

Words with Baggage: Unpacking “Sin”

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I distinctly remember the time I stole two packets of Oreos from a convenience store, though I could not tell you my exact age other than that I was a teenager. This was in New York’s East Village and it wasn’t a chain store, it was a locally owned store. While the clerk wasn’t looking, I swiped the Oreos and ran out of the store. Panting, I stopped at the corner to wait for the light to change, and was surprised to feel a heavy hand on my shoulder. I looked up and it was the clerk, with an odd expression of anger mixed with sadness. He said nothing, simply put out his hand and I shamefully returned the Oreos and started crying. He said “Don’t do that again,” turned, and walked back into his store.

Most of you know that I like to start sermons with stories, but you might reasonably wonder why that story in particular. It’s very unflattering, to say the least. It might seem humiliating for someone to tell such a story about themselves. But I think it might just be the perfect story to introduce today’s word with baggage in need of unpacking, which is sin.

It’s very difficult to know where to start when trying to think about the word “sin” from a Unitarian Universalist perspective. For so many people the word has not merely functioned as a word but rather as a weapon that causes psychological, spiritual, and even physical harm. If I had a nickel for every kid in this country who injured or killed himself or herself or who spiraled passively into self-destructive behaviors because the word “sin” was used to condemn that person’s very being, I’d be exceedingly rich and even more depressed. The word “sin” has been used, and is still used, in such unconscionable ways that cause fear and pain and crush spirits that you may wonder why we are talking about it at all. So, I guess that’s a good place to start.

We’re talking about sin for the same reason that we sometimes talk about hell. We deny the existence of hell after death, but we see plenty of evidence of hell on earth and we can’t do anything about it if we don’t talk about it. One thing we are learning from the intense discussions around racism and police violence these days is that we can’t make social change if we are not willing to be uncomfortable. So today I invite us to be uncomfortable and, nonetheless, to take seriously the idea that “sin” might just be a redeemable and even useful word.

I find it quite interesting that many Unitarian Universalists, for all their rejection of the word “sin”, are willing to acknowledge that the world is an imperfect and even heavily damaged place. Our social justice work starts with the acknowledgement that social injustice can be found throughout society and across the globe. Yet we don’t think to use the word “sin” to describe large-scale social problems. And most of us, most of the time, can tolerate acknowledging our own imperfections but would not be caught dead using the word “sin” to describe this aspect of ourselves. So today we are going to see whether a rather intensive engagement with the word can detoxify it even just a little bit. And if not, we’ll dust ourselves off and go on.

Here’s what you can expect today: I’ll propose three ways to think about sin at the individual level then turn to what we might call sociological or social sin and see whether a larger-scale version of the same three ways to think about sin makes sense.

Let's start with the idea that brought us the word in the first place: sin is imperfection, the inability to escape some failure, in short being human. The word sin, as some of you may know, derives from a Greek term, hamartia, that means "missing the mark" as an archer fails to draw the arrow and shoot perfectly every time. If we accept the idea that the capacity to do good and the capacity to do evil runs through each human heart, as Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote, then sometimes we will do good and sometimes we will not do the good we know we should do. Our chalice lighting today speaks to this reality: we ask that the chalice light inspire us to use our powers to heal and not to harm, to help and not to hinder, to bless and not to curse, to serve the Spirit of Freedom. That we can ask for this means we know that we are perfectly capable of using our powers to harm, to hinder, to curse, and to serve the Spirit of Fear rather than the Spirit of Freedom.

There is no permanent cure for sin as imperfection. We will always be imperfect. In this sense, sin is inherent in being a human being, not because of any "Garden of Eden" stories but because we must always struggle to make the better decision and we won't always make it. I could have paid for those Oreos all those years ago. Oreos were fifty cents a packet back then and I imagine I had a dollar on me. But I made a bad decision. I missed the mark. I acted out of my less than best capacity. I'm perfectly comfortable calling that a sinful act in the most descriptive sense of the word.

