

The Dance of Forgiveness
Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship, Thunder Bay, Ontario
Sunday, September 20, 2015

Reading #1: “How often shall my brother sin against me?” Matthew, chapter 18, verses 21-22

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"

Jesus said to Peter, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven."

Reading #2: “Forgiveness” by Timothy D. Wells [Church of the Larger Fellowship prisoner member]

You want me to forgive him?!!

I want you to forgive.

He must atone!!

Is atonement punishment?

He must pay in kind!

Must it be you inflicting justice?

He must feel the pain I feel!

Cry out your anger.

Listen to his cries.

I can't condone what he did.

Forgiveness is not assent.

I can't be near him.

Forgiveness is not a bond.

Things will never be as they were.

There is yesterday and there is tomorrow.

Where will you live?

I will still mourn.

Yes, mourn anger; mourn loss

Sermon: “The Dance of Forgiveness” by the Rev. Suzanne Wasilczuk

This sermon is about the back and forth of forgiveness. The blame and shame, the fear and anger, the spiritual practice of bringing to mind grievances, the letting go of grudges. Asking: How do we forgive? How do we ask forgiveness?

I'll talk about how different religious traditions speak of forgiveness. How modern psychology approaches forgiveness. And I'll bring up two instances of more expansive wrongs, and how they are, or might be, made right.

Theologian Henri J.M. Nouwen tells us: “Forgiveness is the name of love practiced among people who love poorly. The hard truth is that all people love poorly.”

Christian

In Christian theology, one aspect of forgiveness is atonement. Atonement is the act of reparation for an injury or a wrong. More specifically, in Christian theology, atonement is the reconciliation of men and women to God through the death of Christ on the cross.

But in a more quotidian, in a more everyday sense, Jesus addresses forgiveness.

In Matthew 18: 21-22 Peter comes us to Jesus and asks: “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.”

Forgiveness is beyond calculating.

In the **Lord’s Prayer** we hear:

And forgive us our trespasses [our sins, our mistakes, our offenses, our unkind words or deeds]

may I ask for forgiveness openly

as we forgive those who trespass against us

may I grant forgiveness often [Rev. Victoria Safford]

Lead us first to forgive the mistakes of others

Even as we hope our own mistakes will soon be forgiven. [Rev. Jeff Briere]

Untie the tangled threads of destiny that bind us,

as we release others from the entanglement of past mistakes. [the Aramaic]

Loose the cords of mistakes binding us

as we release the strands we hold of others’ guilt. [the Aramaic]

Later I will talk about our collective trespasses, our social and ecological sins. The *Justice Lord’s Prayer* tells us:

And forgive us our trespasses our blindness toward our neighbor, our self-preoccupation, our racism, our sexism, and our incurable propensity to worry only about ourselves and our own . . .

As we forgive those who trespass against us those who victimize us, our imperfect parents and systems that wounded, cursed, and ignored us . . . And do not put us to the test do not judge us only by whether we have fed the hungry, given clothing to the naked, visited the sick, or tried to mend the systems that victimized the poor. Spare us this test for none of us can stand before your scrutiny. Give us, instead, more days to mend our ways, our selfishness, and our systems . . . [Justice Lord’s Prayer, Josh Jackaway]

As a seminary professor of mine would often remind us: “We are, none of us, entirely innocent.”

Muslim

In Islam Muslims pray eight times a day, reciting *du’a*, prayers over & over, often using prayer beads [*sobha*] to keep track of the number of repetitions.

Our Lord! Therefore forgive us our sins, and remit from us our evil deeds, and make us die the death of the righteous. (Qur’an 3:193)

Thou art our Protecting Friend, therefore forgive us and have mercy on us, Thou, the Best of all who show forgiveness. (Qur’an 7:155)

Muslims believe that Allah is Merciful and Forgiving, and that only Allah can forgive sins. All human beings make mistakes, and all that is needed is to recognize the error, rectify it, and seek forgiveness for it.

<http://islam.about.com/od/prayer/qt/DuaForgiveness.htm>; accessed 17 September 2015.

Judaism

This is the time of year that Jews celebrate New Year. Starting with Rosh Hashanah [L'shanah tovah tikatevu] –May you be inscribed in the Book of Life for a good year]

These High Holy Days – ten days in all – culminate with Yom Kippur, the “Day of Atonement” – the day we wipe our slate clean for a New Year.

Because Jews believe that offenses against other people can only be forgiven by other people – and not by God – Jews take these ten days to meet with, or call, their family, their friends, their neighbors – anyone they may have offended or been unfriendly to in the past year. “Pious families... gather and ask forgiveness of each other for any slights, insensitivities, or injustices, they might have committed against each other in the preceding year.” [*The Joys of Yiddish*, Leo Rosten, 447-48] Spouses. Parents and children. All your relations are asked to forgive, so that you may enter the new year with a clear conscience.

