

Atonement and Forgiveness

A couple of Sundays ago, for our coffee hour time, some of the younger folk from our Religious Education program provided us with a very delightful and informative experience about the Ethiopian New Year celebration.

Those of you who were here will remember that we walked into the dining room under an arch made of tree branches. But before we could pass through we were each asked by one of the young people if we had settled any differences we may have had with someone in the course of the previous year, or if we were planning to settle them. You had to answer ‘yes’ in order to go under the arch. Since I didn’t see anyone hanging around in the hallway I assume that all the answers were in the affirmative.

I appreciated, as I’m sure you did as well, the time and energy that went in to providing us with this multicultural experience. And I found in it a reminder about how certain common themes find their expression in a wide range of religious traditions. There’s an interesting parallel in the question asked at the Ethiopian New Year celebration, and one of the themes that will be highlighted over the coming eight days in Jewish communities.

Today marks the beginning of the eight day observance of the Jewish New Year, collectively known as the “Days of Awe.” In this year of 2016 this Sunday, October 2nd, corresponds with date of Rosh Hashanah: “Head of the Year.” The Days of Awe conclude with Yom Kippur: “Day of Atonement.”

Atonement in this case means repenting of ones wrongdoings, seeking forgiveness, and to the extent possible, making amends with any who have been harmed by your misdeeds. Atonement essentially means saying you’re sorry, repenting of your misdeeds, and trying to make up for them.

This same principle of atonement also shows up in the 12 Step Recovery process of Alcoholics Anonymous. One step says: “Make a list of persons we have harmed and be willing to make amends to them all.”

When the same theme or principle shows up in a range of religious or quasi-religious settings, like the three I just cited, that suggests a universal chord is being struck. So this notion of atonement—the seeking of some kind of healing, particularly of a rift in a relationship—finds near universal expression. And that’s a good thing. None of us, I daresay, get through this

life without having to come to terms with our occasional human failings and our need to make our amends for them.

When it comes to Christianity, however, especially in some of its more orthodox and doctrinaire forms, this principle of atonement takes a rather odd turn. I'll run with that for a few minutes.

To offer a personal note, when it comes to my own religious and spiritual journey, my uneasiness with the Christian doctrine of atonement was one of several road markers that eventually pointed me to the UU ministry.

So what am I talking about here, anyway? The orthodox Christian doctrine of atonement holds that the primary reason Jesus was on earth was to atone for the sins of humanity by way of his crucifixion and death. The historical reason for Jesus' execution most likely was a political one having to do with the Romans fearing a popular uprising among the Jews, over whose land they ruled. They saw Jesus as a revolutionary figure who needed to be disposed of.

But the First and Second Century Church theologians, St. Paul in particular, gave the reason for Jesus' death a different spin by theologizing it. They held that in dying the excruciating death that he did Jesus was taking upon himself the sins and the very fallen nature of humanity. He was making a sacrifice, an act of atonement, on our behalf so we didn't have to do it; and thereby making us fit and worthy for the good graces and the love of God.

Furthermore, so this doctrine holds, there is nothing we can do on our own to make ourselves worthy. We were born into an inherently fallen state from which only God can deliver us by this act of atonement on the part of his Son—who somehow was also God as well (I'll leave that one be!). By taking our unworthiness upon himself and suffering and dying on our behalf, Jesus has rendered us worthy of the love of God even though we don't really deserve it. That is what the traditional Christian doctrine of the Atonement puts forth.

Esoteric as all that may sound, it is pretty powerful, and pretty emotional, stuff when applied in certain ways. I can tell you from first hand experience that if you're sitting in a pew at a revival meeting, like the ones I attended while growing up, and you're carrying a weight of guilt and misgivings over stuff you know you did wrong; and then you hear that God will forgive you

for all of it if you'll just accept and believe what Jesus has already done for you—well, that will get you off your feet and down to the altar in a hurry. You're still expected to make amends for your misdeeds when it comes to those you've wronged. You're not off the hook there. But you can now do so as one who—thanks to Jesus' act of atonement—has been reconciled to God.

