

**First Unitarian Universalist Church**  
**Rev. Sandra Fees**  
**Second Chances**  
**October 19, 2008**

**Sermon Reading:** Excerpts from The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini

**Sermon**

One of the most painful things for any of us to deal with is a broken relationship. When we hurt someone else or they hurt us, it causes an ache that does not easily go heal. We carry the burden of that injury around with us, sometimes for days, years or our whole lives.

We may doubt ourselves and feel remorse. Was it my fault? Why did it happen? What can I do to make it better? Or we may be angry and hold a grudge. Sometimes we nurse those grudges. You know what I mean. We say we want to forgive, but we first want everyone to know that we were wronged. So we draw every person we know into the situation, which in the process only grows larger.

There's something else we sometimes do. We get angry at the person we wronged. If things don't get addressed with the other person, we can get to the point where we can't look the person in the eye. We are ashamed. We just wish they would go away.

This is what happened to Amir in the The Kite Runner. He didn't stand up for his friend, Hassan, and then lied to make it seem like his friend had stolen something from him. He just wanted the boy to go away, because he couldn't stand being confronted with his own guilt day after day. But each action of his only made it worse. He got his wish, but it cost him dearly.

He and his father were exiled and fled to the U.S., where Amir grew up. Even in a new country, he still felt the sting of what he had done. He could not bury his guilt completely. Eventually, many years later, he was called upon to make amends. He was lucky. He was given a second chance. He took it. He didn't get to make amends in quite the way he expected or wished. That's how it is sometimes. But Amir did get a second chance.

When we are in the position of needing to make amends, we know it. Just as Amir knew it. We may ignore it, but still we know there's a problem. At some level, we know that there is a wound that needs to be healed. We know we need to learn to let go of the injuries.

Holding onto the wrong – the one we committed or the one that injured us - has a tremendous cost. It has a huge cost to us and to others. Our unresolved mistakes create a burden that we carry around with us until we can find a way to set things right. This is

exhausting. It is exhausting to feel bad about ourselves and other people. It chips away at our spirits. It can also ruin our mental and physical health.

How to atone is one of the great questions in our lives. It is one of the great religious questions. People, and consequently religions, have struggled with this from earliest times. When we make a mistake, what do we do? What does our religion suggest we do? Are all transgressions even forgivable? This is one of the questions that really haunts us. Do I even deserve to be forgiven?

Unitarian Universalists struggle with how to answer these questions. We rejected the idea that Jesus' death atoned for our sins. In fact, we rejected sin. Ever since our UU tradition rejected sin, we have had to struggle not only with how to learn to forgive, but also how to admit we have done wrong in the first place. We don't believe in original sin, generally speaking. We are optimistic about human nature. We affirm the worth and dignity of every person.

But what about our shortcomings? I doubt that anyone here is arrogant enough to believe they don't have any. So how do we confess that we still have work to do to the best people we can be? How do we admit we have made mistakes? To whom do we confess our failures?

We UUs have always believed in taking responsibility for our actions. We have often talked, especially on the Unitarian side, about salvation by character. This means we strive to be better people. We believe that our good deeds matter. The Universalist side of our tradition, which we talked about just a few weeks ago, affirms that we are loved just the way we are.

These may seem like contradictory ideas. I think we can hold both these ideas in a healthy tension. I can know I am loved. But I can also know that I am not a perfect person. There is room for improvement. I make mistakes. We can know that we are loved and also that there is room to grow.

Unitarian Universalism have been seeking a way to make the practice of atonement an intentional part of our tradition. We have begun to turn to other religions for guidance. Most of the world religions offer some mechanism for forgiving, making amends, and reconciling. We may not end up adopting the approach of any one of them, but we can learn from them. We are learning from them.

The one that seems to be having the greatest influence on our religion is Judaism. In the Jewish High Holy Days, we find a process for acknowledging our guilt, confessing it, and making amends. It is a process that has become increasingly meaningful to many Unitarian Universalists. It is being adapted as part of the liturgy and practice of many of our churches. It is even becoming a regular annual observance for many UUs.

I suspect the growing number of people with a Jewish heritage coming into our faith and the growing number of interfaith couples in our movement have helped make this so.

The Jewish High Holy Days are observed in the Fall. The Fall is a natural time for reflection and turning, as it is so visibly also the turning of the year in nature in this part of the world. This year, the High Holy Days concluded on October 8. The 10 day period began with Rosh Hashanah and ended with Yom Kippur or the Day of Atonement.

During this period, which is referred to as the Days of Turning or Days of Awe, individuals think about who they may have wronged over the past year. They look at their relationships and reflect on those that are broken.

They spend time in reflection and prayer. Individuals acknowledge those who they have wronged over the past year. The idea is to go to those who we wronged and try to work things out.

This means admitting our selfishness, our failure to help a friend, our lies and betrayals, or how we turned a blind eye to the needs of the world. It means having a sincere intention not to repeat the wrong. It also means asking for forgiveness. Then, at the end of the 10 day period, everyone returns to the community. This is the time for placing the burdens before God, before the community, and finally letting them go.

I think that we UUs need to learn a practice of atonement. We need to be willing to be humble enough to confess that we sometimes get it wrong. We need to do what is required to make up for it. Having a religious observance set aside for discerning our mistakes is quite powerful. It helps us incorporate confession and forgiveness into our everyday spirituality.

Having a practice of atonement won't turn back the clock. It's not a panacea. Some things can't be undone. Not every attempt will turn out the way we expect. Not every act of forgiveness will result in reconciliation.

We may be able to forgive but find we can no longer have a relationship with a person we wronged or who wronged us. Maybe that person is dead. Maybe that person is not good for us in our lives. We don't need to befriend everyone we forgive or seek forgiveness from. Maybe that person won't forgive us. But we can still own our mistakes. No matter what, we can learn to forgive ourselves. And we can seek the forgiveness of God.

There will be times when we can restore and even strengthen a relationship. More times than I think we believe, our relationships can be healed. Either way, we will have the chance to begin again. Good people do wrong, and we suffer because of it. We have a choice to turn that into something good. That's what Amir does in the [The Kite Runner](#). That's what we can do too. That's what we can do for ourselves and each other so that we can move on in our lives.

I think of the story a friend told me many years ago. When he was a young child, he went into his mother's bedroom to look at a small dish that his mother cherished. It was a family heirloom. He couldn't help but want to touch it. In the process he broke it. He was

so upset and didn't want to tell his mother what had happened. He didn't want to tell her he had broken her special treasure. So he put it back as best he could and didn't say anything.

Later she discovered the broken dish. She asked him what happened. He confessed to her that he had broken it. He told her he didn't mean to break it. He said he was sad that he had broken it. She didn't yell at him. She didn't brush it off lightly. She didn't just say she knew he didn't mean to do it. She said, "Why don't we go upstairs together, you and I, to look at it. We can be sad together." And that's what they did. They shared their sadness.

What a profound moment. When we do something that hurts someone else, we often hurt too. The hurt we cause them breaks our hearts too. So being able to be sad together makes it possible to begin to heal. So much more than any lecture or punishment or anger will ever do.

The dish is still broken. But the relationship was healed in those moments, and made stronger. A mother taught her son how it's possible to make a mistake and still be loved. A mother taught her son how to confess and how to forgive.

May we each learn to confess our own mistakes. May we learn to forgive. May we be an example to others, to our children and grandchildren. May we embrace the spirit of love and renewal.

May it be so. Amen.