A second important way to think about sin is as isolation or separation – from our own best selves, from each other, from the Spirit of Life that we invite to come to us, from society, from the planet. There's a long tradition of thinking this way about sin in Christianity, where it mostly means human beings choosing to separate themselves from God. That particular imagery doesn't work for me, but it is worth noting that classic Universalism started with this way of thinking about sin. The radicalism of classic Universalism came in its claim that while we kept running away from God, God kept chasing after us and eventually would draw all of us into God's very self. Perhaps you've heard the Universalist idea that God's work would not be complete until the last sinner was dragged into heaven kicking and screaming.

Now, again, this is not how I think about sin when I think about sin as separation. But I do think of sin as a denial of the Seventh Principle, respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. Some Unitarian Universalists who don't believe in a personal God still see the interdependent web of all existence as somehow holy. And I would be the first to raise my hand and admit that I am frequently guilty of sinning against the interdependent web of all existence, of acting as though I am the whole world and not merely part of something much larger, of failing to respect human others and animal others and plant others and the whole planet.

You might say, Amanda, don't be too hard on yourself. We all struggle with that because we live in a society that doesn't affirm the Seventh Principle. And yes, I'll get to that in just a few minutes. We absolutely do live in a society that makes it harder for us to see ourselves as part of the interdependent web. But we also all get to make choices. Our words of welcome today remind us that we are not isolated beings but connected, in mystery and miracle, to the universe, to this community, and to each other. Each of us is responsible for keeping that reminder alive in

ourselves, for taking actions that connect us to the universe, to this community, to each other, and, I would add, to our best selves.

I stole those Oreos during a time in my life when I felt almost completely isolated from almost everyone. I'll say more about that in a bit but I'm convinced today that I never could have done what I did had I understood that I was part of the same world as the store owner, and he as me. In truth, I was pretty angry in my isolation and didn't really care if I caused someone else harm. I had no idea that I was causing myself the same harm I was causing the store owner.

Another way to think about sin is as a form of idolatry. Some of you may remember that I actually preached a sermon about this topic some years back. At the time I had concluded that idolatry is about putting our trust in anything that cannot actually save us, that cannot fill what singer/songwriter Jackson Browne called the God-sized hunger inside of each of us. I still believe that if we rely on an activity like gambling, a substance like cocaine, an ideology of any sort or even a social institution like religion to try to make our frailties magically go away, we are committing idolatry. Or, as I said back in that sermon years ago, if it can't solve the problems we set before it, it's a false god. There's a reason I stole Oreos in particular rather than a really cool denim jacket or a bottle of Scotch. Well, one thing is that the Oreos were pretty easy to swipe. But more importantly, in those days when I believed the universe was unremittably hostile, I was not tempted to comfort myself with clothing or lose myself in drugs or alcohol. No, my idolatry of choice was food. I somehow genuinely thought food could get me through the day and numb my pain. It didn't work, of course, but that's the nature of idolatry: you keep believing the false god will turn into a real god if you just worship the false god long enough.

Why think about sin as a matter of idolatry? Because if we do, it's pretty clear how we might go about rejecting the sin of idolatry: we can seek out whatever it is that *is* worth our trust, that *can* actually save us, that *can* fill the God-sized hunger in us. Today, I am far less likely to turn to Oreos and far more likely to seek help among friends or Phoebe or pets or music. Today I try to figure out what blesses my life and choose that rather than choosing something that turns out to be a curse even if I am tempted to see it as a blessing. I'm certainly not perfect at it – see Part 1 above – but I am quite confident that if I was back on Bleecker Street in the East Village today and I saw that store I would not steal anything from it. I don't need to.

