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March 15, 2015
Theme: Brokenness
Sermon: There Is a Crack in Everything

Call to Worship:

I love that opening hymn, although when we sing it in church it doesn't sound the way Mary Magdalene sings it in the musical Godspell...in Godspell sounds a lot less like a hymn and a lot more like burlesque.

Our worship theme this month is "Brokenness" and there are a lot of ways to understand what it means to be broken, breaking, healing, and healed.

The songwriter Leonard Cohen wrote:
Ring the bells that still can ring,
forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack in everything;
that's how the light gets in.

Here into this sacred place and time we have brought our imperfect, vulnerable, beautiful selves. Let us bring all of who we are, all of who we have been, and all of who we wish to become into our worship together—and find that we are stronger in community.

And now our chalice will be lit by Jane Spickett.

Reading: "A Disappointment" by Louis Jenkins

The best anyone can say about you is that you are a disappointment. We had higher expectations of you. We had hoped that you would finish your schooling. We had hoped that you would have kept your job at the plant. We had hoped that you would have been a better son and a better father. We hoped, and fully expected, that you would finish reading Moby Dick. I wish that, when I am talking to you, you would at least raise your head off your desk and look at me. There are people who, without your gifts, have accomplished so much in this life. I am truly disappointed. Your parents, your wife and children, your entire family, in fact, everyone you know is disappointed, deeply disappointed.

Sermon: There is a Crack in Everything

I wonder if that poem echoes an inner voice you have heard before—or perhaps an external voice?

There is a slogan: “Expectations are pre-planned resentments.” I think expectations are often pre-planned disappointments, too.

Ring the bells that still can ring,
forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack in everything;
that’s how the light gets in.

I saw a comic strip this week, the comic “Rhymes with Orange.” I’ll describe it to you.

The setting is labeled: “The Church Basement.”

Four people are sitting in chairs together.

One man says to another:

“Glad you’re fine as you go through this divorce.”

A woman says,

“It’s like when I was fine when my parents got sick.”

And another man says,

“When my dog died, I was fine.”

Underneath this picture it says:

“The New Englander Support Group.”¹

I find a lot of Unitarian Universalists just don’t want to talk about Brokenness. We want to skip the brokenness part and go straight to Healing and Wholeness, straight to “I’m fine.”

Well, how can we really find healing and peace and acceptance if we don’t admit to our broken places? We have all been disappointed and disappointing...and worse.

I think people who know this the best are people who have engaged deeply with 12-step work—the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, also used for many other types of addictions.

I won’t list all the steps, but
the fourth step is to make
a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
The fifth step is to admit to God—
however we might understand God—
and ourselves and to another human being
the exact nature of our wrongs.

¹ <http://www.cartoonistgroup.com/store/add.php?iid=123466>

And if you continue the steps, you have to ask for help from God—
and again, that is however you understand God—
to remove these defects of character and shortcomings,
and make amends.

Sometimes Unitarian Universalists struggle to find
the common ground between
our seven principles and the 12 steps.

I recently read this new book—“Restored to Sanity: Essays on the 12 Steps by Unitarian
Universalists.”

All the authors are, in the tradition of AA, first name only. There is an essay by Celeste
about her struggle with the fourth and fifth steps, who writes:

As a Unitarian Universalist,
I had bought into my own interpretation
of the Universalist side of my faith tradition—
that I was born with inherent worth and dignity
and that because I was basically good
instead of depraved,
I had nothing to repent.

Celeste argued with her sponsor around the language “defects of character.”

“Isn’t this just another Calvinistic attempt to make me feel like a lowly worm?” I
explained to her that I was a UU, who believed in the inherent worth and dignity
of all persons, including my own. What was this business about character defects?

So Celeste and her sponsor grappled with this idea of being “defected.”
In this fearless and searching inventory,
Celeste realized she did have some character defects: Perfectionism. Arrogance. Envy.
Entitlement. Resentment.

All these aspects of her personality had contributed to her decades of struggling with
alcohol—
her perfectionism and arrogance had made it harder for her to admit that her life was
unmanageable,
that she had a drinking problem and needed help.

Celeste writes,

I now understand that the first Principle—
“we covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every
person”—
is both deeply meaningful and spiritually flawed. While it affirms human worth
and dignity,

it does not provide a way to grapple with the times when my willfulness leads me to diminish my own dignity.

The 6th step acknowledges that part of being human is to have defects of character.

Celeste also has a Unitarian Universalist relationship with God—that is, “It’s complicated.”

As she went through the 12 steps, she struggled with what it meant to ask God for help.

She didn’t believe in “the big Daddy in the sky”

or a magician with a magic wand to wave away her personality flaws.

So what would take the place of these antiquated ideas?

Celeste, in her journey, came to understand “God”

as Universal Love—

a “real Presence that constantly beckons me to my highest self.”

She wrote that she said “yes to a Spirit of Life that loves us—character defects and all.”

