WHERE THE BUCK STOPS
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A little over a month ago, a BP oil rig accident caused the biggest oil spill in history. Today, oil is still spewing out of the ground into the ocean at a rate of hundreds of thousands of gallons per day, killing ocean wildlife, destroying delicate ecosystems, and damaging the fishing industry that supplies a quarter of all the fish we eat in this country. All of BP’s efforts to stop the leak so far, including the recent “top kill” attempt have failed. The disaster is getting worse and worse.

The American public is responding as we always do to disasters caused by corporations: on one side you have the liberals livid with righteous indignation, wailing “I told you so’s” to high heaven, demanding that the negligent corporations and governmental powers be held accountable. On the other side, you have conservatives scrambling to make sure that the disaster is not used as justification for actually changing anything substantial when all that is really needed is a little better technology. Both of these approaches center around a guilty party – either it’s the corporation or it’s an individual or it’s the government or it’s someone’s lack of technological expertise.

In my last sermon called “The Car You Drive,” I talked about our tendency to lift up heroes in our culture – to imagine that there are spectacularly singular individuals who pick themselves up by their bootstraps and create tremendous wealth or do tremendous good all by themselves. Well, we do the same thing with villains. We want so much to believe in individual responsibility that when something goes wrong, even on a massive scale like the BP spill, we are always trying to figure out who or what is to blame. We want to identify the culprit and then punish or eliminate it.

There is something about this approach that is comforting in its simplicity: There are bad apples out there. Get rid of the bad apple and everything returns to normal. But just
as the idea of heroes acting in a vacuum is a myth, so is the idea of villains acting in a vacuum. All of us, for good and for ill, are only able to do what we do in the world because of an intricate web of circumstances and resources, the culture surrounding us, and just dumb chance. Individuals simply don’t have the kind of control that we wish we had.

Responding to the oil spill, Republican nominee for a Senate seat in Kentucky, Rand Paul captured the public’s attitude about these things perfectly. He said, “Accidents happen.” Of course he was saying this with a shrug to get BP off the hook, but on one level he’s right. Accidents do happen and no amount of technology or regulation is going to prevent accidents from happening from time to time. The only thing that will prevent accidents happening is to stop doing the thing that caused it to begin with. If we, as a society, decided that we do not want an oil spill in the ocean to ever happen again, the only way to ensure that is to stop pumping oil from the ocean.

Oil spills happen because we buy oil. BP is only able to do what it does because of us. Because of our desire to drive cars; to eat meat from Uruguay and fruit from New Zealand; because of our desire to fly in airplanes, buy giant TVs, eat fast foods, and drink bottled water. Not all of us in this room do all of these things, but most of us do at least some of them on a regular basis.

I think we all know this on some level, but we want to deflect responsibility. So we identify villains -- literally scapegoats. We are part of a long tradition of this: the book of Leviticus in the Hebrew Bible describes a ritual of scapegoating practiced by the ancient Israelites on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The high priest would lay his two hands on a goat’s head and confess all the crimes of the community, symbolically putting them on the goat. The goat would then be escorted out to the wilderness to an “inaccessible land” and let go to Azazel. No one really knows who or what Azazel was, but the implication is that he was some kind of desert demon. Once the goat had gone off to Azazel, the person who had escorted it there would come back, change clothes, wash his body, and the community would be exonerated from their sins.
We do a similar thing today when we place the sins of our community on the heads of individuals and corporations. We think we can neutralize their evil power by sending them off to an inaccessible land. Let me be clear: I’m not saying that they should not be held accountable and made to pay for the damage—of course they should. But the true responsibility for making the world a better place lies with us—not with BP, not with President Obama, not even with God except insofar as you think of God as the force within us that gives us the capacity for change. The responsibility for changing the world is ours.

The problem is that changing the world means changing ourselves. And true, deep change of the kind that is required is really hard. A reporter for Mother Jones magazine recounted a conversation with a fifty-something couple in southern Louisiana who said that oil spills and chemical leaks happened all the time when they were kids; they swam in rubber suits when it got bad and it was no big deal. *They just hope this doesn’t mean we’ll stop drilling.* Deep down, I think most of us in this room hope that we won’t stop drilling when we think of the radical changes in our lives that stopping drilling would require.