The Yom Kippur service features a Confession by those gathered: “For the sin[s] we have committed before Thee..., O God of forgiveness, forgive us, pardon us, grant us remission.” The confession is communal. Jews share in each other’s transgressions. They share “general responsibility for the misdeeds and shortcomings of mankind.” [Joys, 448]

“We are, none of us, entirely innocent.”

Rituals of forgiveness – through prayers and personal apologies and confession.

Modern self-help

A story from *Forgiveness: How to Make Peace with Your Past and Get on with Your Life* by Sidney & Suzanne Simon:

We stood around the casket, my brother, my sister, and I, gazing down at what remained of the man whom we had always loved but sometimes hated, whom we tried to respect but for so many years feared and avoided. He barely resembled the formidable giant who wielded so much power over us when we were children. He had been seriously ill for a long, long time.

I cannot tell you what my brother and sister were thinking as they stood beside me in that dimly lit funeral parlor. I, however, was remembering the man who adored my mother, who would lean over to kiss her outstretched arm while she poured his coffee and played footsie with her under the dinner table. I was thinking about the man who had been a skilled craftsman, an imaginative storyteller, an avid reader, and an exceptional gardener. And with this last talent in mind, I broke the silence.

“I thought we could bury these with Dad,” I said, reaching into my pocket to retrieve a gift I tearfully bought soon after receiving the news of his death. Both my brother and my sister laughed out loud when they saw what I held, a half-dozen packets of seeds, the very same kind our dad planted each spring for as far back as any of us could remember.”

They reminisce, smile, chuckle.

“Yes, this was a fitting send-off for a man who cultivated the tastiest tomatoes on Long Island. But it was also much more than that. It was a tribute to the healing his children had done during the years preceding his death.

You see, when we were young, Dad came into our bedrooms and sexually molested us. At other times, he exploded into violent rages, lashing out at us in anger and frustration. Yes, this man did some horrible things to us when we were children, and we had not forgotten that.

In fact, had our dad died three or five or ten years earlier, we might have stayed away from his funeral altogether, and if, out of duty, we had attended it, we would not have been able to see anything good in him. We could not have acknowledged that there was more to him than the abuse he perpetrated or that we were more than the victims of his abuse.

Instead of tranquility and affectionate laughter, there would have been bitter tears and stone-cold silence, resentment, pain, anger, regret. We might have condemned him to rot in hell and condemned ourselves to more years of hiding, hating, and hurting. But instead, we walked away from his coffin knowing that he would rest in peace and even more important, that we would go on living at peace with ourselves.

What made the difference for us? Forgiveness.

Perhaps you are shaking your head in disbelief right now and wondering how anyone could truly forgive something as unspeakable as incest. You may even be asking yourself why anyone would want to. The truth is that we did not want to or set out to forgive. All we ever wanted was for pain from the past to stop interfering with our lives and our happiness in the present. To accomplish that, my sister, my brother, and I, each in our own way, worked through our pain and let go of it.

We did not and never will forget what had happened to us. We did not and never will condone our father's actions. Nothing could alter the fact that how he treated us was no way to treat little kids. Yet, before our dad died, according to our own needs and our own time frames, each of us reached a point where we no longer needed to make him pay for what he had done. We stopped expecting him to make up for it. We stopped using incest as an excuse for everything that was wrong with our lives. And we stopped waiting for our parents to give us as adults what we did not receive from them as children. We let go. We healed. And yes, we forgave.” [1-3]

If you have experienced the sting of rejection, ridicule, humiliation, deception, disappointment, abuse.

If your life is filled with grudges, resentments, self-defeating habits.

After going through stages of denial – refusing to talk about the hurt; into self-blame [if only I had... or had not...] and being a victim [of feeling: I am the abuse I suffered]; through a stage of indignation, outrage, fury at what happened to you [“I will never forgive you!”]; into a survivor phase [I did the best I could, under the circumstances]

The authors suggest that we “forgive the people who hurt you, not as a favor to them, but so you can let go of the pain and get on with your life.” [5]

With time and work, maybe a lot of therapy, we arrive at integration – inner peace. Knowing that there is nothing we can do to change the people who hurt us.

Knowing there is no form of revenge that can heal our wounds.

“Learning that the rapist or mugger or drunk driver who wreaked havoc on our lives” will no longer define our life.

We “forgive the people who hurt us, not as a favor to them, but so we can let go of the pain and get on with our lives.”

“Forgiveness” by Timothy D. Wells [Church of the Larger Fellowship prisoner member]

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Where will you live?

Finally, the two instances of more communal wrong.

