Atonement

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Unitarian Universalist Meeting House
October 2, 2011

As we approach Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, we are all – Jew, Gentile, Christian, atheist, UU – standing in need of atonement. The English word atonement means at its root to make one, at-one-ment, and we have never seen so much fracture and division. Class war between rich and poor, the eternal struggle between women and patriarchy, whites and people of color, industrial world vs. developing world, conservatives vs. liberals vs. libertarians, capital vs. labor, Yankee fans vs. Red Sox fans, Apple users vs. PC users.

Jewish tradition holds that on New Years, Rosh Hashanah, the book of the year is closed. You then have ten days in which to rectify anything that is amiss. There were traditionally two aspects to atonement: atoning for any sins against your fellow human beings, and for sins against God, which were considerably more serious. You are supposed to make atonement to your fellow humans before Yom Kippur, so you can concentrate on making atonement to God on Yom Kippur. That way, accounts for the last year can be settled.

This morning I want to go through some of the root ideas of atonement in Jewish, Christian and Universalist thought, before switching gears to talk about Twelve-Step programs, and then I'm going to end by urging that we approach atonement by getting the sin out of it.

UUs tend to set high standards of behavior for others and ourselves, and we inevitably fall short. In the church newsletter the other day, I asked for feedback on my ministry, and I got some from one of you which made me understand a connection I had been missing for these three years. I reached out and had a conversation that needed to happen.

Of course, the way the modern liberal mind deals with these shortcomings is very different from the way the ancient Jewish people thought of them. Jewish and Christian conceptions of atonement are rooted in the idea of sin, though the Jewish conception is not the same as Christian, as we shall see.

The observance of Yom Kippur is one of the many ritual practices set forth in the book of Leviticus. It is the one day a year when the priest may enter the Holy of Holies, the seat of God. As most ancient worship, it was based on animal sacrifice. Four animals are involved, a bull, a ram and two goats. The bull, the ram and one of the goats is slaughtered, and their blood is scattered on the mercy seat, the throne of God. Once this has been done, the high priest lays his hands on the head of the other goat and transfers to it all the sins of the people of Israel, in the passage I read earlier. This scapegoat is then allowed to go out into the wilderness where dwells

the desert demon Azazel. Leviticus says that the scapegoat is simply set free in the wilderness, but by the time of the Jerusalem Temple, the practice developed that the scapegoat was driven off a precipice to its death. When this had been done, a signal was sent back to Jerusalem, and a cloth of white wool, symbolizing purity, was raised over the temple, and the people were relieved to see that their sins had been atoned for another year[1].

Of course the Jerusalem temple, and its bureaucracy and priesthood are no more, and after its destruction, atonement became a more internal matter. In the Twelfth Century, the Jewish sage Maimonides gave the opinion that since there was no longer a Temple or priests, atonement would have to come not from sacrifice or scapegoats, but from repentance for one's sins. He defined repentance as a resolve not to commit the sin again, and it is stronger if you have the opportunity to commit it again and refrain from doing so[2].

So Maimonides and Jewish thought totally divorced the idea of atonement from ritual sacrifice. However the Christian church has always been very much wedded to the idea of atonement as sacrifice.

Go back to the scapegoat. The scapegoat was not invented by the Jews; Babylonian and Canaanite religion had also used this device. But pagan religions had also practice human sacrifice as a means of atonement of sins, while this was strictly forbidden in Jewish law (Leviticus 18:21). Thus it is a little peculiar when the idea arises in the Hebrew Bible that a person should be the means of atonement, but there is such a suggestion. There is an extended passage late in the book of Isaiah, what the scholars would call Second Isaiah, which talks about the suffering servant. The words will be familiar to us from Handel's Messiah (Isaiah 53):

"3 He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
..."

This sufferer suffers for all of us:

"4 Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
5 But he was wounded for our transgressions,

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[1]Book of Jewish Knowledge, exact citation lost.

[2]Moses Maimonides, "Hilchot Teshuvah (Repentance)" in Sefer ham-Mada, tr. by Immanuel M. O'Levy http://www.panix.com/~jjbaker/rambam.html.

crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed."

"The punishment that made us whole;" this is the essence of vicarious atonement: punishing one being releases the sins of everyone else.

"6 All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all."

This suffering servant is basically the human equivalent of the scapegoat. The sins of the community are heaped on him, and in his destruction the sins are atoned.

