

“A Way to Be Good Again”

3/16/14, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Sterling

Rev. Anya Sammler-Michael

Reading – “Redemption Experiences” from the Rev. Forrest Church

Rev. Anya: Etched in my soul, and by far the most haunting memory of my childhood, is a fantasy of death. I date it to sometime after my family moved to Washington, D.C., when I was eight years old. I can't remember how often I succumbed to this fantasy, but I do recall what prompted it (a brutal argument with my mother), the time of day when these battles took place (right before bed), and the thing that triggered them (always a lie). When my mother caught me lying, not content to leave bad enough alone, I would fabricate more lies to cover up the first one. What finally piqued her anger into fury - my transparent mendacity or my panic-driven tears... I spun out of control, my mother's anger intensifying until it reached a fevered pitch. Invariably, the battle ended with me in total humiliation and banished to my room.

Albert, Worship Associate: More vivid in my memory than the struggle itself is its aftermath. After sobbing uncontrollably for a few minutes, I would launch my mind into a sea of self-pity. Into this wine-red sea sailed my fantasy of death.

Rev. Anya: Running away from home, I crawl out of my bedroom window into the snowy night. Wearing only my pajamas, I wander in the bitter cold through the woods between our house and the elementary school. I fall into a snowdrift. Never have I felt so alone. And then I die. The snow stops and morning dawns. A schoolmate finds me lifeless in the snow, bursts into tears, and rushes off to tell my parents. "Come quickly. Forrest is dead." My parents hadn't missed me. They didn't even notice I had run away. Hastening to my side and falling to their knees to embrace my body, they beg me to awaken. My father becomes distant. My mother moans in disbelief. Through tears of self-recrimination and overcome by grief, she pities me with all her heart.

Albert: At this moment in my imagined melodrama, the floodgate opens once again, my self-pity magnified by the specter of me dead, my mother's lamentations almost too poignant to bear. But not quite, for with this I rewind my fantasy and play it back again, embellishing it yet further with loving detail: ripped pajamas, my beloved sock monkey frozen to my breast, my mother's raven hair blowing in the wind, the dark sun, the snow on my forehead.

Rev. Anya: And then, interrupting my fantasy, the bedroom door opened.

Albert: A crack of light pierced the darkness, and in slipped my mother. Sitting down on the bed, she leaned over and hugged me, saying she was sorry, confessing how very much she loved me.

Rev. Anya: We cried together. She cradled me in her arms, my tears subsiding. An inexpressible calm settled over me. I shut my eyes.

Albert: My mother rocked me gently until I drifted off to sleep. When I awakened in the morning, my fantasy of death was but a distant dream.

Musical Anthem- #1037 “We Begin Again in Love”

UUCS Choir with the Congregation

Sermon – “A Way to be Good Again”

“I don’t know if I can ever trust you again.”

Those are the words I remember. I was 13 or 14. I was testing my limits. Like Forrest Church, I had lied and then lied again. My mother shared - “I don’t know if I can ever trust you again,” and I crumbled inside. You might hear the words as cruel. They hurt for certain, but I know now, and I knew then, that I had been cruel to my mother. And her words weren’t solely punishing words.

Just as the door opened to Forrest Churches room, just a crack, and then his mother came in... my mother had left the door open, just a crack, for my redemption. She said “I don’t know if...” There was the “if.” “*If*” I did what was necessary, “*If*” I proved myself, “*If*” I cared enough to repair what was broken, I could be trusted again, I could be forgiven, I could be *good again*.

The “*if*” is always there. Human brokenness is never final. The if might be a mother’s words, or a garden plot in San Quintin. (*Note: San Quintin reference is from the Time for All Ages.*)

Forrest Church’s waking nightmare fits the narrative of a well known... a well *worn* tale of sin and redemption. He has broken his contract with his mother and in his childhood drama, his mother has assumed the role of the Judeo-Christian God. She has punished him for his wrong, and Church experiences this punishment as exile - exile from love. His mother then returns, and through an act of love, forgives.

I am not speaking about original sin - a stain supposedly born into our souls, but I dare allow that we are all sinners. Its a heavy word and for those of us who were punished by faith leaders, by power holders in churches or congregations - punished for “sins” that were most assuredly *not* sins - punished for being wholly ourselve ... for loving people of the same gender, for yearning as a woman to be a priest, for

asking honest questions and raising honest doubts... for us, the word “sin” may prompt a painful sting - an aching memory of iniquity.

The word “sin” can be used as a bludgeon by the powerful, against those they wish to control. It can be used to maintain order or uphold a status quo. But the idea of “sin” can also be private - an internal recognition, perhaps an internal revelation - a realization that some connection, some contract has been broken, that some relationship has been damaged. No one need tell you that you have sinned. Sin is what we may recognize in ourselves, when something sacred has been lost. We may not use the word. The word might be wrong for us, but the idea is that something sacred has been lost.

