

“Forgiveness: What It Is and Isn’t”
Skagit Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
March 21, 2021
Guest Speaker: Rev. Bruce A. Bode
Celebrant: Jorge Manzanera

Quotes on the Theme of Forgiveness

“Not forgiving, staying in bitterness, anger, and hostility, is like drinking a cup of poison and waiting for the other person to die.”

(Fred Luskin)

“It was easy to forgive, so much harder/ to be forgiven.”

(Stephen Dunn, from “Long Term,” *New and Selected Poems*)

“I have discovered that most people who tell me that they cannot forgive a person who wronged them are handicapped by a mistaken understanding of what forgiving is.”

(Lewis B. Smedes, *The Art of Forgiving*)

“And throughout all eternity, I forgive you, you forgive me.”

(William Blake)

Chalice Lighting

Amid all the noise in our lives, we take this moment to sit in silence –
to give thanks for another day;
to give thanks for all those in our lives who have brought us warmth and love;
to give thanks for the gift of life.

We know we are on our pilgrimage here but a brief moment in time.

Let us open ourselves, here, now, to the process of becoming more whole –

of living more fully;
of giving and forgiving more freely;
of understanding more completely the meaning of our lives here on this earth.

(Rev. Tim Haley)

Opening Words

Our Opening Words are from the 13th century Sufi poet Rumi, born in Afghanistan in 1207.

Come, come, whoever you are.
Wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving – it does not matter.
Ours is no caravan of despair.
Come, even if you have broken your vows a thousand times.
Come, yet again, come.

(Mawlana Jalal-al-Din Rumi, adapted)

Reading

My sermon for this Sunday's service will be on the immense and ever-important subject of forgiveness. And one of the aspects of forgiveness I will be talking about is how difficult it is for one to be in the position of needing to ask for forgiveness.

My reading is a poem on just that subject, a poem by the American poet Sharon Olds about a mother-daughter relationship ... a story told from the daughter's perspective about her mother coming to her in apology ... and how difficult this was for the mother ... and what this will now mean for their relationship. The poem is titled, "After 37 Years My Mother Apologizes for My Childhood."

After 37 Years My Mother Apologizes for My Childhood

When you tilted toward me, arms out
like someone trying to walk through a fire,
when you swayed toward me, crying out you were
sorry for what you had done to me, your
eyes filling with terrible liquid like
balls of mercury from a broken thermometer
skidding on the floor, when you quietly screamed
Where else could I turn? Who else did I have?, the
chopped crockery of your hands swinging toward me, the
water cracking from your eyes like moisture from
stones under heavy pressure, I could not
see what I would do with the rest of my life.
The sky seemed to be splintering like a window
someone is bursting into or out of, your
tiny face glittered as if with
shattered crystal, with true regret, the
regret of the body. I could not see what my
days would be, with you sorry, with
you wishing you had not done it, the
sky falling around me, its shards
glistening in my eyes, your old, soft
body fallen against me in horror I
took you in my arms, I said *It's all right,*
don't cry, it's all right, the air filled with
flying glass, I hardly knew what I
said or who I would be now that I had forgiven you.

(Sharon Olds, *Strike Sparks: Selected Poems, 1980-2002*, p. 47, Knopf, 2004)

Sermon: “FORGIVENESS: WHAT IT IS AND ISN’T”

Introduction

Forgiveness has to do with the process of releasing our hatred, hostility, bitterness, and disappointment toward others, ourselves, and reality in general – or all three – so that we are able to say “yes” to life and get on with our lives.

It’s hard for me to imagine how anyone could be a mature human being without having developed at least some capacity to forgive; it’s one of the marks and measures of a developed human life.

Additionally, without a generous dose of forgiveness in our lives, we simply won’t make it, either individually or, perhaps, as a human species.

And, personally, there’s little that moves me more emotionally than to hear of or to witness examples of forgiveness – again, whether in relation to others, ourselves, or reality in general. Tears spontaneously fill my eyes in the face of such examples of forgiveness.

The reason for such emotion, I think, has to do with the recognition of some obstacle being overcome ... for it strikes me that forgiveness relates to what is the hardest spiritual labor we humans can undertake; namely, the difficult work of the ego in surrendering its plan for life in the face of what reality actually brings our way ... embracing, as it were, a larger reality, saying, as the Christ in Gethsemane, “Not my will, but thine be done.”

