



# Sin

A reflection from Karen Hering, Assistant Literary Minister

Each month worship, religious education, community outreach ministry, covenant groups, and Wellspring Wednesday programs will offer opportunities to contemplate, consider, contend with and discuss an intergenerational curriculum based on monthly themes. Our hope is that this approach will bind us more closely together and inform our lives in positive ways. March's theme is... Sin.

I have not counted them, but I have read that Mosaic Law as outlined in the Bible identifies 613 behaviors defining the difference between sinful and honorable living. It is easier to consider the more manageably numbered Ten Commandments or the even smaller number of the seven deadly sins named by Pope Gregory in the late sixth century.

But how do these numbered lists and definitions add up to an understanding of sin that is meaningful in our own times and in our own Unitarian Universalist faith?

Theologians today are less likely to take a numerical approach to sin and more likely to consider it from a wider view, as seen through one of many different lenses. There's the lens of brokenness, of missing the mark, of the absence of faith, of living a lie; the lens of self-centeredness, of alienation or of despair; the lens of violating creation or dominating others.

Each one of these offers its own wisdom about sin, but the more I think about the varieties of sin and the different ways to regard it or define it, I come back full circle to the Bible and the image so often linked to sin in the older and newer testaments – the image of the hardened heart. The hardened heart signifies those who will not heed the holy, who close their eyes and ears and hearts to God and also to their neighbor. The hardened heart represents a loss of perception, perhaps the most basic breakage of our connection to the world around us.

"They made their hearts as hard as flint," says a passage in Zechariah.

I do not need numbered lists of sins to understand the meaning of a hardened heart. A hardened heart, I know instinctively, is what makes it possible to turn away from one another and from the sacred; to pull into protected private worlds; to deny relationships and responsibility; to deny one's own deepest needs and longings, which are after all how the holy often speaks to us.

Many of the scriptural passages talk about hearts that are hardened to God, but in the Bible's covenantal understanding, no clear line is drawn between God and one's neighbor. Hardened hearts, then, refer equally to those that are calloused and closed to the love – and needs – of our neighbor, of our fellow living creatures and of the earth itself. As one contemporary theologian, Eleazar Fernandez, puts it, because we are social beings, all sin is destructive of others. He writes, "There is no separation from the Ground of Being (or the holy) without being separated from the neighbor."

Of course, removing the heart's armor can feel risky. Buddhist monk Pema Chodron notes that beneath this armor is the *bodhichitta*, a soft spot in the heart that is vulnerable and easily wounded. But that very vulnerability, she says, can be a link to all living beings. By touching the soft spot of our own sorrow, we open a doorway through which we can find and restore our connection to others.

Perhaps, then, March is a good time of year to consider sin and hardened hearts, because all around us the natural world is showing us that softening is possible. The solid ice of winter is melting away, the hardened ground grows moist and yielding once again, and the leathery branches of bushes and trees untie their tips for the tender buds soon to

emerge. Can we too follow suit? Can we leave the armor of our hardened hearts behind and, in the softened ground of right relationship, bring love to bud and bloom?

## Worship Theme Resources

### Books

**Son of the Morning** (1978) Joyce Carol Oates' fever of a novel tells the story of Nathan Vickery, a young man born with the gift of prophecy.

**The Confessions** (various) Augustine A demanding, towering classic of Christian literature that focuses on the sin of pride. It is well worth the effort.

**Sin, Pride and Self-Acceptance** (2003) Terry Cooper. A well-presented overview of both theological and psychological approaches to the concept of sin.

### Films

**Dead Man Walking** is the story of the relationship between Sister Helen Prejan (Susan Sarandon) and Matthew Poncelet (Sean Penn), a man accused of rape and murder. Sister Helen asks Poncelet to come to terms with his sins or his truth in the eyes of God before the end of his life.

Based on the writing of Isak Dineson (Karen Blixen), **Babbette's Feast** is the story of a return from a life of sin, but not the kind of sin that is often imagined. UU theologian Jack Mendelsohn maintains that we are punished by our sins, not for them. Babbette's Feast asks us to show up for life.

**Cider House Rules**, John Irving's classic of 1985, became a film directed by Lasse Hallström. Orphan Homer Wells (Tobey Maguire) learns the truth about sin and sorrow and learns to find his own path through a complicated world.

