

“Though You’ve Broken Your Vows a Thousand Times”

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

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This past week, our Jewish siblings ended their commemoration of the High Holy Days - the ten days beginning with Rosh Hashanah - with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

The ten days of *teshuvah* are a time of return - returning to oneself and to the promises one has made to God, to one self, and to others.

One important aspect of these ten days is the act of seeking forgiveness, checking in with oneself to identify ways that you might have wronged or harmed others and to ask forgiveness.

It may have been that you said something rather unkind to a friend. Or, maybe you willfully neglected to visit with an ailing family member who you were angry with for whatever reason. Or, you were dishonest with someone you love because you were afraid of hurting their feelings.

In this time of atonement, whatever injuries one might have caused, however small or large, have the chance to come out into the light of day. To be named so that forgiveness might be sought.

In our Unitarian Universalist tradition, we do not have a corollary ritual or holiday for the acknowledgement of how we have wronged or harmed others. One part of our historic Judeo-Christian roots that we have been eager to let go of is that idea of sin and the confession of our sins. That word, sin, by itself is quite loaded, I admit. For some of you who might come from traditional religious backgrounds, the concept of ‘sin’ may have been used in ways that were, in fact, harmful to you. ‘Sin’ may have been used more as a weapon than as a benign tool for spiritual growth - forcing you into a kind of religious obedience under threat of the punishment or retribution of a judging God or a religious

figure who was a stand-in for God. The use of the word 'sin' in this way can certainly be harmful and problematic.

In losing the word, though, I think we have also lost some important meaning in our lives as religious and spiritual people. As much as we lift up the inherent worth and dignity of every person, we also know that human nature has a shadow side, and we each have the capacity to hurt others, to cause separation from others, to go against what we know in our hearts is true and good.

We know that as much as we are “promise-makers,” as the theologian Martin Buber called us, we are also “promise-breakers.” We are whole and good, but we are also broken and cause brokenness. This is just a natural part of being human.

And, the question is, how do we return from that brokenness back into wholeness?

Now, I want to say before I get too much farther into my sermon that I am aware that, especially amongst people who are rather idealistic in nature, and I would say this is true of most people who come to a Unitarian Universalist worship service, there can be a tendency to be a little too hard on ourselves. When things are falling apart around us, when there is so much suffering, we can feel an overwhelming responsibility to fix things, to do our part, to get it all right and the expectations we have on ourselves can be so incredibly high. Let me just speak for myself and say, that I feel this, and I think this has resonance with at least some of you.

So, today, as we reflect on the “promise-breaking” aspect of our theme of the month, “covenant,” I want to do so with the spirit of grace and of mercy. None of us is expected to be perfect. None of us is expected to get it all right all the time. Our inherent worth and dignity as human beings is not compromised by our wrong-doings and our failures. As Stephen Levine writes, “Somewhere there is a basket that contains all of our failures. It is a big basket...Mercy has no use for them.” This is the good news of universalism.

While that is true, it is also true, I believe, that grappling with our capacity to do harm is a necessary part of fostering wholeness and spiritual well-being in ourselves and in our relationships. This honest accounting of how we are out of right relationship is a necessary part of our spiritual growth and spiritual health - individually and collectively. It is a first step in repairing relationships and renewing our promises.

Now, I have to say that as I prepared this sermon for today, our nation was in turmoil (and continues to be) over our most recent U.S. Supreme Court nominee and allegations of sexual assault that date back more than 30 years ago. These events cast another light onto the themes of covenant, brokenness, and repair that are central to my sermon this morning.

Mostly, what is playing out in our public life illustrates how lacking we are in collective practices of atonement, practices of repair and renewal. Particularly for those desperate to hold onto power, it is seemingly impossible to admit wrongdoing. Instead, we see those who have named profound harm done to them discredited, bullied, and threatened. We see how our systems are not designed to foster wholeness or true justice but to perpetuate power and further divide us.

And, while I think it is necessary to hold those in power accountable for the ways they misuse and abuse their power, I also don't want us to push their failures and their wrong-doing too far away. To fall into the 'us' versus 'them' trap.

To some degree, what is playing out right now in our public life is a mirror for us. It is reflecting back to us some deep, and perhaps unwanted, truths about ourselves.

And just for today what I want to pick up from the refracting light of that mirror is the challenge we can have in being in that place of honestly accounting for that hurt - both in naming that hurt to others and being willing to face the hurt and pain in others that we may have caused.

This accounting is what atonement is really about. Unitarian Universalist minister and religious educator, Jeanne Nieuwejaar writes this about atonement, "To atone for our sins, we need not rote or mindless apologies or punishments, but an honest encounter with the damage we have caused and meaningful steps toward restoring the relationship—the external relationship with the one we have harmed, but also our inner relationship with our god, with our conscience, with the truth of who we are."¹

While Nieuwejaar here uses the language of atoning for sins, I think she could also be speaking of any time we have broken a vow, a promise, or a commitment that we have made, any time we are out of covenant in a relationship.

