

# WHERE FORGIVENESS COMES FROM

A Sermon Delivered at  
First Parish in Needham, Unitarian Universalist  
Sunday, May 17, 2009  
The Rev. John Buehrens, Minister

First Reading

*The Lord's Prayer for UUs*  
From a booklet of prayers for children,  
Unitarian Universalist Church of White Plains, NY

Anon.

Giver of Life, who is in and beyond the universe,  
We would speak your name with thoughtfulness.  
May we follow the laws of peace and understanding here on earth  
As the stars obey the laws of the heavens.  
May there be food for all that none go hungry.  
When we have been unfair, unkind or thoughtless,  
Give us the courage to say we are sorry.  
Help us to be forgiving when others hurt us.  
Give us the strength to do what we feel is right  
And to turn away from whatever hurts ourselves or others.  
For the wonder, the beauty, and the goodness all around us,  
We give praise and thanks. Amen

Second Reading

*Forgiving Love*

Reinhold Niebuhr

Forgiving love is a possibility only for those who know that they are not good, who feel themselves in need of divine mercy, who live in a dimension deeper and higher than that of moral idealism, who feel themselves as well as their fellow [humans] convicted of sin by a holy God and know that the differences between the good . . . and the bad . . . are insignificant in his sight. When life is lived in this dimension the chasms which divide [us] are bridged not directly, not by resolving the conflicts on the historical levels, but by the sense of an ultimate unity in, and common dependence upon, the realm of transcendence. For this reason the religious ideal of forgiveness is more profound and more difficult than the rational virtue of tolerance.

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By now many of you know my frequent suggestion for better understanding of a sermon: Try to figure out what happened to the preacher to make him want to preach about *that!* Well, the truth is, I've often struggled with forgiveness. Sometimes on the giving side, often on the receiving end of the interaction.

Once, for example, many years ago, when I was first running for President of the UUA, one of my female colleagues told me that she would like to support me, but that there was a rumor circulating about me she thought I ought to know. It was a piece of pure slander. I had to insist that she tell me where she had heard it: from still another woman minister. Then I had to confront that person. And so on. Finally, I traced the slander back to a seminary professor, of all people. A single mother whose teenaged daughter had been left unsupervised in the apartment above ours for several weeks while she went overseas. Causing our own daughters to hang out there. Then, when confronted with her own misconduct, the daughter had blamed both our older daughter, and me. I won't give details.

All I'll say is that I had to remind the professor, who taught Hebrew Bible, of a Jewish story about a man who slandered the rabbi. When hauled into the *beit din*, the rabbinical court, confronted with having spread a malicious untruth, the slanderer showed remorse. "What can I do to atone?" he asked. The rabbis pondered, and then delivered this ruling: "Go home," they said, "and bring us back the best pillow from your bed." So he did that. "Now," said the rabbis, "take the pillow and a knife into the town square, cut it, shake it, and come back." He did that, too. "Now," they said, "go and gather up all the feathers."

She got the point. But it took me years to get over that; to lay down my righteous anger. In fact, I've never before in twenty years, spoken publicly about that episode. Enough. Perhaps I'm hoping to finally lay it aside. Because if there is one thing I have learned about forgiveness, it's that we are granted forgiveness ourselves as we ourselves grant it.

And I don't know about you, but I often need it. Just ask my wife and family; or, more recently, the lay leaders of our congregation. I've dealt with them badly, in several ways. About the original plans for this very Sunday morning, which was to have been a much more elaborate – and expensive – Music Sunday. One that they wisely knew, given the state of the economy and of our parish finances, we couldn't really afford. I protested too much, to the point of seeming to want only MY way. Not what I thought I was doing – but sometimes that doesn't matter. The point is that I behaved quite badly. And I have apologized to those I offended both directly and now do so again even more publicly.

But where does forgiveness come from? That's my question this morning. Because while each of us hopes that the people we hurt directly can and will also forgive us directly, what really provokes my sermon is the realization that this is NOT always possible. Many of us know that. We have hurt people along the way in life whom we no longer know how to contact; some who may no longer be living, or inappropriate for us to find.

Recently that issue emerged for me in the course of a visit to a man who is now in prison. Five years ago, you see, a team of us here at First Parish decided to participate in a program of prison ministry started by a laywoman from Westwood named Jeannette Hanlon. Called Partakers, this interfaith ministry primarily connects church volunteers with prisoners who have signed up to try to earn a college degree while still incarcerated.

(I probably don't need to tell you this, but doing that dramatically reduces re-offending. And public resources for such rehabilitation have long been very small indeed. Too many people seem to want to lock all offenders up, throw away the key, and then let those who complete their sentences fend for themselves when and if they get out. Short-sighted; and costly. Many states now spend more on their prisons than they do on higher education.

We have been visiting Willie. A very bright, determined, African American man in his mid-40s, who's been in prison almost twenty years. Two years ago we learned why. Nearing a chance at parole, Willie applied for a treatment program for sexual offenders, and was accepted. We have continued to visit him.

In the course of his treatment, he has been forced to look closely at himself, and at the crimes he committed. Again, I won't go into detail, except to say that I am convinced that Willie is genuinely remorseful, and understands himself much, much better now, and truly wants support so that he will never re-offend. His treatment has included writing letters to the people that he hurt. Not that those letters will ever be mailed, of course. There's no assumption that he can even presume to ask for his victims' forgiveness. Another goal of his treatment, however, has to do with helping him reclaim some of his own self-worth. So when you can't even appropriately talk to those you have harmed, where does forgiveness come from?