Forrest church continues in his reflection to tell about his adult alcoholism - how for years he hid himself from his own feelings by clouding his heart with drink. He asks: “Why would we run away from anything we seek: success, companionship, community, health, freedom, responsibility, even love? What would drive us to subvert our most cherished aspirations?” Then he answers: “when fear (and I add, or shame, or self loathing) spurs our flight we are running away, not from another, but from ourselves... Turning to the comforts of the bottle was for me, itself - at least in part - a fear-driven attempt to escape pain.”

Sin is in essence a running away from ourselves, from our wholeness. As a theist I can add that sin is also a running away from god, a god that for me is experienced in relationship - relationship with self, with others, with this awe inspiring life. Sin is the running away from the opportunity of love in all it's forms - love of self, love of our wholeness, and perhaps love of the holy - however you describe the holy.

Church, as a child in his waking nightmare ran away to die in the snow. He felt in his sin, his lie - the experience of separation, disconnection from the bonds of love. He felt that he was no longer "good" - not "good" in a trivial way, but in a deeply felt way - that he was no longer worthy of love. Church as an adult alcoholic, again struggled against fear, to reconnect with love, with the saving power of love.

He shares: "As things turned out for me, pride didn't lead to a fall; it simply took slow possession of my soul. Fortunately, when I awoke one day to discover that God (or you might say love) was nowhere in my life, I knew enough to recognize that alcohol (though symptomatic of more general self-absorption) was part of the reason... Love gradually turned me (away) from the bottle, which had become a kind of mistress."

I'd like to take a step away from the theistic language to bring, I hope, us all on board. Love is saving whether you understand a god or not.

When people of the Jewish faith speak about redemption they speak about leaving the world a better place than we found it, they speak about *tikkun olum* - rebuilding what has been broken. The quote on your orders of service is from the Jewish Nobel Prize winner, Ellie Weisel - “redemption begins where indifference ends.”

If I was indifferent to that “if” that my mother offered. If I heard her say “I don’t know *if* I can ever trust you again,” and rather than fear, and shame, I felt indifference... love would have dissolved, and left me, and left our relationship. Instead I was charged - determined to rebuild what was broken, (to rebuild our broken relationship,) to make love a home - in my heart, and especially to rebuild a trusting place in the space we could inhabit together.

Whether you understand love as a force that is larger than human holdings or simply a human reality, you might be able to understand sin as the product of indifference to love... what happens when we are indifferent to love's salvific force.

Redemption begins where indifference to love ends - the love that rebuilds your soul, that rebuilds the world, that rebuilds your relationship to another - that is the love that dissolves indifference.

We *can* be good again - not good in the sense of material gain, (how others may perceive our lives) but good as a felt sense of engagement - a participation in life and love...

A story is told in Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashima-Brock's book "Proverbs of Ashes" of a man Lyle and his sister Maxine. Lyle returned from World War II, like a ghost. He did not seem to recognize anyone, and his family did not know how to respond. Maxine decided to keep her brother company - to speak to him, until she didn't have any more words, then to simply sit by him, quietly doing her chores. This continued for months, then one night Lyle's eyes began to fill with tears. Maxine noticed and embraced her brother, and he began to sob, then shake, then talk - about the noise, the cold, the smoke, the death, the mass graves.

A traumatized human being was able to return to life again because another human being gave him her presence - through his silent grief and then through his telling - through the horror - she gave her presence, without turning away.

This is how we offer another human redemption. It is also how we offer it to ourselves... by not turning away from our wholeness (the easy parts and the challenging,) by being present, through the fear, the shame, and

the horror - by owning our indifference to love, our sin, and by opening again, to love's gracious presence.

As Unitarian Universalists we know that all of us are worthy of love. I know that, and I pray that I live that. Universalism is historically the affirmation that a loving god wouldn't damn anyone to hell. And Universalism is presently, here in this congregation, the affirmation of an unbounded love that rejects no soul - a love that we must all uphold, as we *are* the congregation - the lived representation of our principles, our affirmations.

We will falter, we will stumble, we will err... I dare say again, we will sin (we will be indifferent to the gift of love.) I pray you will offer, not rejection of the sinner, but redemption - presence, an invitation to be good again. I pray you will offer this to others and... perhaps most pressingly, to yourself. You are worthy of love, my dear ones. You are.

Love does not dissolve when we falter. It doesn't dissolve when we are arrogant, when we are quarrelsome, when we lie, when we reject a friend for fear that they will reject us, when we drown our hearts in drink, when we break a promise, when we feel the ache of shame. The "if" is always there - the path back to love is always there. Not every person we meet will mirror that possibility. Still, the possibility is always there. Sometimes we need to do the work alone, sometimes we

need to reach out to the holy as we understand the holy - asking of the universe - the strength to be whole again. Sometimes we need to find someone who will be present to us, to our fullness. Sometimes we need to confess - to tell our full truth to someone - to a minister, a psychiatrist, even to one we have harmed... or perhaps, and again, most pressingly, sometimes we need to tell our full truth to ourselves.

Redemption does not live in the clouds. Nor is it the possession of one creed bound faith community. Redemption is bigger than that - it belongs alone, to love.

We forgive ourselves and each other, and begin again in love.

You are worthy of love.

Amen.