

“Is Forgiveness Always Called For? Part II”
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
November 15, 2009
Rev. Bruce A. Bode

Poetry for Order of Service

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

(William Blake)

Lighting the Chalice (spoken in unison)

Blessed is the fire that burns deep in the soul.

It is the flame of the human spirit touched into being by the mystery of life.

It is the fire of reason, the fire of compassion, the fire of community, the fire of justice, the fire of faith.

It is the fire of love burning deep in the human heart, the divine glow in every life.

(Eric Heller-Wagner)

Opening Words

Come, come, whoever you are.

Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving – it does not matter.

Ours is not a caravan of despair.

Come, even if you have broken your vows a thousand times.

Come, yet again, come.

(Mawlana Jalal-al-Din Rumi)

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: We know we are estranged from something to which we really belong, and with which we should be united.

CONGREGATION: We know that this separation is not merely a natural event or fate, but that it is an experience in which we actively participate; thus, it is also guilt.

MINISTER: We are separated from the mystery, depth, and greatness of our existence.

CONGREGATION: We hear the voice of that depth, but our ears are closed.

MINISTER: We feel that something radical, total, and unconditioned is demanded of us; but we rebel against it, try to escape its urgency, and will not accept its promise.

CONGREGATION: However, we cannot escape; we are bound to it for all eternity. We always remain in the power of that from which we are estranged.

MINISTER: In grace something is overcome; grace occurs in spite of separation and estrangement.

CONGREGATION: Grace is the acceptance of that which is rejected.

MINISTER: Grace transforms fate into a meaningful destiny; it changes guilt into confidence and courage.

CONGREGATION: Grace is the reunion of life with life, the reconciliation of the self with itself.

(Statements from Paul Tillich's sermon, "You Are Accepted!" The Shaking of the Foundations)

Introduction to reading

This Sunday, like last Sunday, I am speaking on the subject of forgiveness. I define forgiveness as our capacity to release hatred and bitterness with respect to others, ourselves, and to larger reality so that we can get on with our lives.

Note that I include "larger reality" in my definition of forgiveness. I think here of Robert Frost's humorous and edgy poetic couplet on forgiveness. Asked at a gathering one time to offer the prayer, Frost gave the following two-line 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 joking.

Indeed, I think our capacity to forgive is rooted in the understanding and experience that, at the depths of being and at the center of our own individual soul, there is a creativity that is ultimately for us – though it may take a long journey to discover how that is so.

This creativity that I'm talking about, and which to my mind is the basis of forgiveness, is the ultimate creative ground from which we all arise and from which we are never separated. It's a creativity powerful enough to overcome any past event, a creativity that cannot be thwarted no matter what has been done to us or that we have done, a creativity that will support us in all kinds of weather – if we but allow it to work in our lives.

In the Christian tradition, this creative potential – if you have ears to hear – is expressed in its central tenet, the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith. This was a doctrine that the Apostle Paul first gave shape to nearly 2000 years ago based on an overwhelming personal experience of grace at a time of great turmoil in his life. And thus he preached:

"It is by grace that you are saved, through faith; not by anything of your own doing, it is a gift from God." (Ephesians 2:8)

Some 1500 hundred years later, Martin Luther picked up that same central thread and it became the center-point of the Protestant Reformation.

But the delicious freedom that Paul and Luther first felt in the reception of that gift of grace often gets lost – perhaps by them as well – and grace gets tied to proper belief, proper ritual, proper authority, to having the proper religion.

But grace to be grace can have no such conditions. It is precisely that which is unconditional, unlimited, unbounded, and universal. It is precisely that which breaks into our lives when we least anticipate it and when we least think we deserve it.

Nowhere that I know of is this unconditional nature of grace expressed more eloquently than in the writings of theologian Paul Tillich. In a sermon titled, “You Are Accepted,” he writes:

Do we know what it means to be struck by grace? It does not mean that we suddenly believe that God exists, or that Jesus is the Saviour, or that the Bible contains the truth. To believe that something is, is almost contrary to the meaning of grace....

Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk though the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage.

Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!"

(The Shaking of the Foundations, pp. 162-63)

“IS FORGIVENESS ALWAYS CALLED FOR? PART II”

Introduction

One of the questions I explored last Sunday on the subject of forgiveness was the question of whether there are some persons and situations that are beyond forgiveness. At that time I put before us as a “worst-case scenario” the question once suggested to me

by a friend as to whether an Adolf Hitler could or should be forgiven, if he expressed remorse? If Hitler were somehow to appear before the survivors of those whom he had slaughtered, and if he were to express his deep regret over his unspeakable deeds and to beg for their forgiveness, could they, should they, try to find it in their hearts to forgive him, and what would such forgiveness mean?

