

“Is Forgiveness Always Called For? Part I”
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
November 8, 2009
Rev. Bruce A. Bode

Lighting the Chalice (spoken in unison)

We gather this hour as people of faith
With joys and sorrows, gifts and needs.
We light this beacon of hope,
Sign of our quest for truth and meaning,
In celebration of the life we share together.

(Christine Robinson)

Opening Words & Musical Response

Our opening words are from the Iranian poet, Rumi:

Come, come, whoever you are.
Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving – it doesn't 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: The years of all of us are short, our lives precarious.

CONGREGATION: Our days and nights go hurrying on, and there is scarcely time to do the little that we might.

MINISTER: Yet we find time for bitterness, for petty treason and evasion.

CONGREGATION: What can we do to stretch our hearts enough to lose their littleness?

MINISTER: Here we are – all of us – all upon this planet, bound together in a common destiny,

CONGREGATION: Living our lives between the briefness of the daylight and the dark.

MINISTER: Kindred in this, each lighted by the same precarious, flickering flame of life, how does it happen that we are not kindred in all things else?

CONGREGATION: How strange and foolish are these walls of separation that divide us!

(A. Powell Davies)

Reading

In the eighteenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, there are two little vignettes on the subject of forgiveness placed right next to each other.

In the first vignette, Peter, a disciple of Jesus, asks his teacher, “Lord, how often must I forgive my brother, if he wrongs me? As often as seven times?” Jesus replies, “Not seven times, but seventy times seven times.” In other words, forgiveness doesn’t have to do with the world of calculation, or of judgment under the law, or of doing things by the book. With forgiveness we’re talking about another principle that breaks into the flow of tit-for-tat and cost-benefit analysis. We’re talking about a heart and a mind that is ready and willing to let go of what has been in order to begin anew and to find a way to a larger future.

Jesus then illustrates this principle of forgiveness with a parable, often titled, “The Parable of the Unforgiving Debtor.” Here, reading from Today's New International Version, Matthew 18:23-35, Jesus says:

²³ "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. ²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

²⁶ "The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' ²⁷ The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

²⁸ "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

²⁹ "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'

³⁰ "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

³² "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' ³⁴ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

³⁵ "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive a brother or sister from your heart."

I take this parable to mean that there is a deep-rooted magnanimity at the heart of being that will sustain us spiritually when we cast ourselves upon it. But, having been the recipient of such magnanimity, if we ourselves don’t put that into practice, we will be given over to the life we have chosen: a life lived under the judgment of the law, a life that measured strictly by the books.

“IS FORGIVENESS ALWAYS CALLED FOR? PART I”

Introduction

In the past four years for the last service of the regular church year that takes place on the second Sunday of June, I respond to written questions on a variety of subjects. This past year one of the questions had to do with forgiveness, the questioner simply requesting, “I would like to hear what you have to say about forgiveness.”

But since the subject is a large and potentially complex one, I deferred responding to it at that time, promising instead to speak on it in the coming church year ... which is now upon us. And so both this week and next I will speak on the subject of forgiveness.

It’s a subject I’ve given considerable attention to in previous congregations I’ve served, but never here at this Fellowship. And I’m not sure why because forgiveness is a terribly important subject at the heart of religion. I would judge it to be similar in depth and weight to subjects like gratitude or kindness or generosity, each of which relate to our overall attitude and approach to life and to practical daily living. To the extent that a person is unable or unwilling to forgive – either themselves, or others, or larger reality – to that extent a person closes down, shrinks in heart, mind, soul, and spirit.

When my mind turns to the subject of forgiveness, I tend to think of the most difficult situations imaginable, because, it seems to me, that if forgiveness is going to work as a valid spiritual principle, it should work in the most difficult cases as well as those of lesser magnitude.

As with many persons considering the subject of forgiveness, my mind turns to some of the most horrendous crimes of the past, particularly the Jewish Holocaust in World War II, which would seem to be a kind of ultimate test case for the principle of forgiveness. Can forgiveness have any meaning in the face of such horrendous crimes? On the other hand, if forgiveness is not possible in the face of such crimes, how can there ever be hope of healing and reconciliation in this our troubled world?