Well, one of the crises of faith I encountered was when I began to think seriously about all this. Thinking seriously can be a dangerous thing; it can also be a liberating thing. My thinking—I was now into my early adulthood—went along these lines: Wait a minute here. Sure, perfect I'm not. Indeed I know I've done things that have been harmful to others—or that have betrayed my own principles and values; things for which I for which I need some forgiveness. And yes I agree as well that there is a fallen or broken side to my nature so that, on occasion, even when I know what is the right and good thing to do I still don't do it. Yes, there are times when I can relate to what St. Paul says in his epistle to the Romans about “The good that I would I cannot do.” Okay, I admit all that.

But still, wait a minute. Granting all I just said, none of that renders me guilty just for showing up in this world—which is what the doctrine of original sin holds. And I see nothing in my misdeeds—as much as I regret them; and nothing in my essential nature—flawed as it is, that would warrant a poor and terribly misunderstood soul to have to die a terrible death on my behalf some 2000 years ago. At some point I realized that those dots no longer connected for me, and my path took a turning point that in time led me to this faith tradition of Unitarian Universalism and to its ministry.

It was when I later found my way into the UU neighborhood that I discovered that one of the early architects of our faith went through a similar struggle of mind and spirit as mine. That was comforting to learn. Clear back in 1803 or thereabouts the Rev. Hosea Ballou, who had moved from the Baptist ministry to the Universalist ministry, wrote what is now regarded as one of the founding documents of American Universalism, which later evolved into today's Unitarian Universalism.

The title of Rev. Ballou's document is *A Treatise on Atonement*. Ballou was originally a New Hampshire Baptist country preacher. He was largely self-educated. His formal education went to the third grade. He switched his

affiliation from Baptist to Universalist just as Universalism was getting a toe-hold in this country.

Rev. Ballou's Atonement essay is long and rather cumbersome, written as it is in early 19th century language. So, the Cliff Notes version of *Treatise on Atonement* goes something like this: Jesus' mission on earth was, in fact, to deliver (or save) us from our more fallen selves, but not by way of his death. Instead it is the example of his life and the content of his teachings that can call and guide us from our sometimes broken selves to a more wholistic, restored, and reconciled-to-God state of living. Jesus lived to call us to our better selves rather than dying to save us from our fallen selves, so said Rev. Ballou.

It was this precept that served as the basis for Universalist Christianity, and made Christianity palatable for those for whom the more orthodox interpretation of atonement was a stumbling block.

While Universalism, and later Unitarian Universalism, have expanded out beyond their liberal Christian base, it has still maintained the idea that over the ages there have been great teachers of humanity, great bearers of wisdom, who have also played the role in human history that Ballou saw Jesus playing.

Today, in our UU Statement of Purpose and Principles we cite as one of the Sources of our Faith, "Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love." This is really an expanded and universalized statement of the role Ballou ascribed to Jesus in his *Treatise on Atonement*. Today we honor the "words and deeds of prophetic women and men" but without tying it to any one individual—Jesus or otherwise. But in offering the view of Jesus that he did, and dropping the part about him dying for the sins of humanity, Ballou helped pave the way for this later expanded version we now have.

But what about the broader idea of atonement itself? The care one needs to exercise in casting off a particular piece of doctrine is to not throw the proverbial baby out with the bath water. The need for atonement, for making amends, for both seeking out and offering forgiveness, and for seeking to live a more reconciled and at-peace-with-oneself life—these are, as I stated earlier, still very real and universal human needs.

To briefly return to Yom Kippur, this observance holds that before you settle up with God when it come to your shortcomings, you are first supposed to settle up any debt of wrongdoing you've incurred with any of your fellow human beings. In other words, you make amends with your fellow human beings—you seek their forgiveness in whatever ways you can; and then Yahweh is ready to settle up with you and offer Divine Forgiveness.

While my personal theology does not allow for the idea of a Supreme Being who can dispense Divine Forgiveness, I still like the Yom Kippur, or Day of Atonement, process. You have to get right with your fellow human beings whom you may have wronged in some way, so you can then be right with yourself, with Life Itself, with the Universe—however you may wish to express it. We all need to do this kind of atoning from time to time, Jewish or not; and nobody has to die a horribly bloody death with this type of approach.

