

“Healthy Bodies, Healthy Souls”

(The Seven Deadly Sins: Lust)

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Here we are, back to the Seven Deadly Sins!
For those of you who are new, let me say just a few words
about this sermon series we’re doing here.
In the Unitarian Universalist tradition,
we don’t usually talk a whole lot about sin.
Most of us over the years have agreed
that people are born basically good,
and even though we all mess up, some of us very badly,
everyone is basically doing the best they can
in the life they find themselves in.
So it might not be obvious
why we’re talking about sin here in this church.

And yet, when we look at the world—
when we look at *ourselves*—I think we’ve got to admit
that we are also prone to messing up and doing less than our best
in so many ways.
As I mentioned a couple of months ago, the word “sin”
is actually a translation of words in Hebrew and Greek
that mean “to miss the mark,” like missing a target in archery.
Doing less than our best, maybe,
or maybe doing our best at the time and finding out
our best wasn’t enough to keep from hurting someone else.
That’s what I mean when I talk about sin.

But why the Seven Deadly Sins?
After all, isn’t that mostly a Roman Catholic thing?

That's true. This is not really part of our Unitarian Universalist theological tradition. Again, when I talk about theology I'm talking about how we answer the big questions we ask about life—questions like, where does everything come from? Why do we have to die? And how are we supposed to live while we're here?

I think the Seven Deadly Sins deserve our attention exactly because they're a little out of our theological comfort zone. Every religious tradition has its theological blind spots, areas of the spiritual life that we haven't thought a whole lot about, and maybe don't have a lot of homegrown wisdom to offer. Sin is one of those things in our tradition—something we haven't attended to very much, and to me that means we probably have the potential to learn something important here!

It's not as if we are perfect people, after all. In fact, a very basic reason for spending this time on the Seven Deadly Sins is that they are a problem for us, too! The Seven Deadly Sins have stuck around in our collective imagination because they are just about universal. No matter who you are, you have probably at one time or another struggled with anger, or envy, or greed, or any of the others. We could all use some help figuring out how to deal with them and being the people we want to be!

So the Deadly Sin of this month, one of the classic ways we fall short, is *lust*. And of course the million-dollar question is, what *is* lust? What exactly are we talking about here? Well, let me say right out: I have absolutely zero interest in trying to convince you that lust as it is commonly understood, lust as sexual desire plain and simple, is a sin. That's just not true!

Whatever the problem is here, sexual desire is not it.
Desire is a good thing; it's a blessing—
the pull of one person to another,
the urge to connect so closely with another living being.
Plato had it right in our Story for All Ages—
this is not a sin. It's a gift.
Of course, like everything in human life, it can bring us harm.
It can bring harm to other people.
But in and of itself the gift of our desire, the gift of our sexuality,
is a wonderful thing.

So what's the problem with lust?
Why would anyone think it was a sin?
Well, as we are finding out on this journey
through the Seven Deadly Sins, it's all about the definition,
what we mean when we say the word.
One of the desert monks of the early Christian church,
a man named Evagrius, gives us a definition of lust
that's different from how we usually think of the word,
and I think it's worth our consideration.
He says lust is the desire to use other people
for our own selfish purposes.¹
It doesn't have to involve sex, though it often does.
Lust is when we are tempted to treat other people
as a means to an end—ignoring their rights and their dignity.
And *that* is a big problem.

Evagrius is pointing us toward *ethics* as the focus of our concern.
And I *know* our faith has something to say about ethics.
What we're really talking about today is sexual ethics.
I'm interested in how we make good choices about sex,
so that this part of our lives is as joyful and healthy as it can be,
for ourselves and for our partners.

¹ Kathleen Norris paraphrases Evagrius in *Acedia & Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life* (New York: Penguin, 2008), p. 27.

By the way, let me just pause for a moment and ask:
talking about sex in church still feels a little bit strange—am I right?
Sex is something that is very private for most of us.
So, to talk about sex frankly and freely
with anyone but our intimate partners—maybe *even* with them!—
that might feel unsafe, inappropriate, edgy to many of us.
And to talk about sex at church—
well, there we are right up against a centuries-old tradition of silence.
That’s not something most of us are used to doing in our churches.