"10. ...When you make his life an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;
through him the will of the LORD shall prosper."

You can see where this is going. These passages, written in the sixth Century B.C.E. after the Jews' return from Babylon, were seized on by St. Paul and the writers of the Gospels and made the prophecy which Jesus was claimed to fulfill. Jesus's death became the atonement for the sins of humanity.

But what sins? In Jewish law, atonement had been for specific violations of the detailed provisions of the Torah. As I said, atonement for offenses against God was a much more serious matter than for offenses against one's neighbor. But the Jews would not have thought of atoning for the sin of Adam. It took St. Paul, a generation after Jesus' execution, to cast Christ as the new Adam.

Paul's reasoning is basically this: humans suffer death, they are not immortal, because death was one of the four punishments imposed by God on Adam and his descendants for the transgression of eating the forbidden fruit. Jesus promised eternal life to all who would follow him, so that means that Jesus has lifted the death sentence from the human race. Jesus is the new Adam, and has atoned by his death for the blot of original sin which stems from Adam's transgression back in Eden.

All subsequent sin proceeds from this original sin, and is so all-encompassing that only the sacrifice of God himself will atone for it. This theory of vicarious atonement is at the heart of orthodox Christianity, Eastern, Catholic and Protestant.

But Hosea Ballou didn't see the sense in it. Our great Universalist theologian was not well-educated; he was a New England country preacher and some people think he got most of his

ideas on theology from his fellow Vermonter Ethan Allen. Yet he was a child of the Enlightenment. In 1805, Ballou published his Treatise on Atonement which cast a rational eye on this centerpiece of Christian doctrine.

Ballou pointed out that the conventional Christian theory of atonement made no sense. God was the injured party, the victim of sin. Why should it be God who makes the sacrifice? It is as if I owe you a large sum of money and I come to you and say, there is no way I can possibly pay anything on this debt, I am totally wiped out, and you say, that's Ok, don't worry about, it, I'll pay the debt myself. And you take some money and pay it to yourself.

God was whole, God did not need to be made whole. Jesus' true function, in Ballou's opinion, was not to atone for the sins of humanity but to show people the love of God and by that love to turn us away from harmful ways. He says:

> "There is nothing in heaven above, nor in the earth beneath, than can do away with sin, but love; and we have reason to be eternally thankful that love is stronger than death, that many waters cannot quench it, nor the floods drown it; that it hath power to remove the moral maladies of mankind, and make us free from the law of sin and to wash us pure in the blood, or life, of the everlasting covenant.[3]"

It is the love shown by Jesus that will bring about the full happiness of the human race and reconcile it to God.

Now as an aside, there are other problems with vicarious atonement; the death of Christ occurs at one specific point in time, but the sins of humanity occur at all times. How can one event atone for sins which haven't been committed yet?

But back to Ballou; he makes sense, but he is still using the language of sin. This term had been so torn from its roots by the doctrine of original sin, it is unrecognizable and produces a lot more heat than light. How about substituting the word "harm" -- can we not recognize that we all can and regularly do harm one another?

In the Karen Armstrong workshop we have concluded with a look at Ms. Armstrong's latest Book, *Twelve Steps Toward a Compassionate Life,* and her Ware lecture this past June at the UUA General Assembly in Charlotte. What this noted religions scholar is about here is promoting a kind of meta-religion based on the Golden Rule, and a pathway for realizing this rule in our everyday lives. In this she is following in the footsteps of Hosea Ballou, though she may not realize it. If we can all feel compassion in our hearts and live it in our lives, we will bring the whole human race closer to true happiness.

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[3]Ballou, Hosea, *A Treatise On Atonement* (Boston: Skinner House 1986) p. 123-4

I agree with Armstrong that the Golden Rule can form the basis for an inter-religious revival, and it is very useful for her to attempt to spell out what a compassionate life would look like on a practical level. But the goal to treat each other as we would like to be treated is a difficult one for anyone to realize completely, and there needs to be some recognition that we will fall short of it in specific instances. This is why there needs to be some concept of atonement.

And if we look to the model that Armstrong herself used, we will see one useful concept. Her Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life is consciously modeled on the Twelve Step recovery program of Alcoholics Anonymous, because as Armstrong says, greed and selfishness is a kind of addiction. And the Twelve Steps of AA's recovery program have strong elements of atonement built in.