A crisis of forgiveness

Simon Wiesenthal, who died in 2005, was well-known for his pursuit of Nazi war criminals from World War II. He wrote a book titled, The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness, in which he recounts a personal story involving what he termed a “crisis of forgiveness.” Here’s the story:

In a Polish concentration camp during World War II, on a day that would forever change his life, Simon Wiesenthal was assigned the job of cleaning rubbish out of a hospital for wounded German soldiers. While performing this duty, a German nurse ordered him to follow her.

She took him, then, to a severely wounded young German soldier dying in the hospital. Arriving at his bedside, the soldier reached out and grabbed Wiesenthal’s hand. He needed, he said, to speak to a Jew. He needed to confess the horrible things he had seen and done and to beg for his forgiveness. Only a Jewish person, he said, could forgive him and, thus, allow him to die in peace.

And so Simon Wiesenthal, a captive audience, sat and listened as this German soldier

poured out his horrific story – a story of entering a Russian village, rounding up over two hundred Jews, cramming them into a single building, setting the building on fire, and shooting any who tried to escape. And Wiesenthal, who himself lost eighty-nine family members in the Holocaust, listened as well as the dying soldier begged for his forgiveness, saying:

“I know that what I have told you is terrible. In the long nights while I have been waiting for death, time and time again I have longed to talk about it to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him.... I know that what I am asking is almost too much for you, but without your answer I cannot die in peace.”

(Simon Wiesenthal, The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness, p. 54)

What would you do if you were in Simon Wiesenthal’s situation? Would you, acting as priest or confessor, grant this dying soldier such understanding and forgiveness as you were able? Or, would you excuse yourself saying, “Sorry, this is not my responsibility?” Or, would you try to keep him squirming, telling him that crimes this monstrous cannot be forgiven no matter how much the deathbed remorse?

What was Simon Wiesenthal’s response? He writes, “I stood up and looked in his direction, at his folded hands.... At last I made up my mind and without a word I left the room.” The soldier died unforgiven by Wiesenthal. (The Sunflower, p. 55)

What would you do?

But now it was Simon Wiesenthal’s turn to be troubled. The question of whether or not to offer this dying soldier his forgiveness continued to haunt him after the war. He wrote about this “crisis of forgiveness” asking others what they would have done had they been in his place.

Most who responded said he should *not* have forgiven the dying soldier. A fellow prisoner questioned how he could forgive as a representative for others, saying: “You would have no right to forgive him in the name of people who had not authorized you to do so.” (The Sunflower, p. 65)

Philosopher Herbert Marcuse felt the imbalance and ineffectualness of a deathbed apology in the face of such horrendous acts and he wrote, “One cannot, and should not, go around happily killing and torturing and then, when the moment has come, simply ask, and receive, forgiveness.” (The Sunflower, p. 207)

Novelist Cynthia Ozick went deeper and questioned the validity of forgiveness itself. She quoted a saying of the rabbis, “Whoever is merciful to the cruel will end by being indifferent to the innocent.” “Forgiveness,” she said, “can brutalize.... The face of forgiveness is mild, but how stony to the slaughtered.... Let the SS man die unshriven. Let him go to hell.” (The Sunflower, pp. 213ff)

And so the questions: Is forgiveness always called for? Are there limits to forgiveness? What does it mean to forgive?

Forgive and forget

I imagine that many of you were raised, as I was, with the well-worn phrase, “forgive and

forget.” But how and why should you even consider forgetting such things as Simon Wiesenthal had experienced? What kind of denial of reality would this be?

From my youth I remember a story on the meaning of forgiveness from a much-respected schoolteacher. This schoolteacher had once had once been a Christian missionary to Nigeria, and he told us students about a time when he discovered a young Nigerian stealing from him. As a missionary, he thought he would use this occasion to teach the young man about the Christian principle of forgiveness – God’s forgiveness of us, our forgiveness of each other. Forgiveness, he said, allows us to move on and improve our lives. And when we truly forgive, he said, the slate is wiped clean. It’s as if the event never happened – forgotten, no more to be remembered. This is how God forgives us, and we should imitate that divine example.