But, when you think about it, why shouldn’t we?
After all, we are all sexual beings.
We’ve all got bodies, and minds, and hearts.
From the moment we’re born until the moment we die,
among many other things, we are sexual beings.
Sexuality is part of our lives. It’s so powerful.
It’s tapped into our deepest instincts and desires.
It’s so closely connected to love, the most beautiful emotion—
the most beautiful *reality* we know.
Sex between loving, consenting adults can be incredibly joyful.

Yet we all know sexuality can also be used to harm.
People can do terrible damage to one another
when we misuse our sexuality.
Let me remind you of some not-so-fun facts.
Every year, hundreds of thousands of women and girls
around the world become the victims of human traffickers
who force them into prostitution.²
Closer to home,
two years ago a study found that more than 10% of all women
in the United States have been forced to have sex at least once,
and more than one in 50 men.³

² Linda Bates Todd, “The U.S. Takes on Trafficking,” *Christian Century* August 11, 2009, p. 25.

³ CDC, *Sexual Violence Facts at a Glance*, Spring 2008, available online at
<http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/dvp/SV/SVDataSheet.pdf>.

The statistics for child sexual abuse are even more horrifying. The largest study done to date found that 27% of women and 16% of men reported that they were sexually abused as children. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual teens are at even higher risk for abuse.⁴ This is a very, very hard thing to know.

We can't stop these terrible things from happening, not entirely, and that is a very hard thing to know too.

But there are things we can do.

Our collection today benefiting the Women's Center is one small step toward helping victims of sexual violence right here in our community.

More personally,

as people of faith, we are all challenged and called to use our sexuality in ways that heal, not harm.

We are called to make good choices, *ethical* choices about our sexuality.

In our liberal religious tradition, we have been preaching for a very long time that there isn't really any division between "sacred" and "secular." There is no part of our life that is not sacred, or out of the realm of the religious.

So sexuality is on the table.

It's part of our life, and so it is part of our life as religious people.

Yet, in this church, no one will tell you exactly what to do or what to believe, least of all about such a tender part of our lives.

In our tradition, you are invited and challenged to figure out what you believe, what you value, how you want to be.

We can teach you what other Unitarian Universalists have believed over time.

We can teach you how their seeking, and the experience of their lives,

⁴ Advocates for Youth, *Child Sexual Abuse I: An Overview*, available online at http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=410&Itemid=336.

led them to say, this is what I cannot help but believe to be true.
We can share with one another our own journeys, our own faith.
But, in the end, you and your conscience, your wisdom, your heart,
are the only one who can say what is right for you.
You have to decide what you believe to be right,
and then *act* on it. Live a life that makes sense, a life of beauty
in which your values and your actions are in harmony.
That is your right and your responsibility.

And, yes, that is a tall order. It's *hard*.
It's the work of a lifetime.
And, especially when it comes to sexuality,
there is a lot of bad advice out there.

In our culture, anyone who has any exposure at all to the mass media
these days is just bombarded with images of sex and sexuality.
Movies, magazines, TV, billboards, computer pop-up ads—
sex is all around us,
because the ad industry knows sex sells.
However, all those seductive images that promise us fulfillment
if only we'll buy this brand of beer, that skin cream,
whatever it might be—
all those so-called perfect bodies that drape themselves relentlessly
over our TV screens and our magazine pages,
do not do a darn thing to help us figure out
how *we* want to be as sexual beings.

Luckily, we have some resources of our own
to help us figure it all out.
This morning you might notice that the parents of many of our 4th-
through 6th-graders aren't with us today.
They're over in the Religious Education cottage
at an orientation meeting for a new class we're offering for those kids
called *Our Whole Lives*, or OWL for short.
OWL is a sexuality education curriculum with six different

age-appropriate versions for kids and adults.
Our Unitarian Universalist Association
put it together about 10 years ago,
jointly with our friends in the United Church of Christ,
and in my opinion, OWL is one of the very coolest things
Unitarian Universalists have to offer our families.