One of the reasons it’s so hard to contemplate deep change on an individual level is that it’s socially uncomfortable. It alienates us from the larger culture in which we live. If you choose not to eat what everyone else eats, if you choose not to watch TV or drive cars or fly in airplanes, you’re a freak. You’re seen as overly serious, even fanatical. “Take a load off,” people will say, “Put it on the goat and send it off to Azazel.”

No individual among us can go out and change the world by him or herself for all the reasons we have been discussing. An individual deciding to live off the grid and use no fossil fuels whatsoever accomplishes little except cutting him or herself off from society. So I’m not suggesting that we do that.

But I am suggesting that we change the conversation. Let’s start talking about what we can do individually and collectively to start to change our culture. Let’s start talking
about our own complicity in the evils that we decry – how our own behaviors line up or don’t line up with our commitment to the values of Unitarian Universalism.

For many of us, the language of sin and guilt and penance is one of our least favorite aspects of traditional religions. It’s what many of us fled from when we left the Catholicism or Judaism or Protestantism of our youth. Fire and brimstone and sacrifices and penance and priests putting sins onto a goat – these all tend to make our skin crawl. Many of us were drawn to Unitarian Universalism precisely because such language is absent. It seems like such a happy religion. It’s a religion without Hell or a devil. All of us are going to Heaven no matter what we do here on Earth. It’s a religion without doctrine; a fact which is often misunderstood to mean that “anything goes.” It’s a religion of acceptance, often misunderstood to mean that nothing we do is unacceptable. Politically we tend to feel that, sure, there are bad guys out there, but not us. We’re okay.

If this really were the extent of the our religion’s engagement with right and wrong; if, by virtue of our membership in this group, in this room, any effort we made would be good enough; if we had no serious expectations of our members; if failure were impossible, then our religion would be truly thin and lacking in moral substance. I don’t think this is the intent of Unitarian Universalism, but I do think that sometimes we drift dangerously close to it.

We could use a little talk of fire and brimstone now and then. After all, if we as a human community don’t change our ways, we are going to end up in a kind of fiery hell on this earth, with unprecedented environmental devastation and human suffering. There will be no goat on which to load our sins and no wilderness to which it could be sent.

Many of us already do a lot of good in the world and all of us also participate in the evils of the world. Both of these are true. For each of us, there is a gap between the good we are already doing and what we could be doing. I invite all of you, over the summer to try to find ways to narrow that gap. There are a thousand ways to do it. You can slowly change your habits and lifestyle to align more and more with your values. You can work with social and environmental justice organizations, either outside the church or here
within this community. We have lots of opportunities here at All Souls to walk our talk – the Ethical Eating group, the Nuclear Disarmament Task Force, the Monday and Friday meal programs, the Navigators, the Booker T Center, and many others. You can take a stand when you talk with your friends or business colleagues about issues of justice and compassion, explain why you make choices that might be different from the norm and be prepared to be told to “get a life” or “lighten up once in a while.” Stick to you guns and explain that your religion requires you to think seriously about how you live your life and to not only have convictions but to act on them.

If we treat BP as our scapegoat on which we pile all the sins of our community and send it out to Azazel in the wilderness of falling stock prices, PR nightmares, loss of government contracts or even bankruptcy and obliteration, have we really accomplished anything? Has justice actually been served? Is it any less likely that there will be another oil spill or equivalent environmental disaster in the future? I think we all know that the answer is no.

The buck has to stop somewhere and I believe that it is incumbent upon us as a religious community to say, the buck stops here. We may not be able to change the world by ourselves, but when we say “deeds, not creeds,” we’ve got to mean it. When we get news of an environmental or humanitarian disaster, instead of saying that “so-and-so has sinned,” let’s say to ourselves, “We have sinned. We’ve participated in creating the conditions of possibility for this disaster. This is a wake-up call. It’s time to redouble our efforts and to cleave to our values ever more closely. It’s time to search our souls and re-examine who we are and who we want to be.”

In the spirit of humility, let’s bring the goat back from the wilderness and reclaim the responsibility that we have at times tried to refuse. Let us embrace our accountability for the world in which we live and solemnly accept our power to transform it.