Crimes of such magnitude as those of Hitler would seem to make individual forgiveness almost too pale a thing – the scale is not right, the balance too skewed.

And yet this past week, at the suggestion of a member of our congregation, I have been reading in a book titled, A Human Being Died That Night: A South African Story of Forgiveness.

It's a book related to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission formed in 1995 in South Africa following the end of apartheid there. The mandate of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was to bear witness, to record, and, in some cases, to grant amnesty to the perpetrators of the crimes – if they would make truthful confession of those crimes.

One of the persons who came before the Commission was the commanding officer of the state-sanctioned apartheid death squads, a man by the name of Eugene de Kock, nicknamed "Prime Evil" by the black community, and known as the most notorious executor of apartheid's most brutal methods of repression, a man now serving a 212-year jail sentence for crimes against humanity.

However, as Eugene de Kock concluded the first day of his testimony before the Commission, he made a surprising appeal. He asked to meet privately with some of the widows of men that he had killed, saying he wished to apologize to them.

The author of this book on forgiveness, a black South African psychologist by the name of Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, interviewed two of the widows following their meeting with Eugene de Kock. Both women reported they were much moved by the meeting, one of them saying,

"I couldn't control my tears. I could hear him, but I was overwhelmed by emotion, and I was just nodding, as a way of saying yes, I forgive you. I hope that when he sees our tears, he knows that they are not only tears for our husbands, but tears for him as well.... I would like to hold him by the hand, and show him that there is a future, and that he can still change." (pp. 14-15)

It was on the basis of her interview with these two women that the author also requested to meet with Eugene de Kock. She was granted that request and her book is a record of those meetings, the relationship that developed between them, and an exploration of questions such as: "Was evil intrinsic to de Kock, and forgiveness therefore wasted on him?" And: "What does it mean when we discover that the incarnation of evil is as frighteningly human as we are?"

There is also a book I would recommend that brings Adolf Hitler back into a more human scale so that he is not totally removed from the realm of humanity. It's a book by the Swiss psychologist Alice Miller titled, For Your Own Good – as in “I'm only doing this for your own good.” It's subtitled, Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence.

In this book, Alice Miller presents case-studies of three persons: a heroin addict, a murderer of young boys, and the dictator, Adolf Hitler. And she depicts Hitler not as an evil monster from the womb but as a child like other children, who became deformed and twisted in his upbringing. The most chilling sentence in the book to me was this one:

“Who knows, perhaps the Jews would not have been sent to the gas ovens if Hitler had had five sons on whom he could have taken revenge for what his father did to him.” (p. xi)

A worse “worst-case scenario”

Returning to the “worst-case scenario” related to forgiveness with which I began, another friend suggested to me that a remorseful Hitler begging for forgiveness is not the worst-case scenario related to forgiveness. The worst-case scenario, he said, is where an Adolf Hitler after his crimes never recognizes them as such, but continues to believe that the genocide against the Jews was for a noble cause, and has no feeling whatsoever of guilt or regret.

How, asks this friend, does the principle of forgiveness work in such a situation? And: does recognition of guilt and regret constitute a pre-condition for the application of the forgiveness principle?”

Certainly, this is a worse “worst-case scenario” – and also more probable. Of course, we don't know how Hitler, had he lived and had time to reflect on his life and his deeds, would come to view his past. But we must face the fact that often, perhaps usually, forgiveness – if there is to be forgiveness – has to take place in the absence of any remorse, repentance, or even recognition of guilt on the part of the one regarded as giving the offense. And the greater the offense, the less likely the recognition of it on the part of the offending party – there's simply too much to undo and overcome, too much to change.

And so to directly answer my friend's question of whether recognition of guilt and regret constitute a pre-condition for the application of forgiveness, I answer, “No, it does not.” We cannot make our forgiveness depend on the attitude or actions of the offending party.

Forgiveness and reconciliation

Here it is well to distinguish between forgiveness, which is essentially an internal process, and reconciliation, which has to do with the results of that internal process in the outer world.

Forgiveness, which has to do with releasing our hatred and bitterness toward another, opens the possibility of reconciliation with another, but it does not necessarily lead to reconciliation, and it is not the same thing as reconciliation.

