

Redemption
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November 17, 2024

Former UUA president Susan Frederick Grey said during the pandemic – “this is no time for a casual faith.” Her words are even more true now. To navigate the complexities of our world we must engage deeply with our faith, our values, meaning and purpose. We must reflect on who we are as individuals and as a community, how we treat each other, how we make love present in our world. We must consider our role perpetuating the problems in the world and strive to make a difference.

Our Soul Matters theme this month is Repair, and a few months ago I decided that this Sunday I would preach on redemption. After the election I decided to stick with this topic and not switch to something else though it was hard. But I can't preach on hope every week friends, I do pray you find some everyday. And if it doesn't come easy for you this sermon may encourage you to try to create hope for someone else.

So let's get started. Redemption is the action of being saved or saving from sin, error, or evil. It also means regaining or gaining possession of something in exchange for payment or clearing a debt. So it has both religious and secular meaning.

In monotheistic religions redemption is about one's relationship with God. Sin is breaking a commandment, or a covenant with God. Atonement is process of confessing your sins and making amends – for Muslims this might mean carrying out good deeds or seeking forgiveness from the wronged person. These acts bring you back into right relationship with God. Those of you who were raised catholic know these steps well- some of you maybe be having a flashback at this point.

So for these religions, sin is separation from god and atonement allows one to come back in to relationship with God – and by this process be redeemed. It an exchange -You pay for your sin by your acts of atonement and God redeems you – accepts your payment and restores the relationship.

This is an important religious concept.

In Christian theology, Jesus's death on the cross was the atonement for our sins. It is through Jesus' death that we are reunited with God – Jesus paid the price required to redeem humankind.

Jews have an entire week set aside each year to get back into covenant with God through atonement.

Most of us here are not part of a monotheistic religion - we have varying ideas about god, or no functional concept of God that is a part of our lives. So lets consider a different theological frame.

As UU our values include the idea of interconnection – the interdependent web of all connection. We believe that what we do and how we act affects not only other beings, but the earth and all life, not only in the present but in the future. For some of us, this interdependent web is God with love as the interconnecting spirit.

Within this interconnected web, sin is an act that separates us from interconnection, from community, and with that a separation from love and wholeness. We don't use sin in a UU context – but the word is relevant here.

Think about it. When I do something that hurts or harms another person or group I am causing a riff – a separation from connection. Humans do this all the time, in small and big ways. And when this happens, to restore connection, we must atone, make amends, apologize, or reimburse. We may feel shame for our actions and separation. Some parents of little kids who steal a candy bar will require them to return to the store, apologize, and pay back the cost of the candy. Criminals have to make reparations, serve time in prison. When we sin we have torn the fabric of our connection and so we must repair it. When we separate ourselves from community by our actions, we must atone for our actions and make amends.

However, redemption is not automatic, and it is not something we can do for ourselves. Redemption is about relationships. Redemption requires that the person or community you wronged must accept your amends and welcome you back. Sometimes it is simple and sometimes not.

Redemption does not happen in a vacuum it happens in community in relationship.

You may know that the Unitarians descended from the Puritans who were all about community and covenant. They covenanted with each other to walk together in the spirit of God. The Puritans had sin, atonement and redemption down to an art. For the Puritans, redemption required participation by the whole community. That meant that if you sinned, the community, through the leaders, would pass judgment on you, and you would be required to be punished to atone for your sin.

The key part of Puritan punishment was the public nature of it. I'm sure you've all seen pictures of the stockades. You'd put your hands and your feet, sometimes your head and you'd be on public display for however long was required by the judgement. Often, the thing that you'd done would be written somewhere. Everyone would witness your shame. It was a communal activity. The public exposure of your sin, your public exposure of your shame, would then lead to your redemption. Once you took these steps, they were done with it. Take off the stockades. They're done. Get on with your life. We don't know whether or not people in their hearts felt

that way, but that was the expected communal response. Harsh but effective because the community knew the drill.

Of course these days its much more complicated because of our interconnected media and proclivity towards passing judgement on everyone and everything. It is unclear who gets to decide when someone has redeemed themselves?