Now I don't presume to visit Willie as some kind of father confessor, who can dispense forgiveness on behalf of God, but I must say that I left my last visit to the prison thinking about how we really all do need to be treated as children of God, capable of treating one another the way we ourselves would like to be treated, as both loved and lovable, in spite of our failings. Otherwise, what hope is there for any of us, who know that we've sinned? And, as an early Christian scripture puts it, "If we say that we are without sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." [I John 1:8] "Beloved," it goes on to say [3:2], "we're God's children; and what we will be has not yet been revealed." Willie hopes to be an electrician's helper in a year or two, when he is released. I really hope he makes it. But our culture, I know, can be pretty unforgiving. As a cultural critic from Australia once put it, "America seems to have raised blaming to the level of a cultural art form." Just consider how we conduct our politics.

It doesn't have to be that way. Recently I watched an episode of the newest HBO drama, *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, which is set in the African country of Botswana. The lady detective, Precious, was hired by an African American woman. Her son had come to Africa to learn and to serve and had ended up being mysteriously killed. Precious discovers what happened, but the fault is not clear and no one else is available for prosecution. Though she has solved the difficult case, Precious senses that the mother is disappointed. "What did you want?" she asks the American mother. "I wanted justice," she replies. Precious tells her that maybe her trip to Africa was to re-introduce her to

“African heart,” which is committed not to punishment, but to truth before the ancestors and reconciliation for the sake of coming generations – something that in Africa must pre-date Christianity, though it has been demonstrated to the world most fully by recent leaders like Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Tutu.

I think American culture remains heavily influenced by Calvinism, and the conviction that personal character is pretty much predestined, good or bad. But I once heard Tutu say in an interview with Bill Moyers that he believes instead in something that he knows now even all of his church can accept – namely, Universalism. Universalism holds that if God is love – persistent, redeeming love – then ultimately even the devil himself is not going to be able to resist the divine persistence, and will be redeemed. This universalism, he pointed out, was first taught by another African, Origen of Alexandria, back in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, when he was one of the early fathers or scholars of the church, though his teaching was found so challenging that the authorities called him a heretic, not a saint. Often I think, the real saints are such heretics.

I’m constantly amazed at how persistently forgiving the universe can be. If it weren’t so, given all that we human beings have done to one another, to ourselves, to our planet through the years, we would have vanished long ago. But as St Paul said in his letter to the Romans, just because the grace of God is so abundant hardly means that we should go on offending against it just to see it work on us!

Sometimes I don’t know which is harder: to forgive, or to be forgiven. The great Unitarian minister A. Powell Davies once preached a sermon called *The Forgiveness That Comes Hardest*, in which he said that the hardest form of forgiveness is self-forgiveness. And I think that’s probably true. In most people I know there’s an idealistic, rather grandiose self, on the one hand. And on the other hand, a rather unworthy self, full of what my wife Gwen calls “self-ick.” Patterns of self-destructive behavior are often forms of self-punishment, unconscious and unrecognized as such.

To forgive someone is to say, in one way or another, “What you have done has been a violation of the implicit covenant between us, to treat one another with dignity and respect. By all rights, I could call it quits between us, if I let my pride and principles rule. I’m not making any guarantees that I will forget what you have done. That could be foolish. But I’m going to lay my anger down. It was getting a little heavy to carry around in any case. And I want to stay in relationship with you.”

The UU psychologist Mary Pipher says that this is the way a good marriage is sustained. And when it gets hard, she suggests to people that they try this exercise: Get up in the morning, look in the mirror and then say to yourself, “You know: your no prize either!”

To accept forgiveness means to admit that you have done things that need to be forgiven. And thus both parties – or both parts of the self, if it is self-forgiveness that’s at stake – need to swallow the same thing – namely, their pride. Principles are fine. But they are too often what the self-righteous have in place of grace. No wonder Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

Now ponder that he was NOT saying that we would be forgiven conditionally only if we also learn to forgive others. After all, forgiveness that’s conditional isn’t so much real forgiveness as a kind of “fair warning.” And besides, what we often most need to have forgiven is our own hard-heartedness. As a prayer in our hymnal [#477] aptly puts it, “Forgive us that often we forgive ourselves so easily and others so hardly; forgive us that we expect perfection from those to whom we show none; forgive us repelling people by the way we try to set a good example. . .” And as it ends, “may we learn to encourage the secret struggle of every person.”

Where does forgiveness come from? Sometimes not from the other whom we have hurt. Nor even from the self. Not from I, not from Thou, but from the Eternal Thou that is best known when we set the necessary but not sufficient conditions to restore the relationship. Humility, rather than pride and arrogance. Then, by grace, when we are truly open to it,

forgiveness can come not only between, but, as it were, from beyond. And bring the mercy that we need even more than justice.

So may it be. Amen.

\*Hymn 213

*There's a Wideness in Your Mercy*

Faber/Pillsbury

There's a wideness in your mercy like the wideness of the sea;  
There's a kindness in your justice which is more than liberty.  
But we make your love too narrow by false limits of our own;  
And we magnify your strictness with a zeal you will not own.  
For the love of God is broader than the measures of our minds  
And the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind.

Benediction

And now, in the words of the founder of Universalism in America, John Murray:

Go out into the highways and by-ways.  
Give the people something of your new vision.  
You may possess but a small light, but uncover it, let it shine,  
use it in order to bring more light and understanding  
to the hearts and minds of men and women.

Given them not hell, but hope and courage;

[In your lives,] Preach the kindness and everlasting love of God. Amen.