Is forgiveness always called for?

Over my years as a minister, I’ve delivered many sermons on this subject of forgiveness, and this morning I thought I’d give a kind of summary of the main aspects of this vast subject, as I’ve dealt with it ... beginning with the question of whether forgiveness is always called for.

It’s the question of whether there are acts of such horror – the Jewish holocaust, for example – that cause everything, including the notion of forgiveness, to pale in front of the magnitude of that horror ... the obstacle so huge, so seemingly insurmountable, that one despairs of being able to do anything with it.

But the question to my mind is: What is the alternative to forgiving? As insurmountable as a particular obstacle might be, if forgiveness is not possible, then it would seem that one is forever condemned to live under the shadow of that obstacle with no hope of ever coming back into the light.

Part of the reason why “forgiveness” may not seem like a solution to some of the horrors of life is that we may have some faulty and confusing notions about the reality and dynamics of forgiveness. So, let me spend most of this sermon talking about what forgiveness is and isn’t ... beginning with that well-worn phrase “forgive and forget.”

Forgive and forget

We need to know that forgiveness, though it is the way that opens us to a brighter future, does not necessarily forget the darknesses of the past. The past doesn't disappear just because through the principle of forgiveness one is now open to working for a different and more whole future.

How can you ever, and why should you ever, forget the deep hurts and wounds that are so much a part of your life, even when they might be largely healed? If you do forget, you're more likely to get wounded again in the same place. So forgive, but also don't be afraid to remember.

Some clarifications regarding forgiveness

In his book titled *Forgive and Forget*, Dr. Lewis Smedes has a very fine summary of what forgiving is *not*. Forgiving, he says, is *not* forgetting, or excusing, or condoning, or accepting, or tolerating, or smothering conflict. Here's how he puts it:

“You do not *have* to forget after you forgive; you may, but your forgiving can be sincere even if you remember.

“You do not excuse people by forgiving them; you forgive them at all only because you hold them to account and refuse to excuse them.

“You do not forgive people by smothering conflict; if you forever smother people's differences, you rob them of a chance to forgive.

“You do not forgive people merely by accepting them; you forgive people who have done something to you that is unacceptable.

“You do not have to tolerate what people do when you forgive them for doing it; you may forgive people, but still refuse to tolerate what they have done.”

(Lewis B. Smedes, *Forgive and Forget*, p. 49)

What forgiveness is

And, on the positive side, then, what is forgiveness in relation to others?

It's essentially an *internal* process – typically a slow one – that takes place in the heart and the mind of the person who feels injured or wronged by another ... a process that, as I said at in my introduction, has to do with releasing our hatred, hostility, bitterness, and disappointment toward that person and again beginning to wish that person well ... which can be a kind of test for whether you have, indeed, forgiven: Do you wish the other person well again?

“A time to hate”

Ironically, one of the things I have discovered in reflecting on the meaning of forgiveness is that there can be a place for hate and other so-called “negative emotions.”

The emotion of hate, the urge for revenge, and the desire to strike back can be seen as natural and even, perhaps, necessary responses to situations that threaten human dignity.

When we are being stepped on and treated as no human being ought to be treated; or, when we see others being stepped on and treated as no human beings ought to be treated, then our hatred and desire to strike back arises in us to let us know that something is wrong, that the situation is intolerable and ought not to be put up with.

Additionally, our hatred lets us know that we are fighting back against this situation ... and that we have something to fight back with. As one author on the subject of forgiveness puts it:

“Not to feel resentment when resentment is called for is a sign of servility, ... a lack of self-respect.” (Haber, *Forgiveness*)

The problem with hate

But, of course, there is also a problem with hate and resentment when we hang on to it long after the event.

“Hate,” as Dr. Smedes says, “can keep us going while we feel battered, but the drive dies down as time goes on after the ordeal is over. And then the hate turns its power against the hater.” (*Forgive and Forget*) It corrodes from the inside; it saps the energy of the soul. As author Fred Luskin puts it,

“Not forgiving, staying in bitterness, anger, and hostility, is like drinking a cup of poison and waiting for the other person to die.”

The process of releasing our hatred is the process of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a way of not letting a past event take you over.

It’s a way of not being a victim anymore.