The Me too movement, with women calling out men for sexual crimes has made public redemption more complicated. There is no longer a unified sense of what is necessary for redemption. It used by pretty agreed on what was required say and do. It is form of public performance. You remember these public apologies from politicians or other public figures. Part one: the sin is revealed to the community. Sometimes there's a time of denial. We'll let them have that. That's part of the process. Then they stand in front of the pulpit, aka the news conference, in the public square with their dutiful spouse standing next to them, and they admit their weakness and their failure. They need to show us that they feel ashamed. They may not say that, but just standing there in front of everybody sometimes is enough. They have to acknowledge how they've hurt others. They have to accept their failings. And we all move on. Ok we're good, you can be re-elected.

Its not that simple anymore – as it should be. The system is shifting and changing, and the w are no longer comfortable with business as usual. What each person has to do to redeem themselves when they have broken the public trust is no longer clear.

So lets consider the Volleyball player from the Netherlands Steven Van de Velde. He was 19 when he met a girl online. They talked frequently for several months and then made plans to see each other. He thought she was 16. He flew to another country to be with her. He found out that she was 12. Of course he should have left right then, but he didn't. they had sex. Before he left he told her to go to a clinic and get the morning after pill because they had not used contraception. She did and the clinic workers called the police after hearing her story.

Those are the simple facts of the case. He served time in prison in England for rape, and was then extradited to the Netherlands where his sentence was reduced and he was released. In his home country his crime was under a lesser charge because the sexual activity was not forced.

Do you think he should have been allowed to participate in the Olympics? Clearly the Dutch Olympic team felt that he should. As we read in the article from the Guardian, "The Netherlands' Olympic committee, said in a statement that he had served his sentence, completed an extensive rehabilitation program and experts had concluded there was no risk of him reoffending.

However, as we read, some activists felt that expressions of regret alone were not sufficient when aiming for such a prestigious second chance in life: he should take advantage of the significant platform he now had as an Olympic athlete to talk openly and honestly about the impact of sexual abuse on victims.

The article asks: what message does the Netherlands send to the world by allowing itself to be represented by a man convicted of a sexual offence?

The answer of course depends on where you stand in regards to the redemption of someone convicted of a sexual crime.

The country could be sending a message that redemption is possible and that your life doesn't have to be ruined by an act you did as an adolescent. That you can still follow your dreams.

From another perspective the country could be sending the message that it is OK for the perpetrator to flourish despite his crime, while the victim must live with his actions.

What do we expect of people who seek redemption? How is the community satisfied that someone has done enough?

We are talking about redemption at the level of society. Lets get more personal and talk about the woman and her nephew.

There are a lot of strong feelings expressed in the letter – understandably so. She seems clear that she wants nothing to do with her nephew given the heinous crimes he has committed. And yet she wrote the letter. Am I being too harsh? She asks.

I have no significant quarrel with the answer for the columnist – it follows the steps that we have discussed about redemption – he explains that the nephew does not seem to have atoned for his actions – in this case acknowledge what he have done and the impact that is had on people's lives. He has just begun to make amends, in this case by serving a prison sentence and other things that are required by the judge in his case. Eric affirms her effort to set boundaries with him.

And yetas a minister I would address her letter a bit differently.

Is there ever a crime that is so horrible that a person should never be allowed back into relationship with their community? Is he irredeemable in her eyes. She is shocked and hurt and disgusted by his behavior but does she have to cut him off forever?

She writes - Am I being too harsh? I remember the day he was born and how happy and close we all were for so long. His actions are unforgivable as far as I'm concerned.

She is shocked and hurt by his actions, and I think she feels a little betrayed. How could my nephew who I loved do such a horrible thing.

My advice to her would be not to take this personally. It is not about her. And not to close the door on him.

When her sense of disgust and betrayal have mitigated somewhat, I would encourage her to extend a hand of mercy to her nephew. A gesture of love to a boy she knew and loved when they were happy and close. Instead of waiting for him, she could reach out to him and ask him for what she needs from him in order to reconnect whether it's a statement of remorse, a commitment to making amends to his victims.

I would encourage her to give him a chance to redeem himself and then show mercy when he tries.

This letter is an extreme example, but it is an illustration for the final theological concept necessary for redemption – mercy. A person can atone, make amends, ask for redemption but they cannot redeem themselves, that is the gift of mercy that is granted by others. Or by God. Forgiveness is a form of mercy, but it is not the same. Mercy is an act of allowing someone back in relationship after they have broken trust. It is an offer of grace from the one who holds the power to redeem, whether that's an individual, a family or a community.

