

“A Crack in Everything”

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Within Judaism and Christianity, David, one-time King of Israel is a giant of a leader. *And* David screwed up bigtime. Do you know the story? In short, David lusted after and then slept with Bathsheba, a married woman. When he learned she was pregnant, David repeatedly tried to cover his tracks which, in the end, left her husband dead. Although David would marry Bathsheba who bore his son, the scripture makes it clear this chain of events was *not* okay, saying, “the thing which David had done *was* evil in the eyes of Yahweh.” (2 Samuel 11:27, NRSV)

A very angry God then sends Nathan, a prophet, to tell David a story. In the story, a wealthy man with a large herd of sheep callously kills the sole, cherished lamb of a poor man. Incensed, David insists such unethical behavior should be punished, asking ‘Who is this man?’ And here Nathan must do the hard work of a prophet: tell the truth. He looks at David and says, *you are the man*.

You are the man. You are the person who did wrong. This is the truth. The truth for David, for you and for me. Maybe you didn’t commit adultery—or maybe you have. Maybe you did not arrange for someone to be killed. But maybe you too have betrayed promises or shown callous disregard for the life of another. Maybe you have abused your power, acting a certain way because, well, because you could.

Each one of us causes harm, does wrong, and generally participates in the swarm of humanity going astray. A big part of religion involves diagnosing this problematic part of the human experience. At least, this is the argument Stephen Prothero makes in his book *God is Not One*. For example, he describes the problem in Christianity as sin and the solution as salvation; in Islam the problem as pride and the solution as submission; in Buddhism the problem as suffering and the solution as awakening; and so on. In each religion, the solution is linked to the diagnosis of the problem. While sharing a sense that human life has a “problem,” just how to name the problem and solution *varies* between religions and, I suspect, among us here today.

Here at First Church, our Puritan founders expressed their own sense of the problem and solution in the 1630 Covenant. In this founding document, they first affirmed their rootedness in Jesus and faithfulness to God. Next, they declared their intention to be united as a church here on the Bay of Massachusetts. And then, they say a bit more about their

vision for being together, writing, “*in such sort as becometh all whom He hath Redeemed, and Sanctified to Himselfe.*” In other words, they want to be a church that appropriately reflects their status as people whom Jesus has redeemed and sanctified. Ok, so that’s still a lot of Christian theological words, so let me try to translate.

Generally speaking, the “problem” in Christianity is that sin has corrupted humanity, creating a distance between humanity and God. The “solution” to the problem of sin lies in Jesus who bridges the gap between sinful humanity and God—in short, Jesus *saves* people from sin. Admittedly, it gets terribly nuanced fast. Does this gap exist from *birth*, is it part of our very *nature*? Or do people only become ‘*sinful*’ after a certain age of moral and spiritual accountability for their specific *actions*? In other words, are we *born* screwed up or do we *become* messed up? And what does it even mean for Jesus to close the gap between sin and God? *How*? Does Jesus *redeem* or make up for human failings all on his own? If so, do we need to do anything . . . like affirm our faith in Jesus, live differently to earn favor, or some combination of both? Or does God just choose our destiny as one of the redeemed or *not*—no human action required?

Whole libraries have been filled answering these questions and more. For us today, we may recognize the ways that we still wrestle with a gap between our actual experience of living *and* what we imagine to be good and possible in us and the world. Faced with this rift between the possible and the real, we are left wondering what’s wrong and what can and cannot be done about it. While we may all wrestle in some way with these questions, I don’t believe there is a single way to name and address the “problem” in and around us. Among the possible frames, today I want to describe four—a Unitarian, a Universalist, a Unitarian Universalist, and some of my own thoughts.

The Unitarian story starts back with our early Puritans. They believed God “elected” who would be “redeemed” by Jesus—giving God all the real power. Fast forwarding a couple hundred years to the mid-1700’s, there was a whole lot of talk about liberty, reason, and individual rights leading up to the American Revolution. So also, liberalizing trends showed up in the pews and pulpit of First Church and other Boston area churches. This led to the emergence of Unitarian—or Liberal—Christianity. In this revised understanding of Christianity, Jesus remained central to ideas of bridging the gap between humanity and God, but human action played a larger part. With esteem for human capacity on the rise, Jesus’ became less of a cosmic broker of redeeming humanity’s debt and more of a model and teacher of how we can all be good. This Unitarian emphasis on our capacity for good nurtured a faith in the possibility of progressive growth for individuals and for society.