Forgiveness is the medicine for the injury. (I don’t know what other medicine there can be.)

It’s a medicine that will eventually heal the open wounds to our psyche and spirit.

Tender to the touch

But, again, we must also be clear that forgiveness does not erase the disfigurement or the scar tissue from those wounds ... because when you have been wounded, particularly if you have been badly wounded, you may expect that there will always be a tenderness at the place of the injury. Touch the scar tissue, you will remember ...

... and I remember some years ago on a parish visit speaking with a lovely 85-year old woman, who told me that finally, finally, just in the last few years, she was able to forgive a step-mother who had treated her cruelly when she was a youngster around the age of ten.

She said she had worked on trying to get over her hatred for her step-mother all her life, and it was only recently that she had been able to do it. And yet when she spoke to me of those times from 75 years ago, she wept at the memory of it. The place was still tender to the touch. So:

Forgiveness does not undo or erase the past;
it doesn't mean everything is now as it once was;
it doesn't mean you necessarily think the person forgiven is now not dangerous for you;
it doesn't necessarily mean you want the person for a bosom friend.

Again, to quote Dr. Smedes:

“When you forgive, you heal your hate for the person who created that reality. But you do not change the facts. And you do not undo all of their consequences. The dead stay dead; the wounded are often still crippled.” (*Forgive and Forget*, p. 108)

Just as some physical wounds never entirely heal, so, too, some of our soul-wounds may be so deep that they never entirely heal, regardless of how much we try to forgive and move beyond hatred.

Forgiveness and reconciliation

With regard to the dynamics and reality of forgiveness, we also need to distinguish between forgiveness – the internal process of releasing hate – and reconciliation, which has to do with the results of that internal process of forgiveness in the outer world. What forgiveness does is open the *possibility* of reconciliation with another person, but it does not necessarily lead to reconciliation.

For reconciliation to take place, *trust* has to be built up again.

And trust is something that must be earned ... over time ... and through experience ... it cannot simply be granted upon request.

Reconciliation, thus, has pre-conditions – or, at least, it should have – not least of which is a recognition on the part of the offending parties as to how they have given injury, as well as some demonstration of change in respect to their behavior.

Forgiveness cannot be tied to apology

Now, certainly, it's easier to forgive when there is a recognition of offense on the part of another, and an expression of regret, remorse, and perhaps an apology (as in the poem from my reading this morning), but we cannot make forgiveness depend on the offending party.

Think about that: It would be a terrible thing if forgiveness depended on the attitude and actions of the one causing the injury, for we might thereby forever be held in bondage to a past about which we can do nothing.

Think, for example, of a father or mother now in the grave, who never expressed regret or sorrow for ways they may have damaged their children ... or teachers from one's school days that seemed to delight in humiliating their students ... or the cruelty of schoolmates who bullied or teased.

Such examples could be multiplied many times ... and, thus, forgiveness cannot depend on the recognition, remorse, or repentance of others. If forgiveness did have such pre-conditions, our lives would be at the mercy of countless past events and injuries that we are helpless to change.

And forgiveness has everything to do with changing: changing our response to the past so that we are able to move on with respect to it.

Forgiveness as an internal process

Let me illustrate this idea that forgiveness is an internal process and that reconciliation in the outer world is another matter.

I have a friend who practices the spiritual discipline of the twelve-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous as a way of dealing with his addiction to alcohol. And forgiveness is a pivotal part of that spiritual discipline. But it's forgiveness with an important clarification, as least as understood by my friend.

My friend says that he never asks other persons to forgive him. My job, he says, is essentially two-fold: First, with respect to myself, I work on forgiving both myself and others. I try to quit hating myself and beating up on myself for the damage I've done to my life. And I work as well on forgiving others for the part that they've played in damaging my life.

Then, secondly, says my friend, my job with respect to others is to work on uncovering how I may have hurt and injured them ... and to express to them my sorrow for my deeds and attitudes ... and, to the extent I can, to make amends.

But, he says, I don't ask others to forgive me or to reconcile with me. That's up to them. I make an apology to them on the basis of my spiritual task and with no expectations or

strings attached. How my apology is received is their business. I can't pressure another person to forgive me for what I've done; all I can do is express my remorse and apologize to them.

So confession may be given and repentance proffered – and that no doubt makes it easier to forgive – but forgiveness cannot be coerced or demanded.