It's messy. It's hard. It often requires stepping outside our comfort zone. We don't do mercy well in our culture. People released from prison will tell you that mercy and redemption are hard to come by even if they have taken all the steps necessary.

Who has offered you a hand of mercy in your life – accepted your request for redemption and welcomed you back into relationship? When have you extended this to others?

Have you closed your mind and heart to someone who seeks redemption?

We all want the same things in life, to be seen and loved and included and to know that when we screw up – even giant almost unforgivable screw-ups, that there is a path to redemption and people extending a hand of mercy, welcoming us home.

Reading #1 :

Why the Netherlands seems unfazed by sending a convicted child rapist to the Olympics

Guardian Newspaper July 30 2024

By Renate van der Zee

For weeks now, controversy has surrounded the Dutch beach volleyball player Steven van de Velde, who was sentenced to four years in prison in England in 2016 for raping a 12-year-old girl when he was 19. He has served his time and openly expressed regret for what he called “the biggest mistake of my life”. But is that enough for him to be allowed to represent the Netherlands at the Olympic Games, a contest in which participants are also expected to serve as role models?

International media and support groups for victims of sexual violence certainly do not think so. Many condemned the decision to let Van de Velde play, and even called on the International Olympic Committee to investigate how he had been allowed to compete.

Remarkably, in the Netherlands itself, the case has not caused much commotion. The news hasn't made the front pages and there were no columnists or opinion-makers expressing astonishment or indignation. Last week, the Team Netherlands chef de mission, Pieter van den Hoogenband, expressed mild surprise at the timing of the uproar, pointing out that Van de Velde had already returned to international sports in 2017, and played in European and World championships. The Netherlands' Olympic committee, which selected Van de Velde, said in a statement that he had served his sentence, completed an extensive rehabilitation program and experts had concluded there was no risk of him reoffending. The volleyball player had shown that he had “grown and positively changed his life”, it said.

But why the muted reaction in the Netherlands? One legal distinction is that Van de Velde is unlikely to have been convicted of rape had he stood trial in the Netherlands rather than England. In England, sex with a 12-year-old is rape, regardless of the circumstances: an under-16 cannot legally consent. But after he was extradited to the Netherlands, having served almost a year of his prison sentence, he was released after less than a month. Under Dutch law, his crime was deemed to be the lesser offence of ontucht, sexual acts that violate social-ethical norms.

On social media, there are of course Dutch people arguing that Van de Velde should not compete, with others going much further in their imagined punishments. One sports commentator wrote that, although what Van de Velde did was utterly wrong and punishable, he did not physically force the girl to have sex with him. The Dutch sports authorities and many other Dutch people, believe that now that Van de Velde has served his sentence and publicly expressed remorse, he is “of course free to move on with his life”. But there is a difference between moving on with one's life and representing your country at the most prestigious sporting event in the world, where you are also supposed to set an example.

Reading #2

From the Washington Post advice column Dear Eric.

Dear Eric: My sister's only son (and my only nephew) is incarcerated in another state and will remain so for many more years for sex crimes against a child. I am still flabbergasted as to how he could commit such a heinous crime.

My sister maintains contact with him, but no one else in the family is interested in communicating with him. He wants to be able to call and write to me. I am sure he needs emotional support, and I know he will ask for money to be put on his books.

I really don't want anything to do with such a person and can't imagine what I could possibly say to him other than to express my absolute disgust in his actions that will affect this child in one way or another for likely her entire life.

I have told my sister that I have no interest in communicating with him and to please not give him my phone number or email address under any circumstances. Am I being too harsh? I remember the day he was born and how happy and close we all were for so long. His actions are unforgivable as far as I'm concerned.

— Conflicted Aunt

Conflicted: You're not being too harsh; you've set a boundary. He needs to honor it, as does your sister.

Though he says he wants to be in contact, I'm not seeing any work that he's doing or has done to repair the relationship with you. His crimes had an unimaginably horrific impact on his victims, and their families. And they also impacted your family. Without repair, there can't be a relationship. And even with amends from him, your relationship won't be the same.

If he's ready, willing, and able to do the work, he can send word through your sister. And you can decide whether a new relationship is possible. But for now, you've stated clearly what you need and that can be the last word.