A short time later the young man again stole from the missionary. “Now, look,” scolded the missionary, “this is the second time that you’ve stolen from me. You can’t keep doing this. How can I possibly trust you? If you do this again, there will be such and such a consequence.”

“Ho, ho!” exclaimed the young man, “I thought you said you had forgiven me for that previous theft and it was all forgotten. Now here you are bringing it up again. What’s the deal?”

At this response the missionary was convicted in his heart – the young man was right, he was wrong.

And so the lesson we students were to take from this story was that forgiveness really did mean forgetting, and that if the missionary had truly forgiven, he wouldn’t be bringing up the first theft even though a second one had occurred.

It may have been the unnaturalness of this idea that made forgiveness a somewhat confused and difficult notion for me for many a year. How can you forget what you quite clearly remember? And, more importantly, why should you forget?

Forgive and remember

Thus, forgiveness, if it is to be a valid spiritual principle in our lives, needs some clarification. And we need to know, first of all, that forgiveness, despite the common saying, does *not* mean forgetting. Such an understanding of forgiveness simply doesn't take the past seriously enough.

The past doesn’t disappear just because through the principle of forgiveness you are now open to working for a better 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 are healed? If you forget, you're more likely to get wounded again in the same place.

Further, a forgiveness that tries to forget the past tends not to respect the very real emotions involved – the hurt and the hate. Not attending to such emotions can only create future complications.

So forgive, but also don’t be afraid to remember.

In Paris there is a monument related to a concentration camp from World War II that reads: “Let us forgive, but never let us forget.”

And John F. Kennedy is quoted as saying: “Forgive your enemies, but never forget their names.”

And in a book titled, Forgive and Forget, by Dr. Lewis Smedes, there’s a very fine summary of what forgiving is *not*. Forgiving, he says, is *not* forgetting, or excusing, or tolerating, or condoning, or accepting, or smothering conflict. This is 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. (p. 49)

And, finally, Dr Smedes writes:

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. (p. 108)

What is forgiveness?

And so what, on the positive side, is forgiveness?

Forgiveness, essentially, is an internal process – usually a slow one – that takes place in the heart and the mind of the person who feels injured or wronged by another person. It’s a process that has to do with releasing one’s hatred, hostility, and bitterness toward that person and again beginning to wish that person well.

Forgiveness allows us to go on with our lives.

It’s a means of not letting a past event take us over.

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

It’s a commitment to the future.

It’s the medicine that heals the open wounds of our souls.

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

So even if you have forgiven, when a past injury or hurt is recalled, many of the old feelings and

thoughts may still come with it. To have such feelings and thoughts does not necessarily mean you have not forgiven. Forgiveness has to do with an aim, a direction, a commitment of trying to be open to the future, whatever the feelings from the past might be.

Perhaps a test question with regard to whether or not you have forgiven others could be this: Do you wish them well?

Forgiveness is rooted in the understanding that we are more than the worst things that we have ever done, and that the potential for spiritual growth and development is always present and possible. How horrible for us as individuals and for our world in general to be forever trapped by our worst actions and deeds!

Thus, forgiveness is rooted in the faith that we are not simply and only what we have been – not *just* a product of the past, but that potentially we are always more than we actually are. And forgiveness creates the space that allows more of that potential to emerge.

Are some deeds unforgivable?

Should Simon Wiesenthal have offered forgiveness to the German soldier?

I once asked a dear friend of mine whether he believed there are some deeds and some people who are beyond forgiveness.

“Okay,” said my friend, “let’s take the worst case imaginable. Let’s suppose that Adolf Hitler himself were here at this table with us, and he, with great remorse, said, “I’ve done the unspeakable. My guilt, sorrow, and regret are beyond words to tell. The blood is on my hands and nothing I will ever do can begin to remove even the least part of the stains. There is no way to atone or to erase or to make up for what I have done. But please, please, forgive me.”

After my friend finished his little speech, I looked and saw that there were tears in his eyes. “What’s this about?” I asked. “Oh, just for things to come together,” he said. “I feel the split in the world and wish it could be healed.”

Here, I think, my friend puts his finger on the ultimate reason and need for forgiveness. We want and need so much to reconcile the world to itself. We want and need to experience the underlying unity of life and being, to experience the reality that at bottom we are one regardless of how we tear and have torn each other apart.