Forgiveness and justice

Another way of expressing this distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation is to understand that the principle of forgiveness does not undo the principle of justice.

Justice, essentially, has to do with three things:

- 1) holding people responsible for their actions;
- 2) protecting the injured parties; and,
- 3) to the extent possible, making amends to the injured parties.

Forgiveness does not erase these demands of justice.

As a matter of fact, without justice, the principle of forgiveness is undermined ... because without justice the victims are at the mercy of the perpetrators, who often are not noted for being particularly merciful.

And, thus, to forgive without justice, to forgive without accountability, is to set one's self up again, which shows a lack of respect for human dignity and self-worth.

But the reverse is also true, namely, that forgiveness is needed to make justice work.

Without forgiveness, justice is undermined; justice alone will not do the trick. Justice and forgiveness belong together; without each other they both fall.

Why is this? Why does justice need forgiveness to support it?

Well, because this is a broken world, and a constantly breaking world, which is always in need of repair. This is a world in which we all fall short ... in, oh, so many, many ways ... on, oh, so many, many days.

No amount of recompense can undo the damage done to our world, and no system of justice can restore everything that has been broken. Only forgiveness restores. Only forgiveness is creative.

Harder to be forgiven than to forgive

Let add a couple more things on forgiveness: First, a reflection on a line of a poem by Stephen Dunn that reads: "It was easy to forgive, so much harder to be forgiven."

(Stephen Dunn, from "Long Term," *New and Selected Poems*)

Hmm ... so much harder to be forgiven than to forgive ... well, yes ... for how do you feel when someone comes to you and says, “You will be happy to know that I have forgiven you?”

Actually, you may not be so happy at all to hear this news ... because you didn’t think you had done anything wrong that required forgiveness ... and the person who is happily announcing his or her forgiveness of you shouldn’t have taken offense in the first place ... was too thin-skinned ... too easily offended ... didn’t understand at all what you were about ... didn’t know the fullness of the circumstances, etc., etc.

So, while at some level, you may be happy that the other person has resolved some issue for him or herself, at another level it might have been just as well if he or she had not announced it to you ... because now, indeed, you do have some stuff to work through with respect to the other person ... and soon there may be good reason for the other to forgive.

But why might it be more difficult to be the one needing to be forgiven than the one in the position of forgiving?

The reason, I think, is because the one forgiving is the more magnanimous, more God-like figure, the one with the power. It’s hard to be the party needing forgiveness.

And so it is that we don’t want to make mistakes that would put us in the position where we are the ones that need to be forgiven ... where we may feel that we have to grovel until the power person releases us from our prison. And what if the person refuses to release us from that underdog position?

Thus, we greatly fear making mistakes and what they will mean for our place in life.

And so, secondly, if we have made mistakes, we’d rather not acknowledge those mistakes. Sometimes, we’d rather do anything than acknowledge or recognize our need to be forgiven because of what we imagine this means for our place in life and for our image of ourselves ... and how such an acknowledgement may complicate and upset our lives and call upon us to change our ways.

Psychological dynamics of forgiveness

This brings me, briefly, to the psychological dynamics of forgiveness and back to my introduction to this sermon in which I spoke of forgiveness as being the hardest spiritual work imaginable because it has to do with the ego adjusting itself to a reality that it would rather not have to face.

I see a paradox here, namely, the capacity to forgive comes from the paradoxical combination of having both ego-strength and ego-humility at the same time ... of having a sense of one’s self-worth, on the one hand, and a sense of one’s minute finiteness, on

the other. The process of forgiveness has to do with the process of the ego being strong enough to digest those aspects of reality that it would rather not have to digest.

But to the extent that the ego can digest whatever obstacle is before it – think, for example, of a Nelson Mandela digesting his very difficult reality – to the extent that the ego is strong enough to digest the seemingly indigestible, to that extent it becomes even stronger and more resilient ... as in the proverbs:

“What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”

“The demon you swallow gives you its strength.”

Forgiveness on three fronts

The directions or fronts that the ego has to work with, as I said in the opening statement of this sermon, are three in number: 1) forgiving others; 2) forgiving ourselves; 3) and forgiving Reality – Nature, God, whatever term works for you.

The first front has to do with all the ways we feel we’ve been injured by others ... unfairnesses, injustices, abuses ... some things horrific beyond words.

