



*“And please make Barack Obama accept the things he cannot change;  
give him the courage to change the things he can  
and the wisdom to know the difference.”*

*Church Words—Sin & Prayer*  
*A Worship Service by the REV. JEFF BRIERE*  
*Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga*  
*November 22, 2009*

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CONNECTIONS

Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. My name is Matt Hoyt and I am a member of the congregation. We begin each Sunday at this time with Connections. This is a time of community and contemplation, where we share the joys and the sorrows going on in our lives. This is not a time for announcements,

politics or expressions of personal anger, but a time of deep sharing, where we are reminded that we are all human beings and we're all in this together.

Enjoy the experience of sitting in restorative silence until you are moved to speak. Please allow a breath of silence after each person speaks, so that we may focus our attention on what has been said. If you have something to share, please come forward, tell us your name and what's on your mind.



Let us pause to dwell inward. Spirit of Life, please meet us where we are, in the struggles we choose for ourselves; in the ways we move forward in our lives, and bring our world forward with us. It is right that we pause to remember those who need love and support; who are ill or in pain, either in body or in spirit; who are lonely or have been wronged. Let us open our minds and hearts to a place of quiet, to a silent prayer for the healing of pain, and the soft, gentle coming of love. In this time of silence let our thoughts be with those who have spoken or been spoken about this morning. Amen and Blessed Be.

Please rise now and greet your neighbors at the door. Welcome them into the sanctuary with a hand of warmth and a smile.

*HYMN 108, How Can I Keep from Singing?*

GREETINGS

**KRISTIE.** Thanks so much for joining us in worship today. We hope you find the service rewarding and that you leave here inspired and uplifted.

There is an emergency exit over here to my right, now is the time to put your cell phone in “Worship Mode” and childcare for the young

and the restless is available downstairs in the nursery.

If you have a particular joy or sorrow or something you'd like added to the prayer of the people, please clearly write it on an index card and drop it in the basket back there. You may sign it or not, as you wish.

Thanksgiving is 4 days away and Jeff & Kate invite you to Thanksgiving Dinner here at the church. They roast the turkey and make dressing and gravy. You bring a dish to pass. Please check out the roster on the door next to the kitchen and sign up if you can join us for Thanksgiving Dinner.

A complete listing of announcements is included with the bulletin and is available on our web site. The best way to find out what's going on around here is to sign up for a weekly e-mail. To do that, please see Chris in the office.

Today we begin a yearly fund raiser known as "Guest at Your Table." This is a modest effort on our part to help the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee accomplish their work for social justice in the world.

You will probably meet a youngster before you leave today who will present you with a box to place on your dining table. The faces on the colorful box you receive as you leave today are of real people whose lives have been touched by the Service Committee. Working through indigenous organizations, the Service Committee contributes staffing, technicians, and funds to promote social justice issues such as civil liberties, worker's rights, the availability of water, micro loans and the alleviation of suffering due to natural disasters.

This program, and individual memberships, are the major source of funding for the Service Committee. So as we live with the "guests" pictured on the box during the holidays, our contributions express gratitude for what we have and our concern for the human rights of

so many around the world.

If you wish to write a check instead of using the box, an envelope is available for that purpose. Take the box home and bring it back on one of the first two Sundays in January.

Responding to this appeal will certainly enrich your holidays. Thank you so much for your generosity.

Catherine Long has a new calling as a bandleader. She convinced Jay McCurdy and Christina Koch to sing some John Prine songs for us today. You can now say that you knew them when they just staring out. John Prine's music often paints a portrait of situations we read about in the newspaper. Others tell of human relationships. This is one such song.

*PRELUDE: Speed of the Sound of Loneliness*

*LIGHTING THE CHALICE*

Nancy Anderson, would you please light our chalice? Today, to light our chalice, I bring words that remind us why we are here. Please read together with me the words of Annie Dillard.

We are here to abet creation and to witness it,  
to notice each others' beautiful face and complex nature  
so that creation need not play to an empty house.

*STORY: What Are You Watching?*

*CHILDREN'S RECEPTIONAL*

We hold you in our love  
as you go, as you go.  
May your heart

be at peace as you go.