Now so far, we've talked about human imperfection, human isolation, and human idolatry in a purely individualistic way, and there is some value to acknowledging that we are individuals who make individual choices. You can support me in my attempts to feed my best self but only I can actually be my best self. That said, we would be missing a huge part of the story if we only considered sin as a matter of individual failings or frailties. In fact, no less a theologian than Reinhold Niebuhr wrote a book decades ago called *Moral Man, Immoral Society*. More recently, Pope Francis claimed that "inequality is the root of social evil." And naming and acknowledging systemic or sociological or institutional or corporate sin is a necessary part of building a land where we bind up the broken, where justice rolls down like waters and peace like an ever-flowing stream. We can't fix what we don't understand. And I think our understanding of the world's problems is enriched by considering the sin in them, specifically the social version of imperfection, isolation, and idolatry. We'll take each of these in turn.

First, there's social imperfection, the idea that societies or social groups are no more capable than individuals of acting perfectly all the time. A particularly important sociological type of imperfection is what one sociologist calls "the path of least resistance." This idea refers to the fact that our lives are difficult and distracting enough that we will always find it easier to go with the flow and will in fact do so unless we struggle awfully hard against it. Now, going with the flow is great when the flow is toward justice and wholeness and well-being for everyone, but that's rarely if ever the case. So, when we just get through our days, when we take the easy way, when we flow down the river of the taken-for-granted we just reinforce everything that's already wrong with society. It may sound weird to refer to this as participating in sin but in a very real sense, that's what we're doing. And it's almost impossible to resist.

But you might wonder, what's wrong with going with the flow? Life is hard enough, why should we be trying to resist the reality we encounter? And this is where we come to the second and third forms of social sin, social separation and social idolatry.

Why do police officers shoot Black men so often? Why is gay-bashing the second largest type of hate crime? Why do wealthy politicians mock the poor and cut their benefits, often pushing them into hunger and hardship? Why are so many women raped? Why do we assume that people of color at elite colleges are there because of affirmative action? Why can someone be fired just for being a lesbian in 31 states? Why are female professors more likely to get bad course evaluations than male professors? Why, in 2014, do people insult Obama as though he were subhuman? Why do we have so much anti-Muslim and anti-Sikh violence in a society that is supposed to be religiously pluralistic? How did "thug" come to be the new N-word?

The questions could go on, but one important answer is the sin of social separation. Here, we are not talking about an isolated individual stealing two packets of Oreos. We are talking about prejudice and discrimination, verbal and sexual and physical violence, suspicion, ill-wishes, language that values one group over another, institutional practices that segregate entire populations and then punish them for not breaking through the segregation. These are matters of isolation, even when the two groups interact with each other regularly, like men and women. It's not possible to truly know another person in all their complexity, as an individual and a part of humanity and a member of a particular social group, and then call them a dehumanizing name and beat them up. It's not possible to hear someone's story and then decide that they are less valuable than someone else because they are female or gay or Black or poor. But as a society, and more importantly, as members of groups with social power, we have failed to truly know each other in all our complexity and to listen respectfully to each other's stories and have thus allowed isolation and its ills to remain in place.

We may not call these kinds of social patterns sins. But cutting some people off from full humanity is a sin against humanity in general and against members of the offended-against social group in particular. It keeps devalued people from flourishing, buries them in fear and resentment, and may over time convince them that they really are inferior, which can lead in turn to self-destructive behavior. It may in fact lead them to engage in individual-level sins to a greater extent than otherwise would have happened. That bad-choice, socially-isolated, food worshipping Oreo stealing I did? One important reason I felt so isolated and had such a hard time making a good choice and felt a need to numb out with food was because I was struggling

mightily with homophobia, both the homophobia of those around me and internalized homophobia. Social sin fed individual sin. The interconnected web is just as interconnected in matters of harm as it is in matters of good.

The idea that social inequality and social separation are two sides of the same coin probably would make sense to most people, but what on earth could social idolatry mean? Here's a proposal: we can think of social idolatry as what happens when a social group or society puts its faith in something that can't deliver. Sooner or later, this is highly likely to lead to some kind of harm to one or more people. For example, we are pretty good at worshipping the almighty dollar, which means we kowtow to the rich and scorn the poor as losers. Read enough about how poor people suffer physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually, and it becomes clear that our adoration of Mammon is a sin. We also live in a society that sure seems to bow down to violence as a cure-all, and we see the consequences in the actual violence that real people carry out and from which real people suffer. Don't feel enough like a real man? Shoot up a school. Beat up someone who looks gay. Rape a woman. Do I even need to continue?