Indigenous

In 1886 a group of Unitarian ministers and lay people established The Montana Industrial School for Indians – Bond's Mission – with Rev. Henry Bond as the superintendent. In a letter to the *Christian Register*, Rev. Bond writes of his objectives for the school:

“Be it understood that, though our movement is religious, it is not directly so; and in the common sense, we do not expect or desire simply to lug the Indians into our church, and be given the name Christian before the reality can possibly exist. We would educate and elevate the whole man. We would begin with the school; and to accommodate ourselves more completely to the status of the Indians of America, we would begin with the kindergarten and industrial school. And, to meet the mercurial habits of roving boys and girls, we propose to change the occupation as frequently as possible until, as we hope, we shall succeed in establishing habits of concentration and perseverance.

Entering upon the work in a religious and philanthropic spirit, we wish at last, in God's good time, to lift the whole red man, physical, intellectual, moral, spiritual.” [A *Worthy Work in a Needy Time*, Margery Pease, 10-11]

Here in Canada, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission calls on all institutions in the country, including churches, to recognize their historical and present-day role in the treatment – and mistreatment – of Aboriginal peoples.

In page 10 of the 17 page document, churches, especially the Roman Catholic Church, are called to “learn about their church's role in colonization, the history and legacy of residential schools, and why apologies to former residential school students, their families, and communities [are] necessary.”

Perhaps not as egregious as other church schools, Unitarians, too, were involved in the re-education of indigenous children.

Perhaps our intervention did not lead to the extensive “spiritual, cultural, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse of First Nations” children, written of in the document.

But: We are, none of us, entirely innocent.”

And eco-justice, sins against the environment:

The Great Bear Rainforest

Situated halfway up the coast of British Columbia, is the Great Bear Rainforest, home to the Kermode bear, a type of black bear. Many of these black bears carry the recessive gene for a pure white bear, the white Spirit Bear.

One of the rarest bears on earth; there are as few as 100 Spirit Bears living in the rainforest. On Gribbell Island, Princess Royal Island, Swindle Island, and sometimes ranging as far inland as Terrace.

All the bears in the Great Bear Rainforest are threatened.

Trophy hunters cannot hunt white bears; but the black bears they kill may carry the genes for the Spirit Bear.

Climate change is warming the waters, threatening the salmon populations that feed not only the bears, but the birds, other mammals, and humans.

And a new danger: the proposed Enbridge Northern Gateway pipeline, which would bring crude oil extracted from the Alberta tar sands to the town of Kitimat just up the coast. Tankers would navigate the narrow, rocky, 160-kilometer-long Douglas Channel, just north and west of the Rainforest.

Shortly before this article was written, a Russian tanker full of oil, diesel fuel and a mix of other hydrocarbons lost power and went adrift off the rocky coast of Haida Gwaii, the group of islands just west of the Great Bear Rainforest. Luckily, an American tugboat happened to be in port at Prince Rupert and was able to pull the tanker to safety.

But, more importantly, was able to ensure the safety, at least for the moment, of that precious and unique part of Mother Earth.

[“Spirit Bears” *Smithsonian*, Sept. 2015, 42-53, 94]

In my home of Minnesota biologists are still monitoring the loon population, studying the impact of the 2010 explosion of the British Petroleum Deepwater Horizon oil rig off the Gulf of Mexico – the loons’ winter home.

How do we forgive ourselves for our selfishness and shortsightedness? How do we ask forgiveness of air, water, trees, birds, fish, animals, peoples we have harmed in our over-striving?

How do we say “I forgive” or “Please forgive me” to a loon? a bear? the child forced from her parents into a residential school?

How do we say “I forgive” or “Please forgive me” to our parents? Our children? Our spouse? Each other?

Hymn #1037 “We Begin Again in Love” [turquoise hymnal]

For each time that our fears have made us rigid and inaccessible

Sung: *We forgive ourselves and each other.*

We begin again in love.

For each tie we have struck out in anger without just cause...
We forgive ourselves and each other.
We begin again in love.

For each time that our greed has blinded us to the needs of others
We forgive ourselves and each other.
We begin again in love.

For the selfishness that set us apart and alone
We forgive ourselves and each other.
We begin again in love.

For falling short of the admonitions of the spirit
We forgive ourselves and each other.
We begin again in love.

For losing sight of our unity
We forgive ourselves and each other.
We begin again in love.

For those and for so many acts both evident and subtle
which have fueled the illusion of separateness
We forgive ourselves and each other.
We begin again in love.

The dance of forgiveness is a wobble-wobble; a stepping on toes – intentionally,
inadvertently.

The dance of forgiving - ourselves and others, of being forgiven, is a back and forth.
A dance through the good times, and the bad times, too.

We step; we misstep; we get stepped on.
We begin again in love.

May it be so. May we make it so. Blessed Be. And Amen.