

"Seventy x Seven" ©
Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society, Madison, CT
The Rev. Jeanne Lloyd
October 6, 2019

Sounding of the Gong

Gathering Music *Maybe (Next to Normal)*, Kitt Nick Stanford, Pianist

#Welcome Mary Strieff, President
Board of Trustees

Prelude *For Good*, Schwartz

Chalice Lighting
(The flaming chalice is the symbol of our free faith)

Opening Words Rev. Lloyd

"To forgive is to set a prisoner free, only to discover the prisoner was you."
Lewis B. Smedes

#*Opening Hymn 1023 *Building Bridges*, Quaker Tradition

As we prepare to sing our hymn, you will find the hymnals under the seat in front of you, unless you're in the front row where they were on your seat. We invite you to share hymnals.

Story Kathy Helmrich, Member at Large
Board of Trustees

Offertory Words

Offertory Words October Share the Plate

Here, we share with generosity what treasure we have with others whose needs are greater than our own. Our Share the Plate collection donates 50% of our total cash offering each week to a designated community program that serves others. This month your cash contributions will go to: *IRIS, Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services* Since 1982, IRIS has helped refugees and immigrants establish new lives, regain hope and contribute to the vitality of Connecticut communities.

Please give generously.

Offering & Offertory Music *What the World Needs Now*, Bacharach
Candice Anglin, Soloist

Message/Candles

#Sing the Young People Out *Children’s Recessional* (see back of hymnal)

Honoring Our Joys and Sorrows

And, now, if you woke this morning with a sorrow so heavy that you need the help of this community to carry it; or if, in the spirit of thankfulness, you woke with gratitude in your heart that simply must be shared, now is the time for you to speak.

Please come forward to the mic as you are able. Or, we will bring a mic to you, as needed.

Musical Meditation *Pathetique Sonata, Mvt. 2, Beethoven*

Let us reflect with reverence in our hearts for the joys and sorrows spoken and unspoken today.

Reflection *Seventy x Seven* Rev. Lloyd

As we approach the end of the 10 Days of Awe celebrated by observant Jews, we move from Rosh Hashanah which began the evening of September 29th . . . toward Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, which happens on October 9th, this year. For Jews, this is the beginning of the new year, 5780. The Days of Awe are a time of reflection on the regrets of one’s life, and on forgiveness. It is a time of new beginnings.

Last week we reflected on how difficult it can be to forgive ourselves when we judge ourselves too harshly, and bury regret in the deepest parts of our heart and soul. I talked of how great a burden it is to carry this kind of regret forever . . . never forgiving ourselves . . . never releasing the spirit within from the sentence we’ve given it . . . because we can’t accept our own fallibility or imperfection.

Last week, those of you who were here were offered the opportunity to consider the possibility of letting go of that gnarled stone of regret. Many of you began that process in the presence of this community.

PAUSE

As with all qualities in relationships, an act of forgiveness that ends in reconciliation is, in my mind, a reciprocal process. It occurs as an act of mutuality. When we learn how

to forgive ourselves (while acknowledging our own imperfections) our heart learns how to open up to the possibility of forgiving someone else. It may not do so in quid pro quo fashion, as with a specific relationship and incident, but it *prepares your way* for the future possibility of being able to forgive someone else in a new incident. Once we learn how to fairly and responsibly forgive ourselves, accept our own imperfections, accept our humanness, we become more capable of being able to see past the growing edges of someone else.

PAUSE

There is another kind of forgiveness though, that is not relationally based. It is the kind of forgiveness that happens when it is not mutual. That kind of forgiveness may not end in reconciliation with someone else, but it can help you reconcile yourself to the situation. I will speak more on this second kind of forgiveness later.

Last week I referenced the Hebrew Bible and the Islamic prophet, Rumi. This week, I bring Jesus, into the mix. He said, in Matthew 7:3, “remove the beam out of your own eye, and then you [will] see clearly [enough so that you may] remove the speck out of your brother’s eye.” If you are to achieve reconciliation with another, how can you forgive another person their mistakes, if you can’t admit your own mistakes? We are each fallible. We each make mistakes. Learning to admit our mistakes and the pain we cause, is a step toward humility, and humility is a step toward acknowledging that someone else who has caused us pain, is just as humanly imperfect as we.

Jesus said something else, as well. When he was asked the question by Peter, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven."¹

PAUSE

Truth is, what Jesus says about forgiveness can be contradictory. Seventy x Seven can seem to be an infinite number of times. Indeed, the phrase of “seventy x seven” refers to a metaphor of the times in his life that symbolized eternity, G*d’s eternity.

So what Jesus is actually saying is that because G*d forgives for eternity, so should we forgive for eternity. The concept of 70 x 7 is rooted in the concept of G*d’s² unconditional forgiveness of us, for *an infinite period of time*.

¹ Matthew 18:21-22 (King James)

² Rev. Lloyd does not spell out the word, “G*d,” because the term is loaded with many misconceptions and preconceptions. That which is the spirit of life and community, the spirit of love and death, the spirit of humanity, cannot be relegated to one three letter word. Rev. Lloyd invites others to reconsider the meanings of this word, and, to contemplate whether it is a noun or verb. Is G*d Love? The reader is invited to expand their vision and understanding . . .

