

«Reflections on Forgiveness»

Sermon by Rev. Patty Hanneman, September 26, 2009

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

Besides the regular Sabbath worship, the Jewish year is marked by several festivals. First are the High Holy Days, or “Days of Awe” which come in the fall. Rosh Hashana, meaning “Head of the Year” is celebrated as the anniversary of the creation and signals new beginnings. Then, after a sacred season of 10 days of reflection come Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Yom Kippur is said to be the day when God reckons up the sins of every person for the previous year. Whether that interpretation is accepted or not, most Jewish communities see the 10 days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur as a time to reflect on reconciliation; to consider those who may have come to harm through your actions, those from whom you may need to seek forgiveness; and those who may need to be forgiven. In the spirit of Yom Kippur, celebrated today by the Jewish people, we focus this morning on the process of forgiveness..

Ministers are forever talking about the *importance* of forgiveness... forgive your enemies, turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile... One of the most powerful parables in the Christian scriptures – that of the Prodigal Son read earlier – is about forgiveness. Part of its power for me is because there are three main characters in this story: the father, the eldest son and the prodigal one. At different times in my life, depending on my circumstances, I have identified with each of these guys, and so the story holds many different meanings for me. I have been the father, having had something asked of me, feeling taken advantage of by someone I thought cared about me, feeling a sense of loss and abandonment because of that, and then working through my loss to feel joy again. I have been the older son, feeling the need to withhold forgiveness because I was in the right, and to forgive just wouldn't be fair. And I have been the prodigal son, having been cruel to those who care about me and spending emotional capital in all the wrong places. The story is a lesson in seeking forgiveness, offering forgiveness, and a reminder that this kind of reconciliation sometimes moves beyond categories like justice and fairness. It's not about whether we *deserve* forgiveness; it's about giving it freely, from the heart, regardless.

Ministers rarely talk about *how* to forgive, and this is a sad thing. If we tell this story and stress its importance without talking about the *how* of forgiveness, we leave people believing that forgiving is simply an act of will and if somehow you just can't bring yourself to forgive someone, well, you're just being weak or egotistical. Read the story and it seems easy, right? He sees his son across the field, his heart goes out to him, and he forgives him. His son is sorry; he's immediately forgiven. Why is it not that easy for us? First of all, when we read this story, we do ourselves a great injustice if we're not considering the months, and possibly even years that have gone by since the son left home. The father has had time to move through the process toward forgiveness so that when he sees his son, he greets him as a man who has already been healed from the hurt. The at-one-ment has already occurred.

I recently read this little book by William Meninger called *The Process of Forgiveness* that helped me understand that the ability to forgive is a byproduct of this reaching for healing and wholeness, and that it is often slow, painful work. If we try to forgive prematurely, without this work, it will be shallow and unreal. I remember reading a book called *The Sunflower* a few years ago, in which a Nazi soldier, on his death bed, tells a Jewish man of the atrocities he has committed on the Jewish people. He asked for forgiveness. The Jew turns and walks away, and that act haunts him. Yet the Jewish community takes the act of forgiveness seriously. It takes work and time to truly forgive, and his act of forgiveness would not have been genuine.

Meninger writes of the “how” of forgiveness. He says there are five stages that we move through after having been wounded, and that our inability to forgive is due our becoming stuck in one of these stages. The first stage to reclaiming wholeness is to own and admit that someone has hurt you, and to admit to the depth of that hurt. This may seem self-evident, but indeed in many cases it is not easy. Sometimes our pride is reluctant to admit how deeply we’ve been hurt. We want to think of ourselves as being much more self-reliant than we really are. Words will never hurt me, right? Yeah, I just got dumped, but no big deal, really. Shake it off. No. This first stage of healing is to be able to truly own how that wound is currently affecting you and your life. What is it exactly that needs to be healed? What would your life look like if that hadn’t happened? How is it shaping your life and affecting your ability to lead the life you want to live?

The second stage toward wholeness is self-blame or guilt. As you begin to look at your hurt realistically, you may find yourself looking at both sides of the story, and then say, oh, look what I did to cause this! If only I had acted differently! If you’ve had those feelings after being hurt, recognize them for what they are – a healthy step toward reconciliation and wholeness. But sometimes personal responsibility for what has happened to you gets exaggerated beyond reason and you become stuck in self-blame. As long as you are to blame, there is no one to forgive, and you stay stuck where you are and bleed.

The third stage is the opposite of the previous one – now you see yourself as the victim. It was done, it hurt, you did not do it, it was done to you, it was beyond your control. Symptoms of this stage include depression, listlessness, feelings of not being understood, being really bitter. The victim stage serves a particular purpose as long as it is just a stage and doesn’t become a permanent lifestyle. It is not unlike the grieving process. It gives what is due to past hurts. But it can be difficult to transcend and often the most important thing you can do if this has become your way of being in the world is to find a support group, people who can both understand your pain and remind you that you are more than your wounds.

The fourth stage Meninger identifies is anger. When you can finally say, “I’ll be damned if I’m going to put up with feeling this way, having this pain in my life any longer,” then we’ve advanced to the anger stage. Now, there may have been some anger earlier, but this anger is positive, forward looking, motivating. It declares, “This will never happen to me again. I am not helpless, I’m not hopeless, and I refuse to be defined by my wounds and my suffering.” Now in the place of self-pity, there is outrage. Anger has its place, but obviously this can become dangerous to be stuck in this stage. The anger has to be focused and channeled constructively or it

can burn everything in its path. If you find yourself chronically stuck on anger and can't seem to move through it, find a professional who can help you channel this energy constructively.

The fifth and final stage is wholeness. And this is the place where forgiveness can happen, as a byproduct of this healing process. Realizing our hurt and our hurters, knowing what we did (or did not do) to facilitate the wounding, having mourned our suffering and found the energy and determination to do something about it, we now proceed to do it. We claim our right to wholeness and happiness. At this point, able to truly forgive, you may seek reconciliation. The act of forgiveness does not depend on reconciliation with the other, but you may find, having gone through this process, you need to both forgive and ask the other person for forgiveness as well.

The 10 days of reflection that precede Yom Kippur are set aside in the Jewish New Year for doing this kind of work, of going through the process. It is a time of reflecting on our stuckness in these various stages, for considering – if not forgiveness, then at least the journey toward that goal. The journey toward any goal is difficult if we do not take the time to reflect on where we are right now, and where we need to go.

There are lots of reasons not to seek this kind of wholeness. But if we refuse to try, the poison will stay in our system. Our souls shrink when we are caught and are unable to free ourselves from any of the first four stages of this process. One writer put it this way: “It’s about pulling the knife out of our own gut.” (Lewis Smedes, *Forgive and Forget*) In this season of Yom Kippur, I urge you to reflect on those places where you feel you are not in right relationship with someone. Consider where you are on the path toward wholeness around that relationship. Consider what you can do today, this week, this month, to get the support you need to get you unstuck and moving along the path toward healing and wholeness. It is here that we will find the peace that we all seek. May it be so. Blessed be.