So. This has been a bit overwhelming, hasn't it? The good news is that we can, individually and collectively, resist and push back against the various kinds of sin that I've been discussing. When it comes to our individual sins of imperfection, we can forgive ourselves and each other and begin again in love. We can reach out from our isolation, seek out each other, ask for help, and know that we should offer our support to others just as they offer it to us. And we can pursue a wide variety of spiritual practices to help us resist the temptation of idolatry. We can learn how to trust what is trustworthy and reject what is not. We can help each other do this as well. How to do so would be another sermon, or perhaps a lifetime of work, but at least it's worthy and meaningful work.

How can we respond to social sin? Not alone, that's for sure. If we accept the reality that there are larger social patterns and institutions around us, we will do better gathering in collectives to deal with them. Even a liberal religious community like this one can do something, let alone larger social change movements of recent years such as Occupy and #BlackLivesMatter. Even the conversations we have with others can be part of the solution. If we are willing to understand that social problems are moral problems, we will have more passion for addressing them and perhaps more imagination as well.

Finally, with Christmas just a few days away, I would be remiss not to deal with the matter of Jesus and sin. And to reward you with your patience thus far, I'd like to start with a rather sweet story that I don't believe I've shared here. And if I have, hey, fading memory is not a sin.

Probably ten years ago or so, Phoebe and I were visiting my mother in New York on Christmas Day. Phoebe wanted to experience a "Jewish Christmas", meaning to do what New York City Jews do on Christmas since we are usually not in church or unwrapping Christmas presents. A Jewish Christmas generally consists of, at minimum, a movie followed by Chinese food eaten in a Chinese restaurant; take-out or delivery doesn't really count. I don't remember what movie we saw but we went to a Chinese restaurant that I loved, an extremely popular dim sum restaurant that was completely jammed. I was surprised, then, as we sat down, to see that the waiters were roping off and decorating about half of the restaurant. A waiter came over and I asked him what

was going on across the room. He gestured at the area and said “a birthday party.” Thinking, how sweet, I asked who the birthday party was for. He stared at me as though as was an idiot, said “Jesus,” and wandered away.

So, Jesus. There’s a lot about the Jesus story that cannot be factually true even if the human being we called Jesus actually lived. For example, that business about shepherds watching their flocks at night? That would put Yeshua ben Miriam’s birth in March or April, not December. But more importantly, the idea that Jesus came to save humanity from its sin is a post-Jesus addition to Christianity, if a fairly early one. There’s no solid biblical scholarship suggesting that Yeshua ben Miriam, who was a good Jew, would believe something so un-Jewish about himself as that he had come to save the world from sin. So whatever else we do or don’t think about the figure or person of Jesus, we should stop thinking that he saw himself as the one to rid the world of sin. Didn’t happen. And that, my friends, leaves it up to all of us. Not to rid the world of sin, which we can’t do completely. But to mitigate the sin that’s here.

It falls to us to strive against our imperfections especially when they cause harm. It falls to us to struggle against our isolation and to resist the many idolatries of our age. And it is our work to first understand and then challenge the ways that imperfection, isolation, and idolatry become social phenomena that damage our lives and well-being. These are not easy tasks but they are our tasks. Once we accept the damage done by imperfection and isolation and idolatry, both individual and social, we understand that we have an opportunity to intervene on behalf of flourishing and against suffering.

My friends, let us be unafraid to reject interpretations of the word “sin” that harm us and let us find in ourselves the willingness to re-examine the word for ourselves to determine whether it might be useful. If it is not useful, let us jettison it, by all means. But if it helps us think more richly and confront wrongs more directly, let us reclaim the word and put it to use. Amen and blessed be.