The heart of the program is to help kids and adults make
their own decisions about their sexuality.
It gives accurate information,
it supports you in figuring out what's right for you,
and it promotes respect for all people,
no matter what their sexual or gender orientation.
I am thrilled that we are able to offer this program to our kids.
Kathy Schick and Ben Cervantes are the leaders of the OWL class;
they'll also be teaching an age-appropriate class for some of
our kindergartners and first-graders later in the year.
Also, Christina Cervantes and Greg Harper are standing by,
ready to offer a class for teens as soon as we have a critical mass.
All of them have spent two to three days being trained as leaders—
a serious commitment to our church and our kids.
Please thank them when you see them after church!

The Our Whole Lives program is based on four key values
that I think we would all do well to take as a guide.
Let me tell you just a little about each one.
The first value is *self-worth*. The OWL curriculum
for our 10th- through 12th-graders puts it like this:
“Every person is entitled to dignity, self-worth,
and his [or] her own attitudes and beliefs about sexuality.”⁵
Wow, this sounds so simple.
But how many of us have actually felt this kind of support
within our families, our friends, our schools?
How many of us survived high school

⁵ UUA & UCBHM, *OWL Grades 10–12* (2000), p. 17.

with our sense of self-respect intact,
feeling that our beliefs and our feelings are supported
by our partners, our peers, and the adults in our lives?
What a gift it is to be able to support our UU kids in this way.
I hope and trust that this congregation can be a safe place
for *everyone*, a place where, no matter who you are, you are respected.

Another really important value taught by our OWL program
is *sexual health*.

OWL teaches healthy sexual relationships are based on consent.
They are not based on exploitation—nobody forces another person
to do something they don't want to do.

Healthy sexual relationships are mutually pleasurable—
both partners get to enjoy what is happening.

They are safe—the partners protect each other from unintended
pregnancies and from sexually transmitted diseases.

They are age-appropriate—
nobody has to rush into sex before they're ready.

They are based on mutual caring.

And they are respectful. Partners are honest with each other,
and they keep the commitments they make to each other.

And, again, wow, if we can help our kids choose relationships
like this, that is *huge*. I think back to my own teens and twenties,
and those values of honesty, safety, non-exploitation, and respect
were not something I or my peers could take for granted.

No matter where you are in life,
or how many hurtful relationships you have been in,
my wish for every person
is that you will know you deserve being treated right,
you will know your partners deserve *your* care,
and you will hold out for a relationship where this *is* how it is.

It's a two-way street, of course.

Each of us has to take responsibility for our own lives.

And the next OWL value is *responsibility*.

I really like how the OWL handbook for older teens puts it:

We are called make choices about our sexuality

“that enhance human wholeness and fulfillment
and express love, commitment, delight, and pleasure.”⁶

This is sacred stuff we are talking about.

What we do with our bodies is, or can be, a holy thing.

It moves us and our spirits at the most fundamental level.

The novelist Robertson Davies has a wonderful definition
of sexual responsibility that I’d like to share with you.

“Chastity,” he says, “is having the body in the soul’s keeping.”⁷

Having the body in the soul’s keeping—
to me that’s the bottom line.

There are so many good and loving choices.

No one can make them for you.

If you allow your soul to guide you—

your conscience, your deepest wisdom,

that place within you that is connected in love to *all* beings—
you will never go wrong.

This is what I believe, and I think you believe it too.

But sometimes our society needs a little help in getting on board too,
and the last OWL value is *justice and inclusivity*.

The OWL program teaches that, when it comes to sex,

no one has a right to pressure or force someone else to do something
they don’t want to do.

It teaches that heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality
are all normal and natural parts of the human experience.

They’re all OK.

And it teaches that every person has equal value and equal rights,
no matter what their gender, their race, their class,
their physical or mental abilities, or their sexual orientation.

⁶ UUA & UCBHM, *OWL Grades 10–12* (2000), p. 17.

⁷ Robertson Davies, *A Mixture of Frailties*.

For too many of us, this is still a dream, not yet a reality.
But here in this place, let us reaffirm what we know in our hearts:
love is a blessing, whenever it comes to us.
Our bodies are a gift.
The yearning we feel for one another, body and soul,
is a holy thing.
Blessed be all who love,
and may the work of our hearts and hands bring that day ever closer
when everyone is free to live and love without fear.

Amen.