One cannot be caught in the throes of addiction to alcohol or drugs without harming others. The first essential part of Twelve Step recovery is realizing your own powerlessness over the addicting substance, and the second step is to turn your life over to God or to the Higher Power, as you understand it. But in the subsequent steps, you have to make an honest moral inventory of yourself, and tell this account to another person. Then in later steps you are required to make a list of all the people you have harmed. Once you have this list, you are supposed to make amends to those people, where this can be done practically without adding to the harm.

Making amends: it is daunting but it is manageable. I went through the twelve steps about five years ago, and when I got to this step, I wrote a long letter to my former wife. It took me three days, and three more to put the stamp on and mail it, but when it was done I felt a weight lifting from me and was rewarded by a thoughtful and appreciative letter back from her.

That's one style of atonement: thinking of people we have harmed through specific actions, and going to them to apologize. And if anything we can do now might make the situation better, to offer to do it.

This is not appropriate in all cases. There will be situations in which the very approach to the injured person by the offender will revive the injury. And any apology must be accompanied by sincere repentance, an acceptance of responsibility and a promise not to repeat the conduct.

Confession is held to be good for the soul, and in many instances it is. I also know of instances where confessions have made a bad situation worse. But whether we verbalize to any other person, it is always good for us to account to ourselves for the harm we have caused and to take responsibility for not doing it again.

So what are we to make of all this? For myself I see three conclusions:

1. The scapegoat is a diversion; no one can atone for you but you yourself. To see

Jesus as the scapegoat whose death takes away the sins of the world, though it is at the core of orthodox Christian faith, diverts us from the hard central teaching of Jesus to love God and to love others as ourselves.

2. For us to bring about atonement it is necessary to take responsibility for our actions that may have caused others harm.

3. If you are the one who caused harm, forgiveness is not in your power; it is for the injured to forgive. But it is in your power to forgive yourself, for you have also been injured by your harmful conduct.

One thing that you will find in most Christian worship services is a ritual confession and absolution. I remember to this day the one from my Episcopal childhood –

> "Almighty and most merciful father, we have erred and strayed from Thy ways like lost sheep, we have followed too much the devices and desires of our won heart, we have offended against thy holy laws, we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done, and there is no health in us..."

Now I don't yearn to put thoughts like this into our regular services; we want to be a church which makes you feel good, not bad. Because we do not emphasize sin, you will find that the section on confessions in our hymnbook contains only three entries, Numbers 476-478, and they are seldom used. But confessions answer a deep psychological need, and I have discussed with several people around here my desire to occasionally use some kind of acknowledgment of shortcomings.

This is such an occasion, and I am glad that my profound and talented colleague Robb Eller-Isaacs has written a beautiful Litany of Atonement for just such an occasion as this, and I want to close by inviting you to turn to it at number 637 and join me in reading it responsively.
For remaining silent when a single voice would have made a difference

__We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For each time that our fears have made us rigid and inaccessible

__We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For each time that we have struck out in anger without just cause

__We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For each time that our greed has blinded us to the needs of others

__We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For the selfishness which sets us apart and alone
__We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For falling short of the admonitions of the spirit

__We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For losing sight of our unity

__We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For those and for so many acts both evident and subtle which have fueled the illusion of separateness

__We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

Amen.

Readings Leviticus 16, selections The Day of Atonement

3 Thus shall Aaron come into the holy place: with a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. ... 5 He shall take from the congregation of the people of Israel two male goats for a sin offering, and one ram for a burnt offering.

6 Aaron shall offer the bull as a sin offering for himself, and shall make atonement for himself and for his house. 7 He shall take the two goats and set them before the LORD at the entrance of the tent of meeting; 8 and Aaron shall cast lots on the two goats, one lot for the LORD and the other lot for Azazel. 9 Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for the LORD, and offer it as a sin offering; 10 but the goat on which the lot fell for Azazel shall be presented alive before the LORD to make atonement over it, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel. ....

15 He shall slaughter the goat of the sin offering that is for the people and bring its blood inside the curtain, and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, sprinkling it upon the mercy seat and before the mercy seat. 16 Thus he shall make atonement for the sanctuary, because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel, and because of their transgressions, all their sins; and so he shall do for the tent of meeting, which remains with them in the midst of their uncleannesses. ...

20 When he has finished atoning for the holy place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall present the live goat. 21 Then Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness by means of someone designated for the task. 22 The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness.