

FORGIVEN

A sermon given for Anne Stoner, our 2018 Auction Winner

by the Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason

at UU Wellesley Hills on

Sunday, March 3rd, 2019

In recent years, the popular media has given a lot of positive press to forgiveness, largely in response to the expansion of an academic field known as “forgiveness studies.” Perhaps you yourself have read about it. Physicians and psychologists have been compiling data about forgiveness and demonstrated its considerable mental and physical health benefits. It turns out that forgiveness is not just a good idea; it is good practice. In consequence, newer protocols of forgiveness have made their way into clinical settings, helping people get a better sense of the mechanics involved in forgiving others and being forgiven themselves. When I was a psychotherapist, I made frequent use of these with my clients, who were heartened by the solid research base. Of course, the religious traditions of the world had preached forgiveness for millennia, but they did so on spiritual grounds. They had offered only an art of forgiveness, not a science.

In his book On Forgiveness, Richard Holloway notes “that religion has been the container of of some important human discoveries that are still vital to us” today, including the need all of us have both to forgive and be forgiven. That is a point he makes most convincingly as the former Bishop of Edinburgh. In 2000, Holloway resigned from his

position in the Scottish Episcopal Church in protest over the church's failure to fully embrace LGBTQ folks into the fold. He has since described himself as an "after-religionist", one who has been very public about his personal agnosticism and skepticism. Yet he sees tremendous value, he writes, in "the great religious themes of hope and forgiveness... for the whole human community", apart from any sectarian interests.

According to Holloway, "we can value forgiveness for its own sake, even if we are no longer comfortable with the theological packaging it comes in." As he observes: "If justice is one of the fundamental principles of true religion, then forgiveness... is its essential counterpart, it's necessary antithesis. If our passion for justice can sometimes trap us in war and bitterness," he adds, "then it is forgiveness that can sometimes help to rescue us," often from the dangerous grip that powerful emotions have on us.

Holloway says: "look, human beings do terrible things to each other and the tragic thing about us it all is the way remembrance of past hurt can rob us of our future and become the narrative of our lives" at the expense of a larger life story we might rather tell. If we are always trying to correct for the past, we cannot even pay attention to the choices we have available for us in the present. We need to remember that forgiveness remains one of our options - and beyond that, remember that forgiveness can take many possible forms, much as justice can.

Honestly, if forgiveness were a straightforward matter, we would not need to make such a close study of either the art or science of it. At its

most rudimentary, forgiveness means surrendering our drive to revenge. Even what we dub retributive justice - outlined in some more stringent religious codes along the line of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for tooth” - was meant to ensure a proportional response, meeting wrong for wrong in equal measure, so that a petty theft, say, did not result in capital punishment. When we forgive someone, it does not mean that we want them spared the consequences of their actions or freed from penalties that societies impose upon transgressors with good reason. It does, however, mean that we do not avenge ourselves in anger.

Sometimes that rudimentary sort of forgiveness — resisting acting in rage — is horribly challenging, because it required most commonly in cases of grievous injury. As Halloway notes, you can never forgive a murder - how could you, possibly? Who would presume to speak for the dead? That wrong can never be righted. But you can somehow forgive a murderer. We have to understand that forgiveness does not ask us to excuse inexcusable acts. Instead, it asks us to recall the people who have acted wrongly.

What Halloway calls “conditional forgiveness” is the kind of forgiveness we can more comfortably imagine. It involves a process of restorative justice, where wrongdoers admit the extent of their wrongdoing and acknowledge the impact it has had on us and others. There are expressions of remorse; in certain cases, reparations are made. An attempt is made to stay in right relation, and the wronged parties accept that attempt as sincere. We are encouraged to embrace conditional forgiveness whole-heartedly.

Yet we may never be wholly reconciled with those we have forgiven, nor should we necessarily expect that. Most of our relationships persists through a series of ruptures and repairs, but sadly, not every rupture can be repaired. Sometimes relationships remain intact because they have grown distant. Occasionally, relationships may grow closer, if trust is successfully re-established and even deepened over time. This closeness can be earned in our marriages and families, in our friendships and working relationships, in our local community and in our country; it can feel all the more precious for being hard-won. It is the culmination of people's paired desire and intent to forgive.

In his "Litany of Atonement", Unitarian Universalist minister the Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs declares: "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." Of course, this is much easier said than done, beginning again in love, but such renewal can occur, particularly if it is undertaken as a spiritual discipline.

Part of our religious inheritance as UUs is the Universalist tradition and its faithful witness to the final forgiveness of all sin by a loving God seeking to save every soul, a God forbidding that any soul should be lost. To the extent that Universalists lived in alignment with the divine will as they understood it, they allowed for the eternal possibility of forgiveness. These beliefs scandalized their neighbors, who considered Universalists morally compromised and ethically dubious, at best heterodox and at worst heretical. In some states, Universalists were precluded from serving on juries, presumably

because their theology rendered them fundamentally incapable of rendering judgment or of distinguishing right from wrong.

My original UU faith community was a historic Universalist one; it became my home church and later my sponsoring congregation for the UU ministry. When I first stepped through its doors, it seemed I had accidentally passed through some mystical portal to mercy. I was raised with the threat of damnation, believing that certain people would never and could never be forgiven, and I unconsciously feared that I might be one of them myself. That church relieved me of some deep-seated fears that I did not even know I had. Its religious testimony was ultimate forgiveness and undying love, and it changed my life in ways I am continually working to comprehend.