The second front has to do with ways that we feel we have not measured up, have disappointed ourselves, feel unworthy, have injured and hurt others. Again, some things we may have done to ourselves or others are horrific beyond words. How can they possibly be forgiven?

Then, thirdly, less spoken of, is our forgiveness of Reality ... for, indeed, if we were the Creator we can imagine a few things we might like to change.

I think, for example, of Robert Frost’s humorous and edgy poetic couplet on forgiveness. Asked at a gathering one time to offer an opening prayer, Frost came up with the following two-line, rhyming prayer:

“Forgive, O Lord, my little jokes on Thee,
And I’ll forgive Thy great big one on me.”

Frost also said that he was never more serious than when he was foolin’.

So, as part of forgiveness, I include Reality” – forgiving Reality for being the way it is ... and saying “yes” to it in spite of improvements that we might imagine for it.

The power to forgive

Finally, whence comes the power to forgive?

The answer, I think, is another paradox: the same power of Nature that we sometimes feel is our adversary and which we might like to correct is also a Creative Power that

continually moves forward, a Creative Power that is infinitely larger than our ego-self and to which our ego-self can connect.

Forgiveness, as with so much in life, has to do with letting go of ego-control and of connecting with a Creative Power larger and greater than itself. The name you attach to this Creative Power is not important, but the process of opening to it, of having faith in it, of giving yourself to it – there, I believe, is where the power to forgive ourselves and others comes from.

And to experience the power of such forgiveness is to experience the grace of the world.

The power of forgiveness

I'll conclude our visit to this vast subject of forgiveness with an analogy on the power of forgiveness that I once heard in a sermon from the Rev. Dr. Forrest Church, the long-time minister of the All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City, who died of esophageal cancer in 2009 at the age of 61. This was a sermon I heard Forrest deliver in the winter of 1988, a sermon given shortly after he had seen the movie, *Peggy Sue Got Married*, which just happens to be a favorite movie of mine, directed by Francis Ford Coppola.

In the movie, Peggy Sue, played by Kathleen Turner, is at her twentieth high school reunion. But her dreams from high school are in pieces ... her marriage is on the rocks with divorce proceedings underway.

Still beautiful and popular, however, she's elected queen of the re-union prom. But just as she's about to receive the crown, she faints and finds herself transported back in time to her high school years, but now with full consciousness of what has transpired in the intervening twenty years. In other words, she now has a chance to re-live her life with full knowledge of the mistakes she's made.

What would you change about your life if you had the chance go back and live a part of it over again?

One of the scenes in the movie that I can never get through without watery eyes is the time Peggy Sue's grandmother calls her on the phone. But Peggy Sue, having already lived through this, knows what is about to happen; she knows this will be her last chance to talk to her grandmother, since she knows her grandmother will die in just a couple of days.

Peggy Sue is so overcome hearing her grandmother's voice, she can't speak. And she surprises her family, then, who do not have her knowledge of the future, by taking a day-off from school to visit her grandparents, to be with them one more time.

By being able to go back in time, Peggy Sue takes some chances she didn't take at the time, and sees a lot of things she couldn't and didn't see at the time ... and discovers, as well, some things about her husband that she hadn't known ... so that when she wakes up

from her magical spell, she has a broader perspective; she's able to forgive herself and him and willing to start over again.

Forgiveness is like that. It's like having the power to travel back in time to re-visit events and to change them by making different choices with respect to them – not literally as Peggy Sue was able to do in the movie, but to re-frame those past events by bringing a larger and more mature consciousness to them, thus shifting those events and opening up a whole different future with respect to them.

That's the power of forgiveness.

Closing Words

May the Love that overcomes all differences,
that heals all wounds,
that puts to flight all fears,
that reconciles all who are separated,
Be in us and among us,
Now and always. (Rev. Frederick E. Gillis)

Extinguishing the Chalice

We extinguish this flame,
But not the Light of Truth,
The Warmth of Community,
The Fire of Commitment,
Or the Power of Transformation;
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is manuscript version of the live-Zoom service given by the Rev. Bruce A. Bode at the Skagit Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Mt. Vernon, WA on March 21, 2021. Rev. Bode retired as senior minister of the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Port Townsend, WA in June 2018, and is now minister emeritus.)