Worship theme resources for families are on page 12.



## Parents' Night Out

Friday, March 20 • 6:00–8:00 p.m.

Unity's Ministry with Children and Youth is sponsoring a Parent's Night Out on Friday, March 20, from 6:00 to 8:30 p.m. Free childcare will be provided by nursery staff for children ages 6 months to 12 years. Parents are required to spend time with other adults from Unity Church. Children should eat dinner before arriving. Snacks will be provided. Today is the deadline to register. Contact Christy at the Church Office.

## High School Book Sale March 21-22

Unitarians read the most amazing books... And then they donate them to the Unity High School Book Sale! Donations will be accepted until Friday, March 20. Proceeds support Youth Ministries including the annual pilgrimage to Boston.

As in years past, members of Unity Church are welcome to join us for a Midnight Madness sneak preview at midnight, March 20-21: buy your books before the booksellers and the public snatch them up (we can't guarantee flawless organization at that point, but it sure is fun!).

### Booksale hours are:

**Saturday, March 21**  
8:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.

**Sunday, March 22**  
8:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

Fill a grocery bag for \$5 during the final hour of the sale!

## R.E. Dates for your Family's Calendar

**Friday, March 13:** COA Mentor and Youth Potluck

**Sunday, March 22:** Story Sunday, New Workshop Rotation Cycle: Endings

**Sunday, March 29:** No R.E., Spring Break

## UU Kids and the Concept of Sin

Chances are good that the word 'sin' has actually never crossed your lips in conversation with a child. Chances are fair that if a UU kid asked a UU adult what sin is, they'd get an evasive answer that alluded to sin's relativistic non-existence. Chances are excellent, though, that our UU children will encounter the idea of sin in their world. Surely it's better to offer them our own possible definition from a liberal religious point of view than to leave them wondering about a word wielded with such convincing authority in our culture.

Here are some definitions from religious teachers that you might try out – first with yourself, then with the children in your life:

### Try this with elementary school-aged kids:

"Sin is its own punishment." — Saint Augustine

Our Universalist heritage leads us to doubt that a loving God would punish us for our shortcomings. Still, we know that certain acts have negative consequences in this life; often, these consequences are more immediate and more impressive than any punishment we can devise as parents. How do feelings or actions like rage, envy, dishonesty, violence, and greed cause us to suffer? Do our 'small sins' hurt us less than our big ones? Should we only avoid these sins for our own sakes?

### Try this with young teens:

Sin is missing the mark.

The Greek word for 'sin' as used in the New Testament is *hamartia*, which translates as 'missing the target'. Kids understand how it feels to miss a basket or make an error on a test: expand this concept to the art of being human. In any situation, could your child have done a better job of being kind, honest or generous? As a parent, what targets are you setting for your child?

### Try these definitions of sin with adolescents:

1. Wealth without work
2. Pleasure without conscience
3. Science without humanity
4. Knowledge without character
5. Politics without principle
6. Commerce without morality
7. Worship without sacrifice - Ghandi

These sins are social in nature and far more subtle than "Thou shalt not kill." What is a sin of omission? Does Ghandi's list imply that wealth *with* work is not sinful? How will we know these sins when we see them? What reason do we have to avoid committing these sins ourselves?

Of course, given a working definition of sin, any child (or adult!) will be quicker to point out the speck in another's eye sooner than the log in our own. Still, we can encourage our children to discern between acts that turn us toward love and acts that turn us away from love, recognizing them first in our world and then in ourselves.

### Books for kids:

**Seven Lonely Places, Seven Warm Places: The Vices and Virtues for Children** by April Bolton (Author), Brent Beck (Illustrator). A new approach to the deadly sins, one that illuminates both the consequences of sin and a more cheerful alternate path.

**Maybe Right, Maybe Wrong: A Guide for Young Thinkers** by Dan Barker (Author), Brian Strassburg (Illustrator) A humanist approach to morality for kids. A UU staple on parents' bookshelves.

**Cain and Abel: Finding the Fruits of Peace** by Sandra Eisenberg Sasso. A retelling of the Old Testament story of the first act of violence and its consequences.