



## White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Grow Your Soul & Serve the World

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### *Theme for February* **SIN – the practice of turning**

Each month, our church gathers around a monthly theme and practice to guide our congregational life: worship, small groups, religious education, justice, and classes. Use these readings for reflection around the dinner table, in your own prayer practice, alone or with others.

*More online at [www.wbuuc.org/themes](http://www.wbuuc.org/themes).*

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#### **QUESTIONS**

In what ways have you turned away from your best self at times, or "missed the mark"?

What has helped you turn toward deeper compassion, humility, and love?

What language do you find speaks sufficiently to the brokenness, oppression, or hatred in the world; communal and/or personal?

#### **QUOTES**

I am not a saint, unless you think of a saint as a sinner who keeps on trying.

- Nelson Mandela

Neutrality is at times a graver sin than belligerence.

- Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis

Contrary to what we may have been taught to think, unnecessary and unchosen suffering wounds us but need not scar us for life. It does mark us. What we allow the mark of our suffering to become is in our own hands.

- Bell Hooks

The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen.

- Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

The Hebrew Bible uses three words: *chatah*, “to miss the mark, going astray” is by far the most common; the second, *avah*, “to act wrongly”, usually involves violation of the commandments and wrong intent; the third, *pasha*, “to rebel”, transgression and full-fledged revolt from God, includes referencnes to wealthy landowners foreclosing on poor people, unjust laws that hit women and children hardest, and preachers who say whatever people want to hear. *All three* meanings are about separation, or out of sync, with the will of God – to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly.  
- Barbara Brown Taylor

## POETRY & LYRICS

### Inventing Sin

God signs to us  
we cannot read  
She shouts  
we take cover  
She shrugs  
and trains leave  
the tracks

Our schedules! we moan  
Our loved ones! we moan

God is fed up  
All the oceans she gave us  
All the fields  
All the acres of steep  
seedful forests  
And we did what  
Invented the Great Chain  
of Being and  
the chain saw  
Invented sin

God sees us now  
gorging ourselves &  
starving our neighbors  
starving ourselves &  
storing our grain

& She says  
I've had it  
you cast your trash  
upon the waters  
it's rolling in

you stuck your fine finger  
into the mystery of life  
to find death  
& you did  
you learned how to end  
the world  
in nothing flat

Now you come crying  
to your mommy  
Send us a miracle  
Prove that you exist

Look at your hand, I say  
Listen to your sacred heart  
Do you have to haul the tide in  
sweeten the berries on the vine

I set you down  
a miracle among miracles  
You want more  
It's your turn  
You show me

- George Ella Lyon

## **Because we spill not only milk**

Because we spill not only milk  
knocking it over with an elbow  
when we reach to wipe a small face,  
but also spill seed on soil we thought was fertile but isn't,  
and also spill whole lives, and only later see in fading light  
how much is gone and we hadn't intended it.

Because we tear not only cloth,  
thinking to find a true edge and instead making only a hole,  
but also tear friendships when we grow,  
and whole mountainsides because we are so many,  
and we want to live right where black oaks lived,  
once very quietly and still.

Because we forget not only what we are doing in the kitchen  
and have to go back to the room we were in before,  
remember why it was we left,  
but also forget entire lexicons of joy  
and how we lost ourselves for hours  
yet all that time were clearly found and held,  
and also forget the hungry not at our table.

Because we weep not only at jade plants caught in freeze  
and precious papers left in rain,  
but also at legs that no longer walk  
or never did, although from the outside they look like most others  
and also weep at words said once as though  
they might be rearranged but which  
once loose, refuse to return and we are helpless.

Because we are imperfect and love so  
deeply we will never have enough days,  
we need the gift of starting over,  
beginning again: just this constant good,  
this saving hope.

- Nancy Shaffer

## READINGS & EXCERPTS

Abandoning the language of sin will not make sin go away. Human beings will continue to experience alienation, deformation, damnation, and death no matter what we call them. Abandoning the language will simply leave us speechless before them. Ironically, it will also weaken the language of grace, since the full impact of forgiveness cannot be felt apart from the full impact of what has been forgiven.

Deep down in human existence, there is an experience of being cut off from life. There is some memory of having been treated cruelly, and – a little deeper, perhaps – the memory of having treated someone else cruelly as well. Deep down in human existence there is an experience of seeing the light and turning away from it, either because it is too beautiful to behold or because it spoils the dank but familiar darkness. Deep down in human existence there is an experience of reaching for forbidden fruit, of pushing away loving arms, of breaking something on purpose just to prove that you can. Deep down in human existence there is an experience of doing whatever is necessary to feed and comfort the self, because there is no one else to trust, no other purpose to serve, no other god to follow.

For ages and ages, this experience has been called sin – deadly alienation from the source of all life. By some definitions, it implies willful turning away from God. By others, it is an unavoidable feature of being human. Either way, it is a name for the experience of being cut off from air, light, sustenance, community, hope, meaning, *life*.

- Barbara Brown Taylor

Sin is what caused me to leave the church and give up religion, and sin is what brought me back. In my grandmother's house, sin was associated with pleasure. All those things that I thought were fun were of the world, and therefore sinful. Dancing, playing cards, going to the movies all condemned me to Hell—which made it sound like a pretty interesting place. In my father's house, sin was associated with form and ritual. Eating meat on Friday, coming into church with the head uncovered—these were misdeeds to confess. But I couldn't feel guilty about them. Years later my three-year-old son came running to the house to tell me that a neighbor's boy had just told him that God would kill him if he told a lie. I decided that it was time we found a religious community that would sustain and encourage our beliefs:

*that we are part of a universe of diversity and inter-dependence,  
that the diversity of our world suggests that truth and beauty take many forms,  
that God is concerned with the enhancement of life, that evil is life-destroying,  
that sin is associated with self-absorption, and that salvation lies in selflessness and service.* A religious community is in the world and concerned with the world.

- By Betty Bobo Seiden, From *Been in the Storm So Long*, a meditation manual edited by Mark Morrison-Reed and Jacqui James. Published by Skinner House in 1991.