To nurture the spark  
of your precious life  
we hold you in our love  
as you go.

*OFFERTORY: Sam Stone*

Do you know the man in this photo? He was a news reporter. Irvin S. Cobb. He started in journalism on the *Paducah Daily News* at age seventeen, and became the nation's youngest managing news editor at nineteen. He later worked at the *Louisville Evening Post* for a year and a half.

In 1904, Cobb was hired by the *New York Evening Sun*. It sent him to Portsmouth, New Hampshire to cover the Russian–Japanese peace conference. His dispatches from the negotiations, focused on the personalities involved, including Theodore Roosevelt, and were published across the country under the title “Making Peace at Portsmouth.” They earned him a job offer from Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World* that made him the highest-paid staff reporter in the United States.

When he first moved to New York, he couldn’t find work. With a wife and a sick child to support he pounded the city’s pavements, going from one newspaper office to another, looking for work. For two weeks he visited and revisited them, but the editors always said no help was needed. As a last attempt, Cobb sat down and wrote a letter to each of the editors, proving that he could write effectively and had confidence in himself. This is the last paragraph:

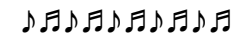
“This is absolutely your last chance. I have grown weary of studying the wallpaper design in your waiting room. A modest appreciation of my own worth forbids my doing business with your office boy any

longer. Unless you grab me right away, I will go elsewhere and leave your paper flat on its back right here in the middle of a hard summer, and your whole life hereafter will be one vast, surging regret.

The line forms on the right; applications considered in the order they’re received. Triflers and professional flirts, save your stamps. Write, wire, or call at the above address.”

The next day Cobb was offered four jobs.

This is absolutely your last chance to support this church during the worship service today. No need to form a line, someone will come to you. If you have an pledge payment, please mark it as such. As always, the Wood–Wilhoit Memorial Food Bank is happy to accept your donations of non–perishable food and household items for the Community Kitchen. The collection basket for that is by the front door. And thank you very much for your generosity. If you wish to light a personal candle of joy or sorrow, you may step up here and Mary will assist you.



Eternal Spirit of life and love, we are profoundly thankful for the blessings we experience today. Would that we recognize our blessings every day and be thankful for them. Kate, please lead us in our Hymn of Thanksgiving.

*HYMN OF THANKSGIVING*

Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day,  
For all gathered here, and those far away,  
For this time we share, with love and care,  
Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day.

*ORISON*

*Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.*

Helen Solomon tells me that Ray is adjusting pretty well to his new life at Morning Pointe Assisted Living on Shallowford Road.

He may be adjusting nicely, but for Helen, it's been a long slow goodbye, and it is not easy for her to enter this new phase of her life, one with out her husband of more than 60 years. She says she may wait awhile before bringing Ray back to church so we may not see him here as often.

Ray showed us around town when we first moved here. Helen drove the van and Ray showed Kate the remote-controlled side door on their minivan. When he pushed a button, the door efficiently closed itself. He turned to Kate and said, "Ain't that the berries?" Ray wanted to make sure I knew a few words in low Yiddish, too. He was surprised that this Yankee gentile minister already knew the difference between schlemiel and a schlamazel.

If you are a newer member, perhaps you haven't had a chance to meet Ray. But you may have heard him whistle. In the past year or so, Ray began to whistle instead of sing. And he was good, too—right on key and a clear, sharp tone. One of the things about Alzheimer's is that it takes you back to your youth, so I guess Ray must have whistled a lot as a youngster.

So this is hard for us all. Ray and Helen were two of the twelve people who started this church in 1952. For many years, they were gardeners, tenders, caretakers, guides, mentors, parents, saviors and generous supporters of the church. For that, we owe them our sincere thanks. Please keep Helen and Ray in your prayers.

Thou, which are everywhere,  
Many are your names.  
May we always feel your presence,

May your wisdom guide us,  
In our deeds as well as in our dreams.  
May we have what sustains our body and soul;  
Lead us first to forgive the mistakes of others  
Even as we hope our own mistakes will soon be forgiven.  
May we resist the temptation of the quick and easy,  
And be delivered from that which demeans and destroys life.

May we live purposefully and joyfully  
in every moment, in every encounter,  
now, and in the time to come.

In this time of silence, let us hold close to our hearts those who suffer  
the fallout of war.

*Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.*

*RESPONSE*

When our heart is in a holy place  
When our heart is in a holy place  
We are blessed with love and amazing grace  
When our heart is in a holy place

*SERMON: Sin & Prayer*

I have this tendency to go overboard sometimes. Maybe it happens with you, too. I put a little too much spice in the stew, I sing a little too loud, I wear stripes and plaids at the same time, I drive a little too fast. Kate and I talk about living on the edge. I may be a little too ambitious in my sermon writing, as well. This week, I think I bit off more than I could chew when I thought I could preach about sin, communion and prayer in the same sermon.

I suppose it's possible to tackle those three at once, but it would be

a pretty superficial treatment and I'd rather muck around a little more deeply. So I chucked communion in favor of sin and prayer. That ought to be enough for one sermon. And now that I've done that, it seems a natural pairing of concepts. You commit a sin, feel guilty and you go pray about it.

You probably know about my series of sermons that I call "Church Words." I am preaching this year about words that you may have used in another church, words that your neighbors may use with abandon, words that we don't hear so much in Unitarian Universalist circles. Words that may have lost their meaning for us, are passé or perhaps words that frighten us.

These words are part of a religious vocabulary common to many people and I contend that if we don't reclaim our religious language and use it with meanings that are appropriate to what we believe, we will allow other people to define the words for us, and eventually we will be excluded from religious conversation.

Sin is a term used most often in a religious context to describe an act that violates a moral rule, or the state of having committed such a violation. Commonly, that moral code of conduct is decreed by a divine entity, that is, God. The colloquial use of sin includes thoughts, words, or acts that are immoral, shameful, harmful or alienating. We often hear the adjective, "sinful," describing sexy dancing, rock and roll and suggestive language.

Some concepts that are related to sin are punishment for sin, either in this life or the afterlife; the question of intentionality—that is whether the sinner intended to sin or just wasn't paying attention—the idea that one's conscience ought to produce guilt for sinning; a scheme to determine the seriousness of the sin, that is whether it was sort, tall or grande; repentance for sin, and atonement for sin. And for many Christians, the possibility of forgiveness of sins, often referred to as salvation.

Judaism regards the violation of any of the commandments to be a sin. Judaism teaches that sin is an act, and not a state of being.

In Western Christianity, sin is a relational problem. Sin alienates the sinner from God. It has damaged, and completely severed the relationship of the sinner to God.

In Eastern Christianity, sin is the refusal to follow God's plan. To sin is to want control of one's destiny in opposition to the will of God.

Islam sees sin as anything that goes against the will of Allah. Islam teaches that sin is an act and not a state of being.

In Hinduism, sin is often used to describe actions that violate moral and ethical codes. Unlike Judaism, Christianity and Islam, for Hindus, a sin goes against Dharma, that is, one's righteous duty in life. So it's more of a social concept instead of a divine one.

Buddhism does not recognize the idea behind sin because in Buddhism, instead, there is a "Cause and Effect Theory," known as Karma, or as I say, "You get what life owes you."

So for a Unitarian Universalist, is the word sin useful? I am unable to decide. My favorite research tool, the dictionary, was not much help to me in my exploration of sin. If I check the etymology of the word all the way back before Middle English, before Latin and Greek, all the way back as far as etymologists can trace it, then the root of a word will reveal concepts that make it easier to understand.

But not with sin, because the root of it is in a word meaning "to be or to be true." Other derivatives are am, is, yes, soothe, present, absence, interest, essence and proud. About the only thing I can draw from the root is that sin is a real thing. It is and it is true.

Crime is the civil equivalent of sin. And I have no problem with crime. Well, I have a problem with crime, as does everyone, but the

word is useful to me. But sin, that's different, somehow. A sin is a bit more than an unfortunate mistake or breaking the law. It's more than a parking ticket. After a sin, you can't say "Oops. So sorry." And press the do-over button. For me a sin is a transgression of a moral law of major proportions.

A crime breaks a civil law; a sin breaks a moral law. That's where it tends to get fuzzy for me. Because I see clearly that everyone has different morals and they all come from different places. Some people take their morals from the Bible, as interpreted by various preachers and charlatans. Some take their morals from Ayatollahs. Some learn morals from their parents. Some people learn morals from experience.

Whether you believe in God or in a goat, whether you are religious or not, if you are human, I believe you have morals. They may not be developed, they may be dormant, but you have morals. These morals guide your actions, encouraging you to do some things and forbidding you from doing others. And, even though the Republicans would like us all to have their morals, all of us have different moral systems. So with all these moral systems, derived from so many sources, can we use the word sin with any common understanding? Maybe.

Let's try a little sin test, OK?

Raise your hand if you think dancing the jitterbug is a sin. Some people would say it is.

Raise your hand if you think uttering foul language is a sin. I won't give you an example of a four-letter-word, you probably know what I mean. Like the word that begins with C and ends with R-A-P. Or the word that begins with S and ends with H-I-T. They get worse. Raise your hand if using those words and the worse ones is a sin.

How about swatting flies and poisoning roaches in your home? Is the

intentional taking of an insect's life a sin?

A paper mill uses nasty chemicals to make paper and then dumps its drains in the Tennessee River. Is that a sin? Can a business commit a sin?

Back there on the table is a basket and a couple of ballpoint pens. I have to replace the pens now and then. Is taking a ball point pen a sin?

A burglar with a gun in his hand breaks into Clint Eastwood's house and threatens Clint. Clint, of course, has his own gun and kills the intruder. Did Clint commit a sin?

Your 14-year-old daughter defies you and goes out with your neighbor's son, who just got his driver's license. Did she commit a sin?

The neighbor and the neighbor's son were both aware of your feelings and ignored you. Did they sin?

You just shot your neighbor's son in the back because he and your daughter got pregnant. Is that a sin? I didn't say you killed the kid, only that you shot him. Matter of fact, you hit him in the tookus, so he'll be OK. Sin or no sin?

Now you shot him in the back and killed him. Is that a sin?

Finally we get universal agreement. Everyone in this room would feel as if they had sinned if they intentionally murder another defenseless human being.

This is the problem with sin. It's a word that has unclear meanings when you do not know the person who uses it. One person's sin is another's unfortunate lapse of judgement. To commit a sin implies that right before you did the dirty deed, you had some rules, some

commandments, some guidelines that governed your actions in this life. From those, you derived your moral code. You had sworn to follow your moral code and you failed in your task, either inadvertently or purposefully.

Everyone at the Brainerd Baptist Church probably has the same moral code. That's the way Christianity works. Same for Islam, and to a lesser extent, Judaism. But for us, not so. Everyone has a different moral code, although there are some actions that we all agree are sinful.

So is there any point to using the word sin? Well, privately, maybe. But in common discourse with other people, I think it's best to reserve judgement about the sinful nature of someone's actions, either yours or another's. Perhaps you could pray about it.

Clever way of introducing the other topic, no?

Prayer is another church word that we don't use the way many church-going folk do. Over at the Brainerd Baptist Church this morning, I know Pastor Gallaty will be praying. Probably for sinners like us. Father Vick at OLPH will pray this morning. Rabbi Tepper prayed yesterday morning at Mizpah Temple. Muslims are called to pray five times a day.

Do we pray? Can we pray? Is prayer a useful concept for Unitarian Universalists?

Traditional prayer is the act of addressing God, or a god or spirit for the purpose of worship or petition. I say traditional prayer, because I think there may be a non-traditional form of prayer as well.

Specific forms of prayer may include praise, requesting guidance or assistance, confessing sins, words of reparation or an expression of one's thoughts and emotions. The words used in prayer may be an entreaty, a hymn, incantation, words of gratitude, or a spontaneous

utterance. Praying can be done in public, as a group, or in private.

Most major religions in the world involve prayer in one way or another in their rituals. In some cases the act of prayer is ritualized and must be followed in a sometimes strict sequence of actions—even going as far as restricting who may pray. On the other hand, many faiths teach that prayer can be done spontaneously by anyone at any moment.

