inherent dignity and worth. We take this further. We believe that every person is unique. We glorify the self. As we should. We are each irreplaceable. We are each endowed with a unique and beautifully complex set of traits and a unique understanding of the world. We each bring special gifts to the world. The world would not be the same without us. This is all undeniable.

And we are also, each one of us, bound to everything else in a mutual network of care and responsibility. We are each a unique strand in that interdependent web of life. Again, the world would not be the same without us. But the world would not end without us; the web would not break. But it would be different.

We live in this tension between our first and seventh principles. Not just UUs, but all of us, seek to be of value and importance. Do we derive this worth from our individuality? Or from our connections to others and to the planet? We all want to be special, to have our uniqueness recognized and valued. And we all want to be held by something larger than ourselves. We want to part of something, to belong, to be needed. To be connected. The lovely thing about our tradition is that it recognizes both truths, and what's more, it affirms that one cannot exist without the other.

Our value as individuals – our dignity and worth – our pride of self – depends on the fact that we are also more than individual selves. It depends on our connections. We don't exist as separate selves and our worth exists only in relation to others.

Humility arises from our understanding that we cannot exist alone, that we need one another and need the web of life to survive. True humility is not the phony denial of self and it is not shame. Humility cannot be forced or enforced. It doesn't develop out of rejection or pain. True humility is the counterbalance to pride. It keeps the self in check but it does not deny the value of the self. It comes out of our consciousness that we may

be unique, but we are not alone. We may be wonders, but so is everyone and everything else.

We are not interchangeable. We do not exist to be used by anyone. Each one of us is, indeed, somebody, with inalienable rights and worth. But so is everyone else. That knowledge allows pride and humility to live together in us. One without the other is toxic – bad for ourselves and for others.

Alexander Pope, the Catholic poet and satirist writing three hundred years ago, said it as well as it can be said in the reading with which we began. We are “the glory, jest, and riddle of the world.” Humans are a riddle, a conundrum. Ours is a perplexed and perplexing existence, endowed as we are among all creatures with a sense of self and the need to understand what that means. We believe in our human worth and are rightfully proud of the selves we craft, day by day, experience by experience. We are right to rebel against a religious tradition that insists that we are nothing.

And we are wrong when this pride tells us that we are better; that we play by a different set of rules, that others are less valuable than we. The conviction, that seems to be hard-wired into our brains, that we, and none other, are the center of the universe, the natural perception that we form the center of the web, is not so different from the old teachings about hubris. If God is that web, that system of connections that makes up reality, the ancient warnings against rebelling against God, against the sin of Pride, take on a new meaning to us. Like Lucifer, if we defy the Holy by refusing to acknowledge our place in the web of life, we will be hurled from the Heavens, from a world at peace, from a healthy planet.

Is Pride a healthy and self-affirming rejection of a psychologically and spiritually harmful doctrine? Is it self-worth? Yes. Is Pride harmful, wrong, and foolish when it veers into arrogance, into hubris? Also yes. We seek to be independent individuals whose choices are not controlled by others. But we must not forget that our individual destinies are never lived out apart from our common destiny -- as people linked in love and need to friends and family, to communities, to the human family, and to the earth.

We must not tell ourselves that perfection is possible, that we can ever know everything, or that we alone can save the world, or save anyone except ourselves. We know better. And we must not tell ourselves that we cannot be better than we are, know and understand more than we do, that we cannot do our little part to save the world, beginning with ourselves. It's really not about us. And it's all about us.

Created half to rise, and half to fall;
Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;
Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurl'd:
The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!*

* Pope, Alexander. “An Essay on Man: Epistle II”