¹ Jeanne Harrison Nieuwejaar, Fluent in Faith: A Unitarian Universalist Embrace of Religious Language (Skinner House Books, 2012).

In these moments, as Nieuwejaar writes, we need an honest encounter with the damage we have caused and meaningful steps towards restoring the relationship. And, I appreciate that Nieuwejaar names that we also need to restore our inner relationship in this process. I believe that this inner work of restoration with our own conscience and with the divinity within us is a necessary first step towards repair and can also be very difficult.

Often, forgiving others can come more easily than even forgiving ourselves. If you are particularly prone towards self-judgment and criticism, you may hold your failures - however small or large - against yourself on a daily basis. This is a spiritual state I often find myself in.

Yet, I have also experienced it to be true that when I am having trouble forgiving myself, that it is harder to let go of the wrongs that have been or that I *perceive* have been done to me.

When I feel that clinging around my heart caused by my feeling that someone else has hurt me or failed me, usually, if I am present enough, I can also notice that I am holding my own failures against myself.

Once I have restored a sense of compassion for myself, then I find that I am more ready to do that external work of restoring a relationship with someone else.

Atonement is about making things whole again, and I want to acknowledge that sometimes this isn't possible. Or, perhaps, isn't possible in the moment.

There are times when a vow, a promise, a covenant can be broken so severely that repair is not possible. Whatever wrong has been committed has violated the mutual trust at the base of the relationship to a point where the relationship simply cannot continue in its current form.

Perhaps a confidence is broken in a friendship, or fidelity in a marriage, or a violation of one's physical or emotional safety in a relationship.

We each have to decide if and when repair is possible and when it's not.

Sometimes, contrary to the Hafez poem I shared last Sunday, loving *is* a letting go. It is letting go of a relationship as it was so that it can change into something new. Or, it is a letting go completely of someone who has harmed you so that you can heal and become whole again.

All of this takes practice.

To be honest with ourselves about the pain we feel and the pain we have caused.

To offer ourselves compassion.

To seek justice and yet to be merciful to others.

To learn to let go.

And, we come to this spiritual community as a practice ground. It is a place where love and grace are offered and also where hurt, pain, and disappointment can be felt. Where promises and covenants can be broken.

And, if you haven't yet found yourself hurt or disappointed being here, let me break the news to you now, you will be.

In fact, as much affirmation as I get from all of you, I know that there are people in this congregation that I have hurt or disappointed in some way already, and I know that there will be ways that I continue to disappoint you as we continue on in our partnership of shared ministry.

Perhaps I have failed you or disappointed you because I didn't remember your name or your child's name, or I didn't reach out soon enough to offer my condolences after a death in your family. Maybe you've been disappointed because I use the word "God" too much, or I don't use the word "God" enough, or I talk about political issues too much, or I don't challenge you enough to take action on political issues. Perhaps you've been hurt because I wasn't listening closely enough during our pastoral visit or I did too much listening and not enough talking during our visit.

I consider it an occupational hazard that there will be myriad ways that I hurt, disappoint, or fail you, the people that I love and serve.

And, I just want to say, that this is totally natural. It is natural to come into this community with expectations and to not have those expectations met. It is natural that as human beings, even one who wears a robe and sometimes a collar, we will

experience and cause hurt and brokenness in our relationships. It is as true here as it is in other parts of our lives.

The promise of living in covenant, however, is that in naming our hurts and our brokenness we can seek to live more fully into the love that is the grounding of our community.

In the coming months, there will be an opportunity for you all as members and friends of this congregation to talk with one another about what commitments you might want to make to one another of how you want to be together as a community.

A task force, created by the Committee on Ministry, will lead a process of creating a congregational “covenant of right relations.” This covenant will be a solemn, living agreement of our aspirations as a community. And, it will likely name the truth that we don’t always live up to our ideals and yet we can be brought back into relationship by the covenant we share. I will talk a bit more about this process next week.

Whether it is in this community or in your life outside of this church, we need to be able to openly and honestly seek repair and restoration. In this repair and restoration, we can then know ourselves welcome once again in communities of belonging.

To begin our service, we sang the beautifully welcoming gathering song inspired by words attributed to the poet and mystic Jalal al-Din Rumi who wrote:

Come, come whoever you are,
Wanderer, worshipper, love of leaving — it doesn’t matter,
Ours is not a caravan of despair.

The lines that are not included in that short hymn are:

Come even if you have broken your vows a thousand times,
come, yet again, come.

For me, this wonderful hymn of welcome is even more powerful with those lines. “Come even if you have broken your vows a thousand times, come, yet again, come.”

Those words say to me, even if you have failed, even though you are imperfect, you, too, are welcome here. And, this good news, is not just for some of us. It isn't just some of us who break our vows, who fail others, who fail to live by our own most deeply held values. We all are amongst the promise-breakers, and so, this this assurance of welcome is for all of us.

All of us can be repairers of promises broken. All of us can come back into covenant with one another and with ourselves.

Sing together:

Though you've broken your vows a thousand times,
though you've broken your vows a thousand times,
though you've broken your vows a thousand times.

Come, yet again, come.

Blessed be.