The fourth principle of Unitarian Universalism

says that we affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

As Celeste discovered, that search sometimes means

we have to grapple with our old broken and harmful ideas

about God

that hold us back.

Another essay in this book, by a man who

also grappled with the God language in 12-step,

said he decided all he had to know about God

was that he was not God.

This idea of recovery as a lifelong spiritual practice can be useful outside the realm of alcohol addiction, too.

Recently I had a chance to chat with longtime Follen member.

We were talking about his childhood and young adult life as a Catholic, which was not a happy experience for him.

He said that he used to joke that he was a “recovering Catholic.”

And then at some point he realized it wasn’t really a joke—he was always going to be “recovering”

rather than “recovered”—

that some of the wounds of his religious past

were always going to be in the process of healing

rather than ever “cured.”

And I think that is true for many of us, that our whole lives are the practice of being “in recovery”—
healing, growing, seeking change and transformation, living through loss and pain,
finding love and grace in the broken places.

I know that most everyone here is familiar with the hymn Amazing Grace, and I want to tell you the story of the man who wrote it.²
His name was John Newton
and he wrote the lyrics in the 1700s.

From his early life, you would never have known
he would write the hymn that some think
is the most known and loved hymn in the world today.

John Newton was a sailor, and kept getting kicked out of jobs for insubordination and desertion.
Now sailors in those days were known for bad language and a love for drink and women.
But John Newton was so extreme that one captain admonished him “for not only using the worst words the captain had ever heard, but creating new ones to exceed the limits of verbal debauchery.”

After getting kicked out of the Navy,
he took work sailing with a slave trader.
His bad behavior continued—
on board he was so argumentative,
and caused so many fights
that the captain ended up chaining and starving him
just like the slaves,
and then leaving him in Sierra Leone, enslaved himself.

The slave trader became the slave.

His father had him rescued, and on the boat ride home,
a storm came up that everyone feared would capsize the boat and kill everyone aboard.

John was desperate and prayed to God
to take mercy on him.

Often people tell this story and use this conversion experience as:
boom, John Newton was saved
and stopped taking part in the slave trade
and stopped fighting and cursing!
Miracle!

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amazing_Grace

But that isn't really true.
Because it is more like he started to be in recovery,
rather than was instantly recovered.
He slowly started to change his life,
with many stops and starts,
two steps forward, one step back.

The first immorality he was able to overcome, according to historians, was profanity—
and that took a while.
He still took jobs on slave ships and even captained one.
But a few years later he stopped working as a sailor.
And once he was firmly on dry land,
he started studying the Bible
and engaging with a church community.

He started, one might say,
a fearless and searching moral inventory...
and he didn't like what he found.

His recovery turned him into an abolitionist,
fighting against slavery, and a minister.
He began to serve a church in a tiny poor town.
He was a unique preacher of his day,
because he would speak personally
about his own experiences with temptation and sin.

He often said in his later years that his mission was to
“break a hard heart
and to heal a broken heart.”

To break a hard heart and to heal a broken heart.

And so he wrote these words:

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
that saved a wretch like me,
I once was lost, but now I'm found,
was blind but now I see.”

The word “wretch” is meaningful:
it reflects how low he saw his former behaviors,
and also reflects how his arrogance and anger brought him down to the very horrendous
conditions
he was oppressing on other humans.

He was wretched and lost
yet he found Love and Healing and God's mercy anyway.
Where once he was blind,
He was finally able to see—really see—
the ways his brokenness had contributed
to brokenness in the world,
through the systems of oppression that ruled the slave trade.

When this hymnal was getting put together,
someone had an issue with that word wretch
and put in a little lyric suggestion that
we could sing “soul” instead:
“that saved a soul like me.”

Perhaps the reason was because of how “wretch” sounds when it is sung,
(which is of course part of the power of the song)
perhaps it was theological confusion
like the worry Celeste had:
if we believe humans are basically good
instead of depraved,
than how can we call ourselves “wretches”?

Well, I know I can be wretched sometimes.
And I also believe that God loves me,
even when I am my most wretched.
And I also believe that
God knows I can be better.

To me that is the very definition of Universalism:
God will never leave us,
and God will never leave us alone.

I want to share with you a quote from Frederick Buechner that I've treasured for years;
Buechner writes, in the voice of his character Bebb:

We all got secrets.
I got them same as everybody else—
things we feel bad about
and wish hadn't ever happened.
Hurtful things.
We're all scared and lonesome,
but most of the time we keep it hid.
It's like everyone of us has lost his way so bad
we don't even know which way is home any more only we're ashamed to ask.
You know what would happen
if we would own up we're lost

and ask?
Why, what would happen is
we'd find home is each other.
We'd find out home is [God] loves us lost
or found or any which way."

We are home.
We are loved lost or found or any which way.
Broken and whole,
disappointing and perfect,
in recovery and healed.

Ring the bells that still can ring,
forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack in everything;
that's how the light gets in.

Amen.

And now please rise in body or in spirit and sing with me, Amazing Grace.