About the the same time, Universalist ideas emphasized the *love* of God. For Universalists, the loving nature of God surely had to mean that *all* would be redeemed—because God’s love is bigger than the entirety of human sin. God is still the one doing the work of bridging the gap by sending Jesus, the Son of God, to live among humanity as a testimony to God’s love. But when faced with the question of who to redeem or save, God is choosing “all of the above.” As one minister I know puts it, “God leaves no one behind.”

In 1961, the Universalists and Unitarians merged to become Unitarian Universalist Association of congregation. Since the 18th century, both denominations had become even more liberal—making space for those who did not identify as Christian or even believe in God. Which leads us to where we are today as a religious community of multiple beliefs but a shared commitment that “Love is the spirit of this church, and service its law.” Or, as the back of the order of service shows, Love is the central value of Unitarian Universalism.

To put this into Prothero’s framework, Unitarian Universalism today suggests that “Love” is the solution. Some of you have heard me say that I understand love to be the “recognition of otherness.” By which I mean that love is recognizing in one another the precious gift of Life, the inherent worthiness of each person. Love insists that we make space for each of us in the community. Cultivating such an inclusive community is not just about “freedom” where everyone gets to say or do whatever they want! Rather, making space for difference means creating a culture of equity and justice, of generosity and interdependence. It means the ongoing work of choosing to center love in how we relate to one another.

But, if Love is the Unitarian Universalist “solution” to the messy swarm of the human experience, what then is the problem?

And here is where I offer a few of my thoughts. Because I grew up Christian, I’m self-aware that the language of sin and brokenness has deeply shaped my sense of what’s “wrong”. *And* I no longer identify as Christian. Over the years, I have begun to learn some of how other religions describe human struggle—and there is much I still do *not* know. What I do know is that too many people feel they are not good enough or that they are not loved or loveable. In different ways and for different reasons, people end up feeling alone and disconnected from others. And this disconnection from others and from a sense of a larger goodness is a problem. When I survey human experience—including my own, I don’t just see *individual* persons who are struggling; I see a broken and cracked *world* of ruptured relationships *between* one another and with the planet, our Source of Life.

Leonard Cohen—bard and musician—wrote a song, “Anthem” whose refrain goes like this:

*Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in*

There *are* cracks everywhere. In us and around us. And trying to fix *all* those cracks is exhausting. If we believe that all the cracks in us need to be fixed before we're good enough or loveable, we will always be struggling. So also, if we expect others to have *their* cracks all fixed up and covered over before we will love or accept them, we will never know more than disappointment.

The truth is you, me, and King David are all the ones who are cracked, who have done wrong. But we need not stop there, with only a name for the "problem." We can also seek to name a solution. And for me the solution is Love, because Love doesn't need perfect. Love knows that cracks come with being human and looks to the whole of who we are. Cohen even proclaims the gift of cracks—they are how the light gets in. Perhaps light coming through the cracks helps us to recognize we are all struggling to do good and all falling short sometimes. Realizing this shared struggle might just help us to have more compassion for the ways we all hurt, to feel less alone for the ways we have all screwed up, and thus to Love others and ourselves for the wholeness of who we are—cracks and all. We don't need to be perfect to be connected to others in love.

I am a Minister not because I'm perfect, but because I've long sought to make sense of the cracks in me and in the experience of Life. I don't have it all figured out. I have more to learn—including from how different religions make sense of the persistent sense that something *is* "off" with humanity. For now, what helps me to make some sense of it all is to stay connected to other people, to seek out beauty, and to deepen my gratitude for the wondrous gift of Life. My hope is that you too will share your struggle with others, to more fully love yourself and others in our cracked, imperfect wholeness, and to stay connected to others and to the Source of Life and Love.

May it be so.