

Forgive Me
SERMON Presented by Reverend Scott Sammler-Michael
October 5, 2008
At The
Accotink Unitarian Universalist Church

“Let love fill our hearts with its clear precious water.”¹

It is a pleasure beyond measure to be with you today.
My life has blessings too abundant to number.
Being your Minister offers me gifts and wonders I never imagined when I was a teacher and an electrician.

Today I live in a beautiful farmhouse in Sterling.
I work with a church full of amazingly talented people devoted to ministry.
I have a family nearby who loves me and with whom I speak frequently –
I am quickly making friends in and around this lovely town.
I have an eloquent and gifted wife, Reverend Anya, who fills my days with beauty and joy, and who challenges me to be my best.
I work in a place that inspires me, challenges me, and honors my call to ministry.
I feel cared for and appreciated.

But you know, that was not always the case. Let me tell you of a time when I was not so fortunate, A time with which many of you may relate. A lesson in Atonement.

Some of you may know I was married once before. My former wife and I lived in Southwest Baltimore, and though we had our difficulties I thought we were committed to making it work. Until One Day - It began in the usual way – alarm clock, coffee, feeding the cat, I went to teach my literature class at Dundalk Community College, east of Baltimore. Poems of Emily Dickinson comprised the lesson plan. That afternoon I met my father at Baltimore’s Inner Harbor to cheer in the Baltimore Stallions victory parade; the Stallions had just won the Canadian Football League championship – I touched the Grey Cup, the CFL trophy. After a pint of Guinness with my dad, I left for home, to get ready for my evening class at Dundalk. When I opened the door to my apartment, something seemed wrong. I noticed some furniture was missing. I ran up the stairs to my office, only to find a brief handwritten note by the phone, from my wife: She had left, for good. Shock gave way to grief and I trembled in anger borne of fear of the unknown – Somehow, I know not how, I taught my class that night.

“Let us remember to find what is holy within and without.”

This Thursday at sundown Yom Kippur will be celebrated in Jewish homes and synagogues. Yom Kippur is a culmination of the ten Days of Awe that begin with Rosh Hashanah. Believers repent, reconcile broken relationships and ask for forgiveness.

Emphasizing communal responsibility, all sins are confessed in the plural (*we* have lied, *we* have stolen, forgive *us*). Sin and its absolution live within community.

¹ From Marge Piercy’s *Sh’ma*.

Judaism teaches that on Rosh Hashanah God has judged most of humankind and has recorded His judgment in the Book of Life – Then God grants a ten-day reprieve until Yom Kippur to change that judgment. These are the Days of Awe. The days preceding Yom Kippur one atones for sins against one another. On Yom Kippur one atones only for sins against God. Yom Kippur is a complete day of rest; no work can be performed. Many Jews who do not observe any other Jewish custom will observe this day. One is supposed to refrain from eating and drinking (even water). The fast lasts from sunset to sunset.²

Yom Kippur services end at nightfall, with a long blast of the shofar, or ram's horn. As 12th century Jewish mystic Moses Maimonides points out, the Shofar sound is a siren to wake us up to the need to take stock of our lives and improve our ways. When did the siren last call you to take stock of your life? Yom Kippur - Known as the Day of Atonement – evokes the genuine desire for forgiveness, reconciliation and reparation - The restoration of communal right relationship and our covenant with the spirit of life. A Unitarian Universalist conception of Yom Kippur might state that we atone for wrongs committed against the Spirit of Life, systems that frustrate justice, the veiling of beauty. What might *we* confess this Thursday?

“Let love fill our hearts with its clear precious water.”

The world no longer made sense after my divorce, and I did not enjoy that chaos. I needed to re-construct the categories framing my understanding. I needed to find the time for my heart to feel what had happened - Time for my body to uncoil I was angry with friends who knew my marriage was a sham but never told me. I was disappointed at God or the universe for allowing vows to be so easily broken. I questioned the very existence of love, since my closest example of it was a lie. Reflecting back on my marriage, I saw so many signs that our relationship could never work – I began to doubt my intelligence and perception, Because, “I should have seen it coming.” Maybe you too have once thought that, “I should have known! What’s wrong with me?” I did not want to forgive myself. “Forgive Me” – the hardest words to say, often, even harder to hear.

Then something happened. One night after a concert I walked home alone in a snowstorm. The snow was two feet deep, the wind driving it into my face. Somehow in that place of vulnerability I was struck by a feeling of total freedom – All of a sudden I felt peaceful, I could breathe deep again I sensed things would get better. I lay down and made snow angels in the middle of Lombard Street, a major artery through West Baltimore. I felt free to move on, to learn from my mistakes - Maybe start anew

“We should Love ourselves, for we are of God”

The *Neilah*, the last of seven services on Yom Kippur, comes from a word meaning “closing” and refers to the symbolic closing of heaven’s doors and Yahweh’s ears.