Reconciliation *does* have 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.

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; but we cannot make forgiveness depend on the offending party.

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.

Forgiveness cannot depend on the apology of others

Think with me for a bit of some situations in which forgiveness needs to take place without the recognition, regret, or repentance on the part of the offending party.

In addition to the large scale and corporate crimes of, say, Nazi Germany, or South African apartheid, or the American genocide of Native Americans and the American enslavement of African blacks – one waits a long time for a change of heart and behavior with regard to such things – in addition to these, think also in a more personal and individual way:

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.

Think of teachers from one's school days that seemed to delight in humiliating their students.

Think of the cruelty of schoolmates who bullied or teased.

Reflect also on situations in which we think an apology is called for, but those from whom we think we deserve an apology don't even see why we're upset. They don't feel they have done anything wrong, or that the offense given was anywhere near as severe as we have made it out to be.

What may be taken as a huge offense by one person may be small and insignificant to another. "People are always surprised," writes Dr. Lewis Smedes, "at how much their 'little' faults can hurt other people."

People see things differently, feel things differently, have different perspectives. In war,

for example, what one side regards as a monstrous crime is regarded by the other side as a noble and heroic act – I give you 9/11 as a quite recent example.

So for these reasons and others, forgiveness cannot depend on the recognition, remorse, or repentance of others. As I say, 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.

And so to make this world work, there must be a mutuality of forgiveness in which we attempt to release our hatred of others as they attempt to release their hatred of us – “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Or, as the poet William Blake says, “And throughout all eternity I forgive you, you forgive me.”

A word about hatred

Let me also say a word here about hatred, since I am speaking of forgiveness as being the release of hatred.

Many of us, I suppose, like myself, have been taught not to hate. We have been taught that hatred is always a bad thing and there is no place for it. Thus, we feel uncomfortable in the face of this intense emotion and attitude. Many times I have stumbled on the line from the biblical book of Ecclesiastes which reads, “There’s a time to love *and a time to hate.*”

Can there be a time to hate? Ironically, when reflecting on the subject of forgiveness, I see that there is a place for hatred.

First, your hatred lets you know that you are feeling diminished and perhaps being stepped on and treated as no human being ought to be treated.

Secondly, your hatred lets you know that you're fighting back and that you have something to fight back with. It lets you know that the situation is intolerable and you will not put up with it.

And so hatred can be a natural and even necessary response to situations that threaten human dignity. Says one author, “Not to feel resentment when resentment is called for is a sign of servility,... a lack of self-respect.” (Forgiveness, Haber)

But, of course, there is also a problem with hatred when we hang onto it. To again quote Lewis Smedes:

“Hate gives instant energy, but it runs dry after the suffering stops. Hate 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. It saps the energy of the soul, leaving it weaker than before, too weak to create a better life beyond the pain.” ([Forgive and Forget](#))

So there may be a time to hate, but certainly there is also a time to release that hatred. And so we are brought back to the process of forgiveness and the question of how we come to forgive and to release our hatred.

Forgiveness as an internal process

I have a friend who practices the spiritual discipline of the 12-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous as a way of dealing with an addiction to alcohol. Forgiveness is a pivotal part of that spiritual discipline, but it's forgiveness with an important clarification.

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,” he says, “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. That's their business, their work. I make an apology to them on the basis of my spiritual task with no expectations or strings attached. How my apology is received is up to them. 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 here again we see this distinction between forgiveness as an internal process and the results of that forgiveness in the outer world. Forgiveness with respect to another is the process within the individual heart and mind of letting go of hate and of beginning to wish the other well again. But whether there can or should be reconciliation in the outer world with that other person is quite a different question. One may, for example, forgive a former spouse and wish the person well, but have no desire to reconcile. As one woman once said to me with respect to a former husband, “I'll always love him, but I'll never live with him.”

So, as I said last week, forgiving doesn't mean forgetting. And, just because you've forgiven, it doesn't mean everything is now as it once was. Nor does it mean you necessarily think the person forgiven is now not dangerous for you. And it doesn't necessarily mean you want the person for a friend.

Trust has to be earned and built up over time. And forgiveness, at most, provides a place where trust can again be earned.

Forgiveness and justice

To put this at the societal level, the principle of forgiveness does not undo or abrogate the principle of justice. Justice has to do with holding people responsible for their actions, with protecting the injured parties, and with seeking to make amends to the injured parties, to the extent it is possible.