Moving along now, to speak about guilt and atonement and forgiveness also calls for a few thoughts about the nature of apologies. [In sermon construction, I am now at the point of what is called a Major Transition on the Original Theme--just so you know. This is why I say: “Moving along now.”] The idea of atonement is of necessity linked to that of forgiveness and apologies.

I put apologies into two categories, and keep it simple by calling them Category One and Category Two:

A Category One apology is one offered primarily for the sake of covering ones behind. You see then in the political arena quite frequently. A public figure, an office holder, or an aspirant for an office will make some kind of gaffe or slur or say something that belittles another person or group of persons. These kinds of apologies often begin with the word “If.” Fair or not whenever I hear an ostensible apology offered that begins with an “if” my red flag goes right up. “If my unfortunate choice of words brought offense to some....” Or, “If my well intentioned actions caused pain for some...”

All that nifty little construct does is take the responsibility off the person supposedly offering the apology, and actually places the onus of being offended or hurt on the very person or persons to whom the apology is supposedly being extended. I'll leave a little wriggle room here but with

most apologies that begin with an “if,” there is very little, if any, taking of responsibility for one’s actions.

Then there’s the Category Two apology, which is one that really does seek forgiveness and one that is offered in the spirit of atoning for a wrong committed. A Category Two apology is one that is offered when we know that we have betrayed some of the very purposes and actions we are attempting to live by, or from the knowledge that we’ve done harm or brought a rupture to a relationship we value. This is usually a personal relationship; or it could be a larger relationship we feel we have with some aspect of humanity, with Life Itself, or with that which we sense is greater than ourselves.

Category Two apologies and subsequent acts of atonements are offered for the sake of restoring a relationship—with others or even with oneself. But seeking forgiveness and offering amends or atonements does not accomplish that on its own as it only addresses one side of the broken relationship or injury. I may need to offer an apology, and try to make good on an injury caused, in order to be in a right relationship with myself. The person on the other side –from whom I’m seeking forgiveness—may or may not be in a position to accept it in a way that will bring about true reconciliation. In that case one can only do what one feels the need to do and then let the process take its course.

I have one more angle to offer on forgiveness before I finish up for today. There is a kind of forgiveness that needs to be offered for the sake of the forgiver much more so than for the “forgivee”, as it were. One of the better examples I’m aware of when it comes to this type of forgiveness goes back to the mid-1980s and involves a priest named Father Lawrence Jenco. Father Jenco was working for Catholic Relief Services in Beirut at a terribly troubled time when he was captured, along with several others, and held hostage for 564 days by one of the radical Shiite extremist groups who were operating there at that time.

After his release he was interviewed and spoke about why, even though he could never forget the inhumane ways he’d been treated, he needed to forgive his captors. After noting some of the ongoing effects of the physical pain that was inflicted upon him, he went on to say, “There are all kinds of pain we enter into in our lives. But I don’t want to lug my own pain on so that it becomes the focal point of my history.”

Think on that line: "I don't want to lug my own pain on so that it becomes the focal point of my history." Father Jenco was saying that he came to a point, after his release, and after—I would imagine—having to work through a great deal of anger, if not hatred, for his captors, where he had to forgive them in order to free himself of the psychic pain he was carrying from his days in captivity. He died of cancer in 1996, about a decade after his release.

Rev. Jenco, in time, realized that he couldn't carry around the burden of anger and hatred for what had been done to him for 564 days for the rest of his life. He could not allow his life to be defined by that anger. Whether his one-time captors ever felt the need for his forgiveness, whether they even cared to accept it or not, was not, for him, the primary issue. Father Jenco did what he needed to do in order to live out a reasonably peaceful life for the remainder of the life that he had.

I'll close with this: Religious communities, whatever their orientation and however liberal or conservative they may be, are also human communities. As such they contain within them the best that is in men, women, and children; as well as our human foibles, shortcomings, and failings. These are the lives we bring to the religious communities to which we belong, as we seek greater wholeness, seek greater levels of relationship, and sometimes seek the forgiveness and the reconciliation we need to get to those levels.

We live our lives by coming into, and then occasionally falling out of, right relationships with ourselves, with others, with Life, and with that which transcends our lives. We live our lives by coming into, and then on occasion having to be re-called back into the circle of life and love itself. Let us each do our best to keep that circle whole in the lives we continually create.

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