² The Talmud, the collection of ancient rabbinic writings on Jewish Law and Tradition, specifies additional restrictions that are less well-known: no washing and bathing, anointing one's body (with cosmetics, deodorants, etc.), wearing leather shoes, and engaging in sexual relations are all prohibited.

This Slamming door lends atonement great urgency – atonement portrayed as a religious imperative with a limited window of opportunity.

Rituals of atonement permeate our society – in religious *and* secular life. There's actually a Unitarian Universalist fast day? It's the third Thursday of April, a time when we are asked to turn inward, seek atonement, and fast until sunset. Several New England States still honor this day as Patriot's Day. This holiday from colonial American times serves as a bookend to Thanksgiving and its bounty. I hope some of you will join us next April to fast and reflect, and gather to break our fast at sunset.

Recovery groups like narcotics anonymous also attest to the power of atonement in the secular world. Operating on the assumption that one must first acknowledge a problem to enable healing, sharing at these groups begins by stating one's name and then declaring, "I am an addict." This practice not only embodies a need for humility and healing, it acknowledges honesty as a precursor to atonement by naming the affliction in public.

Now it is easy to see why an addict needs to jumpstart the healing process, but what about you and me? – what lends us urgency?

"Let the work of our hands speak of goodness"

Every day is precious, like no other. I am the same man I was back before my divorce, and yet I am not. I am wiser than he, more humble, too, I hope. One day, a wise friend advised me, "Do not let the sun set on your anger,"³ The other day I heard someone say on the radio – "anger is a poison we take hoping someone else will die." I had to try to forgive, let go, move on. Somehow I received the grace of hearing the still, small voice within, begging forgiveness, and in return crying, "I Forgive you."

Atonement begins with forgiveness.

Forgiving those who wrong us. Forgiving the universe for not providing in the way we had hoped, or for not being easy to understand. Forgiving all the systems and people who disappoint or obstruct. Forgiving our bodies for breaking down. Forgiving our minds for not knowing. Some may forgive God for not having a plan they can easily discern; or for not being what or where they hoped. Others may forgive those forces in the world that diminish clarity and hinder sanity, or cause bitterness in our quest for justice. We ask ourselves for forgiveness - How can I be more gentle on myself and the world? How do I restore my covenant with life?

Forgiveness also suggests we encounter guilt.

Psychologist Gale Cengage claims "Feeling guilt implies someone is reflective, concerned about integrity, with an inclination that an action, thought, or even word caused harm to another."⁴ Guilt that is not purged can worsen into shame.⁵

³ Ephesians 4:26

⁴ "Guilt." Encyclopedia of Psychology. 2nd ed. Ed. Bonnie R. Strickland. Gale Cengage, 2001. eNotes.com. 2006. 4 Oct, 2008 <http://www.enotes.com/gale-psychology-encyclopedia/guilt> Guilt is both a cognitive and an emotional experience that occurs when a person realizes that he or she has violated a moral standard and is responsible for

Psychotherapist Dixie Morris contrasts guilt and shame. Guilt refers to something done or not done; shame has to do with a person's body and being. Shame makes one believe not that an error was committed, but that there is something fundamentally wrong with one's being. Guilt unforgiven decays into shame.

We purge our guilt to live more fully into our potential – learning pain's lessons. We find solace by acknowledging our complicity. Atonement is an extension of the social contract: It is easier to heal the world if we are healthy. Atonement enables us to love, and be loved, more extravagantly. Atonement is hard work ~How do we own our culpability?

“Let love fill our hearts with its clear precious water.”

Listen to the cries of our souls. Honor the doubt that's the cornerstone of true faith. On the Jewish Day of Atonement, the image of the Slamming Door evokes urgency, displaying how crucial atonement is for wholeness. Yet that door never slams all the way shut as long as we open our hearts minds and hands.

There are tomorrows longing to be lived.
Possible futures not imagined while in despair
As we atone we can be born again and again,
And as we are reborn so is our world.

“Let us remember and strive to be good.
Let love fill our hearts with its clear precious water.
Let the work of our hands speak of goodness.
Let us remember to find what is holy within and without.”⁶

that violation. A guilty conscience results from thoughts that we have not lived up to our ideal self. Guilt feelings may also inhibit us from falling short of our ideal again in the future. Individual guilt is an inner reflection on personal wrongdoing, while collective guilt is a shared state resulting from group—such as corporate, national, or community—wrongdoing.

⁵ <http://www.liberationpsych.org/guilt.html>

⁶ Marge Piercy, *Sh'ma*