I was once a guest on a radio talk show in which we were discussing the relationship between forgiveness and justice ... and making just this point: that forgiveness does not undo justice; that justice is still required even if forgiveness has occurred.

A listener to the radio program called in and said, "Yes, that's right, but it's more than that. It's not simply that forgiveness does not undo justice, but forgiveness," he said, "is what makes justice possible. Forgiveness is needed to allow justice to work."

And why? Because without the capacity to let go of our hatred and bitterness no amount of recompense will do. Without the capacity to forgive, we have vengeance not justice.

And so forgiveness has to come into play if we are not to destroy ourselves. We need forgiveness to make justice work or otherwise conflicts simply escalate until we get the kind of centuries-old, intractable hostilities that we find in so many places in the world. As Gandhi put it, "An eye for eye makes the whole world blind."

The basis of forgiveness

There are two things basically, I believe, that enable us to forgive ourselves and others: First, the knowledge of our own broken condition, of our own capacity for evil, and of our own need for forgiveness. It's not only that we all make mistakes and errors of judgment and that our good intentions go badly, but more than this, we are not always well-intentioned. We have secret pockets where we think we deserve special treatment.

The capacity to forgive comes with understanding that we too need forgiveness, and that no human evil is completely foreign to us. If we can't see that, I suggest we haven't looked hard enough or far enough. As a French aphorism puts it: "To understand all is to forgive all."

Then, secondly, the capacity to forgive is based on the experience of being forgiven, of being permitted to go on despite who we are and what we have done.

My experience is that at the center of being there is a creative power that never gives up on us, a power that is felt most keenly in times of weakness and moments of despair. It's the experience of grace that theologian Paul Tillich addresses in today's reading, a grace that catches us when we are falling, and treats us tenderly when we have fallen – if we but allow it to do its work.

The process of forgiveness (or why forgiveness is difficult)

But to experience forgiveness and to be born to a new attitude means something of the old attitude has to die. Forgiveness involves dying to a part of ourselves, which is why it is hard to forgive and hard to receive forgiveness. Forgiveness means letting go of the way we want the world to be so that we can find value in the world that is here. Like falling leaves in this autumn time of the year, so we must let fall old grievances and old griefs, so that they might be composted.

The slowness of forgiveness

And so forgiveness is typically difficult and glacially slow work. I received some comments in this regard after last Sunday's service – concerns of whether forgiveness was really happening because it was taking so long and because feelings of hurt and anger were still present after long passages of time.

In considering the process of the healing of injuries to the psyche or the soul with which forgiveness is related, we might think of the healing of physical injuries. Many physical injuries are slight ones from which we quickly recover. But there are also more major injuries that do lasting damage, injuries that will permanently change us, injuries from which we may never recover. Think of a limb severed from the body.

So, too, some injuries to our interior selves are at such a deep level that we may never fully recover. And thus forgiveness related to such injuries will never be over; it will always be a work in process.

The process of forgiveness in general is a never-ending part of our lives; we are never finished with the work of forgiveness. And also certain specific wounds can in themselves take a lifetime to process. But it is work worth doing. And it is work all of humanity must do – “And throughout all eternity I forgive you, you forgive me.”

What forgiveness can do

Let me conclude this two-week visit to this vast subject of forgiveness with an analogy on the power of forgiveness that I once heard in a sermon of Dr. Forrest Church, the long-time minister of the All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City, who died just a couple of months ago. This was a sermon I heard delivered in the winter of 1988, a sermon given shortly after Forrest had seen the movie, Peggy Sue Got Married, a favorite 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 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? Sometimes we say, "Oh, I wouldn't change a thing; I'd live it the same; I don't regret a thing."

Okay, that says to me that one is basically happy with one's life and accepts whatever has contributed to it, both the pleasure and the pain. But if you actually had the chance to live it over with full knowledge of the consequences, I doubt you'd live it the same.

One of the scenes in the movie 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, knows that this will be her last chance to talk to her grandmother, since she 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 and is able to forgive herself and him and is willing to start over again.

Forgiveness is like that. It's like having the power to travel back in time to revisit 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.

Closing Hymn #1011 – "Return Again"

Benediction

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.

(Frederick E. Gillis)

Extinguishing of Chalice

We extinguish this flame,
But not the light of truth,
The warmth of community,
Or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon, "Is Forgiveness Always Called For? Part II," given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode on November 15, 2009 at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. The spoken service, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)