Deeper than our separation

I believe that our unity is ultimately deeper and greater than our separation. I believe that love is ultimately stronger than hate. I believe, following the old Universalist doctrine, that no thought or deed ultimately separates us from or puts us outside the reach of what they might speak of as “the grace and love of God,” outside the reach of the renewing creative power at the heart of being.

And I believe that it’s through forgiveness that we have a means by which we can work toward making the reality of this underlying unity an experienced and felt reality. Forgiveness is the medicine that can heal the splits that separate us. I don’t know what other medicine there could

possibly be.

Are there some situations and some persons split apart too far for you to offer them this medicine of forgiveness? Are some of your own wounds too severe to be able to apply this medicine and forgive yourself? Would it require such a large dose that you couldn't handle it right now?

The work of healing is often – perhaps usually – tediously slow work. And there are, no doubt, times when it is not right or appropriate to use the medicine of forgiveness. And I don't believe it's my place to offer advice to a Simon Wiesenthal. Indeed, in his pursuit of Nazi war criminals, he said he was seeking “justice, not vengeance.”

But is this a time in your life when you might examine yourself to see if there is some room in your heart to be released from past events that may have you in their thrall, to see if this might not be a time to try to release yourself and others from the grip of the past so as not to keep playing it over and over and over again?

Forgiveness sought and given

I began this sermon with a story in which an individual did not feel it appropriate to offer forgiveness. Let me conclude with a story in which confession was made and forgiveness sought, and forgiven granted and received. It's a story that was portrayed on the CBS program 60 Minutes a few months ago on Sunday evening, March 8 – perhaps some of you saw it.

It was a program on the unreliability of eye-witness testimony in court cases, and it featured a man named Ronald Cotton, who was accused – falsely as it turned out – of raping a woman, Jennifer Thompson, who had identified him as the perpetrator of the crime. Because of her eye-witness testimony, Ronald Cotton was sent to prison.

When new evidence came forward some years later, a second trial was held with the actual rapist, who looked somewhat like Ronald Cotton, present in the courtroom. But Jennifer Thompson was still completely confident that she had properly identified the rapist, and so he, Ronald Cotton, was sent back to prison, again on the basis of her eye-witness testimony.

Some more years passed and, now, as DNA testing become more prevalent, Ronald Cotton, the falsely accused rapist, requested and was able to get DNA confirmation that it was, indeed, the other person who was the rapist, not himself.

Learning of this DNA proof, Jennifer Thompson was horrified – horrified that she had caused Ronald Cotton to lose eleven years of his life in prison. She was distressed to the point that she wasn't sleeping, and so she asked to meet him at a local church, which he agreed to do.

When Ronald Cotton walked into the church, Jennifer Thompson was so overcome that she could not physically stand. Weeping, she looked up at him and said, “Ron, if I spent every second of every minute of every hour for the rest of my life telling you how sorry I am, it wouldn't come close to how my heart feels. I'm so sorry.”

At that, Ronald Cotton leaned down, took her hands in his, and said, “Jennifer, I forgive you. I don't want you to look over your shoulder. I just want us to be happy and move on in life.”

And they have moved on, even becoming personal friends. Together they now seek reform of the present eye-witness testimonial system, telling their story to prosecutors, police, and defense attorneys. And they have recently co-authored a book, cleverly titled Picking Cotton, in hopes that their story can inform and inspire others.

In the 60 Minutes story, the interviewer, Leslie Stahl, was clearly moved. And why not? It requires an enormous opening and expansion of spirit to digest such a situation. First, of course, on the part of Ronald Cotton to not become bitter over his situation and close down, but to expand and to be able to forgive Jennifer Thompson. And, secondly, on the part of Jennifer Thompson to not shrink as a person and get stuck in life, but to be able to forgive herself and to go forward in life. Such is the healing power of the medicine of forgiveness.

To be continued

Next Sunday, I plan again to speak on forgiveness, further elaborating on the basis of forgiveness, the process of forgiveness, forgiveness and reconciliation, forgiveness and justice, forgiveness and hate.

Closing Hymn #323 – “Break Not the Circle”

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. Amen.

(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 I,” given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode on November 8, 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.)