A lot shifts for people if they know they can be forgiven. They are suddenly more inclined to be forgiving themselves. I was raised in a family that was fairly unforgiving, where estrangements were routine and grievances rarely forgotten. The emotional impact of that was damaging to all of us, although I did not realize that until well into my adulthood. As Hallway observes, there is always a danger that “our previous refusal to forgive will have destroyed the bridge we ourselves now need to cross”. Because no one ever forgave, no one was ever forgiven. What opportunities we lost!

A couple of years ago, there was a spate of articles published about the late New York City Fire Department Chaplain Fr. Mychal Judge, a beloved Franciscan priest who died at the World Trade Center during the attacks on 9/11. These reported on the initial efforts to canonize Fr. Judge, as unlikely saint as he appears. He was self-disclosing

about being a recovering alcoholic. He had an active AIDs ministry and was a gay man in a long-term romantic relationship. But Fr. Judge also had a conspicuous habit of going to FDNY celebrations and proclaiming to the firefighters there (and anyone else who happened to be present), “All your sins are forgiven!” He had repeatedly been told to stop that, since as a priest, he was beholden to Catholic rite of penitence. But he never wanted a single firefighter to doubt forgiveness itself. His last FDNY event was the last for several others there as well, and at it, he promised: “All your sins are forgiven!”

This proclamation that Fr. Judge made expressed what Halloway characterizes as “unconditional forgiveness”. It is not dependent upon a process or a confession, clear goodwill or even a degree of regret; people may not need to know what exact sins they have committed. Most of us are not aware of all the trespasses we need to be forgiven, anyway. “All versions of conditional forgiveness, no matter how just, creative, and releasing are essentially tactical, designed to limit or manage the damage that we do to one another,” Halloway observes. “Pure forgiveness is not an instrumental good, a prudent management or a damage limitation exercise; it is an intrinsic good, an end in and of itself, a pure gift offered with no motive of return.”

Attempting such “absolute forgiveness” requires a certain “moral confidence”, Halloway suggests, a trust that magnanimity exists; “radical forgiveness is its own meaning,” he concludes. “We rarely see this kind of joyful mercy at work in human history, but when do, it has enormous redemptive value. It is one of the few things that are able to break the circuit of evil...” he writes. One classical theological

definition of evil is anything that actively seeks to separate us from love, either love for others or ourselves or the world. Forgiveness helps to restore us to love.

“Fear binds the world. Forgiveness sets it free,” that modern psychospiritual classic A Course in Miracles maintains. “We would not bind the world again today. Fear holds it prisoner. And yet... Love has given us the means to set it free.” Love emboldens us to take risks, knowing that we have been hurt in our relationships and will probably be hurt again, just as we have hurt those in relationship with us and will hurt them again, however much we would like to avoid that.

What forgiveness does is honor the healing power of relationship itself; it connects us with our humanity. As that children’s story “What If Nobody Forgave?” from our Time for All Ages so powerfully reminds us, “Grudgeville” is not a place any of us would want to live on a permanent basis.

Some in the field of forgiveness studies hypothesize that forgiveness is beneficial primarily because it allows us to access strong social supports by fostering resilient interpersonal relationships, ones that can withstand injury and insult. Others theorize that forgiveness is indicative of a spiritual experience or religious outlook that is personally sustaining. One of the loveliest paradoxical insights in Hallowsay’s extended meditation on forgiveness is that we ourselves can be forgiven an initial refusal or ongoing resistance to forgiveness.

In faith communities such as ours, we are regularly asked to be forgiving because we regularly need to be forgiven. Here we are told that we are valued (indeed, we are); that we matter beyond the total sum of our errors; that we have the potential to grow and evolve as people; that we can repair some of the harm we have done in our lives; that we will be encouraged and expected to improve. So we need to not disqualify one another too handily, and we must learn to forgive ourselves, too.

For some people, self-forgiveness may be the toughest task. But it too is a spiritual imperative. “Repentance is change of heart and mind. It acknowledges the reality of what we have done...” notes Halloway. “It is a radical honesty that comes as an enormous relief to the troubled spirit; it is the moment we stop running from the truth about ourselves.” That truth is meant to set us free, not trap us. It is meant to liberate us from past patterns.

One of the simplest interventions I used with therapy clients did not belong to any elaborate forgiveness protocol. It was only an off-handed, gentle reminder to my clients that faced with a similar circumstance today, they would almost certainly make a different choice - a reminder that they had learned something precious about the kind of life they wanted to lead - really, about the kind of life they intended to lead. Interestingly, as we age, research suggests that we are more likely to forgive and to feel forgiven ourselves.

As Halloway maintains, “The real beauty and power of forgiveness is that it can deliver the future to us.” I could tell everyone here that their sins were forgiven, but I’m not sure how credible that would

sound in this congregational context. While I do believe your sins are forgiven you, what I will say to you now is: Welcome to the future! It has been waiting for you; it has been waiting us. Whether we consider such blessed time-travel a miracle of of modern science or an ancient art matters little in the end. What matters is that we make forgiveness a sincere practice. Forgiveness is good for us, because forgiveness believes we can all - each and every single one of us - be better.

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