

You may have noticed that the sermon topic for today changed midweek. I was originally going to preach about “Preparedness” today. But then, last week, my dad was killed in a terrible accident back home in Oregon.

There are some things you’re never prepared for.

In this grief, one of the things I’m most grateful for is that my dad and I had a wonderful visit together last fall. Political differences had led to us talking less and less often over the years. I know many of you have also experienced estrangement from people you love due to those kinds of things.

So last September, when I let my dad know that my marriage had ended and that I was coming out as queer, I was surprised by his immediate support. With no hesitation he said he was happy for me. He asked if he could come visit.

A few weeks later he pulled into my driveway at 7am—he had driven all night. We spent the week sharing meals, hiking, and talking about conventional and unconventional loves. He was the first person to meet my new partner—I had just started dating her then. The two of them hit it off immediately. He fixed things around my house, and improved my home security. We focused only on what brought us together.

Redemption. A person can be redeemed, or a relationship can.

Redemption happens in turning toward the good. It is healing. Restorative.

We often think of it as having to do with sin—“sin and redemption.” When I wrote this sermon eleven years ago, that’s the angle I started with, so let’s revisit that.

There’s an old fashioned definition of sinning as “breaking a rule,” and since we are Unitarian Universalists and don’t believe in strict religious kinds of rules, maybe you don’t believe in sin.

That sounds like breaking the Ten Commandments that God gives the people in the book of Exodus. Do we even know the Ten Commandments? What are they? Let’s see if you know them, UUs.

1. you shall have no other gods before me
2. no idols
3. don’t take God’s name in vain
4. Remember the sabbath day—no one is allowed to work, including slaves, livestock, and aliens—that’s what it says.

5. Honor your father and your mother
6. No murder
7. You shall not commit adultery
8. You shall not steal
9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
10. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; or wife, slave, ox, donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. That's what it says.

Now, the Catholic Church, never to be outdone by God, did us one better and came up with the seven deadly sins, too. Do you know those? What are they?

1. lust
2. gluttony
3. greed
4. sloth
5. wrath
6. envy
7. pride

In Dante Alighiere's classic poem, the *Inferno*, the main character—Dante—descends into the nine circles of hell, four of which bear these deadly sin names. He's creative with the punishments they reap:

There are Francesca and her brother-in-law Paolo, who—in life— were reading a story of Lancelot and King Arthur—those would have been practically hot off the presses back then—when a romantic scene in the story inspired them to kiss, and they began to desire each other. In Dante's *inferno*, they are doomed to be blown about, suspended in the air by hot hurricane winds, for all eternity. That's what lust gets ya. They are only in the second circle of the *inferno* though, which is not so bad compared to what comes later. They are right behind the people in the first circle who were good in life but who were born before Christianity or who were never baptized. Dante has the Greek philosophers there. It's a pretty merciless story.

In the deepest, worst circle of the *inferno* is Judas, who betrayed Jesus. His punishment is to be gnashed for all eternity in the teeth of Lucifer.

I told you it was creative. It's edgy, too. If you think I was picking on the Catholic Church a second ago, hear this: in the eighth circle, just before Judas, the character of Dante runs into Boniface, who was the pope in real life in the year in which the *Inferno* takes place. Dante placed a living pope in the eighth circle of hell. Dante and Boniface did not get along.

But there is one scene that especially stood out to me and that's the one in which Dante encounters Fra Alberigo and Branca Doria, who are, he discovers, still alive but already in hell.

They are still living on the earth, and yet they are already in hell, too because they are living with a great deal of *regret*.

Kind of like the character of Dante himself, who experiences this tour of the inferno by way of a midlife crisis. He awakens from a strange nap, and is led into the inferno by the ghost of the woman he loved all his life, Beatrice, whom he never told how he felt. She died an early death before he could overcome his shyness, and he never got over it. In real life, regret was Dante Alighiere's hell, and it spurred him to write some of the most famous literature on earth.

The kind of hell we can experience while we are still walking the earth is something we recognize in Unitarian Universalism. It is not always linked with sin, but it sure can be, if we re-imagine sin not as merely breaking a rule, but rather, as the writer and minister Forrest Church wrote, "anything that divides us against our better selves or estranges us from our neighbors or severs us from the ground of our being."<sup>1</sup>

We are complicated creatures, human beings. We're animals—sometimes behaving as though it were a dog eat dog world and we were dog-eating dogs.

But we also have this extraordinary love-hungry, meaning-hungry side of ourselves. This side of ourselves will not settle for an unthinking or a mean life or for a life in which we that inner voice—not the one that sounds like an authoritarian figure but the one that sounds like your heart speaking to you.

Where do you go for redemption? Church? I do think you can find it here if this is a place where you are willing to be honest with yourself. I hope church, for you, is that kind of place because there is not one of us who—at some time in our lives— does not need to turn ourselves or some part of our lives around.

Church should be the place where we are most in touch with our humanness, most able to wonder at it and laugh at it and roll our eyes at it and celebrate it and not take ourselves too seriously. In that way, we are supported also in making confessions and midcourse corrections and issuing apologies and forgiving ourselves and others because we do take *life* seriously, because it is a tremendous gift.

The writer and preacher Frederick Buechner<sup>2</sup> says that, "if we come to a church right, we come to it more fully and nakedly ourselves, come with more of our humanness showing, than we are apt to come to most places. We come like Moses."

He is remembering the part of the Hebrew bible—also in the book of Exodus—when Moses is going up the mountain and he sees a burning bush. This is way

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.forrestchurch.com/writings/sermons/another-chance.html>

<sup>2</sup> Pronounced "Beek-ner"

before the Ten Commandments are issued. “Take off your shoes,” God tells him, “You are standing on holy ground.”

Buechner says we are like Moses because we come to holy places “with muck on our shoes—footsore and travel-stained with the dust of our lives upon us, our failures, our deceits, our hypocrisies, because if, unlike Moses, we have never taken anybody’s life, we have again and again withheld from other people, including often even those who are nearest to us, the love that might have made their lives worth living, not to mention our own.”<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes you have to lose your way in order to find yourself. If you can turn around and see your journey through the lens of transformation and possibility, that is the beginning of redemption. And then we move toward acceptance of what has been, forgiveness of ourselves and others, and a decision to make things right going forward.

In the Unitarian Universalist church we believe everyone is redeemable, lovable, worthy, whether you’ve messed up a little bit, or blown it a thousand times.

You are redeemable, lovable, and worthy, even if your children won’t talk to you, or your lover has left you, or you are addicted to something.

Whether you come to church every week, or once a year, or have just stumbled in for the first time this morning, looking for something, maybe you aren’t sure what. Redeemable, lovable, worthy.

Whatever you do, whoever you are: redeemable, lovable, and worthy.

Whether you are tearing up right now, or thinking these are all very obvious things for me to say. Redeemable, lovable, and worthy.

We aren’t told this often enough. Or if we are told, it’s with some kind of catch. Redeemable, if you say the right words about God. Redeemable, if you stop loving people of the same gender or start fitting in a box. Redeemable, if you lose weight or hide wrinkles or etcetera. Redeemable, at a price you cannot afford to pay or can’t pay in good conscience.

But here, you are redeemable and that’s that. There is no catch, just an invitation to accept, forgive, and make amends.

To show up and focus on what brings us together. Which is our humanness. Our lives, which are precious. Which is love.

May it be so.

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<sup>3</sup> From Buechner’s Secrets in the Dark: a life in sermons. Harper: San Francisco, 2006. p 75