Various spiritual traditions offer a wide variety of devotional acts. There are morning and evening prayers, graces said before meals, prayers before football games, silent moments before concerts, and reverent physical gestures. Some Christians bow their heads and fold their hands. Some Native Americans dance as a form of prayer. Some Sufis whirl. Hindus chant mantras. Orthodox Jews sway their bodies back and forth and Muslims kneel and prostrate themselves. Quakers observe long periods of silence. Some pray according to standardized rituals and liturgies, while others prefer extemporaneous prayers. Still others combine the two.

A prayer can be a direct petition to God. From Biblical times to today, the most common form of prayer is a direct appeal to God to grant a request. In many ways, this is the simplest form of prayer. A person directly enters into discourse with God and asks for their needs to be fulfilled. God listens to the prayer, and may or may not answer in the way one asks. This is the primary approach to prayer found in the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, most of the Church writings, and in rabbinic literature such as the Talmud.

A prayer can also inculcate certain attitudes in the one who prays. In other words, prayer can be educational. Prayer books have been printed by many religions. As a young Catholic boy, I had a missal I took to church every day. The Book of Common Prayer is a result of this educational approach to prayer.

Prayer is often part of faith healing. That is the attempt to prevent

illness, cure disease, or improve health through religious or spiritual means. Does it work? We really don't know. Sometimes prayer seems to be involved in someone's recovery from illness, at other times, it seems to have no effect at all.

In 1872, Francis Galton hypothesized that if prayer were effective, members of the British Royal family would live longer, given that thousands prayed for their wellbeing every Sunday. He therefore compared longevity in the British Royal family with that of the general population, and found no difference. Remember that sometimes God answers prayers and sometimes not.

In the western tradition and within Islam, prayers can be divided into specific parts. A prayer usually begins with praise, which the praying person owes to the god being addressed. Thanksgiving for blessings received is the next part, and it's entirely appropriate to thank your benefactor for what you have.

Confession is next. It's always a good idea to recognize your mistakes, your shortcomings or those aspects of your life that need more of your attention to be where they should be. The next part of a traditional prayer is supplication. The ask, as they say in basic salesmanship school. You praise, you give thanks, you confess, and only then, do you ask.

The last, and most neglected part of a traditional prayer is listening, or as I prefer, the wait. Inasmuch as God answers in mysterious ways, after praying, you must wait. And be alert to an answer, which may not be what you asked for.

The root of the word prayer is a word meaning to ask. The same root gives us a couple other words that help me pin down what I mean when I use the word prayer.

From that root comes precarious and imprecate, two words that deal with the future. Precarious, in that things might go one way or

another, imprecate, meaning to curse someone or to wish evil on someone or something. In both words we sense something of the future, that is, something we cannot control and about which we often pray. We'd all love to be able to control the future. Of course, that won't happen, so we pray about it. We hope. We wish. We ask God. And we pray.

We pray that we'll get promoted, pray that we'll ace that test, or pray that she calls me back. We pray that we'll someday meet Mr. Right or Ms. Right, we pray the Vols will win at least one more game, or we pray for material success, or that we'll find a half-decent job. Daidee Springer and I pray the Chicago Cubs will return to the World Series. Apparently, God roots for other teams. Damn Yankees.

I think prayer is a useful word for Unitarian Universalists, at least for this one. With prayer, the first thing I had to understand was the object of my prayers. That is, who or what am I praying to? And I solved that by not praying *to* anyone or anything, but praying *for* someone or something. So in terms that Pastor Gallaty might understand, I don't pray *to* God; I pray *for* God.

I am only an amateur theologian. But I believe that God lives in the connections between people. So when someone is hurting, ill or lost, when someone needs help, I pray for God to show up and re-connect that person to life. That's the way I think of prayer.

So how about a little prayer test, eh? Raise your hand if you think any of these are, or could be, prayers.

"Now I lay me down to sleep..."

The National Anthem before the Super Bowl

A solitary walk along the Greenway from the dam to the Market Street Bridge.

Flying solo around the world.

Sailing solo around the world.

“Hail Mary, full of grace, the lord is with thee....”

Michelangelo painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

Jackson Pollock spatter painting.

Frank Lloyd Wright’s home in Pennsylvania, “Fallingwater.”

Saying grace before meals.

Saying grace before a Thanksgiving meal.

Singing a hymn.

In this worship service, I offer a prayer each week, sometimes tied to current events, sometimes more general. I usually include the spiritual needs of this congregation if I know them. This morning, among others, my prayer was aimed straight at Ray and Helen Solomon, that they might re-connect in a new phase of their life. My prayer is my adaptation of Dan Budd’s adaptation of the Lord’s Prayer. I use it in public because many people know it, it re-frames traditional words in a new way and it seems to sum up many important things about prayer. I call it the Orison, which is a medieval English word for prayer.

I spoke earlier about traditional and non-traditional prayer. Marge Pasch would say that she prays when taking a walk in the woods. Ravi Shankar prays when he plays the sitar. There have been a few times in my life when I have felt utterly connected to my surroundings. This is not an uncommon experience; many people report entering such states of deep connection.

And the word prayer is often attached to such experiences. I think this is indicative of a new meaning for the word, or that people are having these deep connective experiences and using the only word they know that fits. Prayer. I think this is non-traditional prayer.

Meditation is another word that people use to describe such deeply felt experiences. And to close my sermon I offer this meditation on autumn. It’s called “To Hold Deep Shadows Close,” and I think it’s a prayer.

*MEDITATION: To Hold Deep Shadows Close*

A shudder contracts the shoulder blades  
as the season’s first chill  
shakes loose apprehensions  
of approaching winter.

Before us are the inexorable seasons  
of autumn and the long night.

We know where we are following birth, youth, fruitfulness;  
without mercy, the spiral motion of the seasons  
for an indifferent span.

The long descent into subterranean Earth has begun,  
beneath the cold into nether regions,  
the good and wise return.

Dried leaves rattle like skulls  
around the neck of the goddess  
to be absorbed into earth  
as a chorus of late October winds  
swirls sounds of desolation.

Squirrels gather nuts,  
frantically scurrying to store a supply for a deep cold winter.

One squirrel, injured by a car rests in agony  
beside the road in the grass.  
A black carrion crow lands on a low limb,  
watching,  
the dark void of death reflected in bright beady eyes.

Knowing that death is part of life  
does not lighten our fear of its hold.

A winter that endures past any spring  
brings up images of rooms below,  
ghosts in the fissures,  
apparitions in the garden twilight.

Have you not been jolted into recognition  
of a vanished loved one coming through—  
a glimpse in the gray revolving sidewalk carousel?

If we could only know,  
see past the veil,  
into the darkness numinous:

To hear cadence of my grandmother's voice again;  
To feel my child hand in my grandfather's;  
To ask my younger brother if it matters dying young, now;  
To ask my wife if cheerful greetings,  
all the tangibles of graphic art  
or of fresh cut flowers  
on trestle tables past matters now.

If only I could renew all the stories  
that once were so clear in my great aunt's voice;  
Or catch my father's eye  
for an accounting,  
even a silent approval.

Would such a visit in the presence of loved ones  
leave any solace for this life?

Perhaps it is enough to hold deep shadows close.

Leaves turn brilliant red and fall,  
The crow appears on yet another limb,  
We can hear the rattling of Kali's skulls,  
Memories quietly fade,  
The veil is numinous.  
With a sigh we return  
to prepare for another winter.

Since we are talking about traditional church words, Kate thought it  
appropriate to end with a very traditional hymn. Please join us in  
singing "Amazing Grace."

*HYMN 205, Amazing Grace*

*EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE*

Mary Hunter, would you extinguish our chalice, please?

We extinguish this flame,  
but not the light of its truth  
the warmth of this community  
nor the fire of our commitment.  
These we carry in our hearts  
and share with all the world.

*BENEDICTION*

May God bless you with a restless discomfort about easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships, so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart.

May God bless you with holy anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work tirelessly for justice, freedom, and peace among all people.

May God bless you with the gift of tears to shed with those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, oppression or the loss of all that they cherish, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and transform their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you really can make a difference in this world, so that with the grace that comes from deep human connections, you are able to do what others claim cannot be done.

*POSTLUDE: Dear Abby*