Last week, I spoke about a retributive G*d. Please note that when we talk of a G*d who offers unconditional forgiveness for eternity, we are talking about a universal **restorative** G*d of love (not a retributive G*d who punishes mercilessly).

I will say now that most Unitarian Universalists who believe in a loving G*d or Spirit that sustains us, do not resonate with a patriarchal G*d that condemns souls to torment. Many of us believe, instead, in a Spirit of Life and Love that sustains us, without retribution. We don't know exactly what G*d is. We choose not to define her in piecemeal fashion. But, if we know anything at all, we know that g*d with a small “g”, is Love, with a capital “L”.)

Many of us have faith in a Spirit of Life that accepts our fallibility and is eternally there for us. A Spirit that always loves us, always sees the best in us, always accepts us even when we made mistakes. In our best moments, we acknowledge that that Spirit is not only there for us, it is also there for others, indefinitely, for eternity, or at least for our life time. But, when Jesus says 70 x 7, he means for G*d's lifetime.

PAUSE

I have to admit though that Jesus is not always clear on the topic of forgiveness, for it is also written that he said, in Matthew 18: 21-22, “If there is repentance, you must forgive.” (emphasis added) But, we know there are times that the other person who caused you injury, does not recognize the harm they've done, and doesn't accept responsibility for their own actions. They are not repentant. They are not sorry. How do you forgive someone 70 x 7 times, when only one of you is working on the relationship? What chance of reconciliation is there in such a circumstance? Very little.

So . . . Jesus understands forgiveness as reciprocal, that it can only happen when there is repentance by both parties. Indeed, one interpretation of his words on the cross, emphasizes that forgiveness is required but only when the person who caused the injury is repentant. “When Jesus cries out from the cross, he doesn't say to his attackers, ‘I forgive you’. Instead, he prays that God might forgive them . . . [since the men who attacked him displayed no regret]. [He doesn't offer them his own forgiveness, but asks G*d, in his [or her] infinite and eternal perspective on human kind, to forgive them.”³

PAUSE

Forgiving someone 70 x 7 times (or an eternity), even when someone is repentant is still a hard thing to do, isn't it? It's one thing to forgive someone where reconciliation seems plausible, but what does forgiveness look like when someone is not repentant?

³ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/forgiveness-in-the-bible_b_911562

Under such circumstances, I don't believe that forgiving someone 70 x 7 times is the answer. Something else is required.

PAUSE

Let me introduce, here, a 'quality of being' that G*d may have, and in our best moments, that we too, may have. It is a quality that is critically important to the concept of forgiveness. It is something that we presume the great Spirit of Life has, that G*d has, but it is not something that we always have.

And, it is **perspective**. We make assumptions that because the Spirit that sustains us, is 'almost beyond our imagining and beyond our control', that this Spirit has a perspective that exceeds our imagination. We presume that a Spirit that can see across time and into our souls and hearts, has perspective. For us it is a little harder.

As Frederick Buechner says, "As human beings we know time as a passing of unrepeatable events in the course of which everything passes away including ourselves. As human beings, we also know occasions when we stand outside the passing of events and glimpse their meaning. Sometimes an event occurs in our lives (a birth, a death, a marriage—some event of unusual beauty, pain, joy) through which we catch a glimpse of what our lives are all about and maybe even what life itself is all about[... This glimpse of what 'it's all about' involves not just the present but the past and future too. Inhabitants of time that we are, we stand on such occasions with one foot in eternity."⁴ In those rare moments, we may get a passing glimpse of G*d's eternity, and the meaning of 70 x 7.

PAUSE

But, let's get real. In our moment of hurt, we often don't have that perspective. So, when Jesus says, 'Forgive your brother, [for eternity],' he is suggesting that we act more G*d-like. He wants us to internalize G*d's perspective as one who sees across time and space.

Hard to do, isn't it? Why? "Because, Jesus (!), we are not G*d!"

Jesus may want us to aspire to be more G*d-like, but it seems to me self-defeating when we aspire to be something we are not. It seems to me that that aspiration makes it all the more difficult to forgive ourselves and others, when we can't find that broader perspective. Though we may aspire to be like G*d, we cannot be G*d. We don't have that power. And, for that reason, what forgiveness looks like when someone is not repentant and mutuality is non-existent, what that kind of forgiveness looks like is not

⁴ Originally published in [Wishful Thinking](#)

reconciliation but the act of neutralizing how much we allow someone to continue to injure us.

PAUSE

Let me come at this concept of forgiveness and reconciliation and non-forgiveness when there is no repentance, from a secular angle.

Do you know the most important element of spiritual and emotional healing? I believe it is perspective.

Very often when we go to a counselor or therapist, we go with our list of grievances in one hand, and our pain in the other, expecting them to agree with us, take our side, and fix “it” for us. Working with them may promote healing, but they are not there to do it for you. Their role is to provide you the safe environment and sounding board, for you to process the event . . . and . . . hopefully, find a new perspective that will release you from the feeling of stuckness that you have. Reliving the moment of injury, as though you were watching a video, rewinding it and playing it again and again, over and over, is not helpful. All that does is gets you more stuck. What you need to get unstuck, is a new perspective, one that can reframe the memories of the event, one that can help explain the events in ways that promote understanding, empathy and compassion, for yourself.

Jesus’ command that we forgive others “70 x 7” times (for eternity) asks us to try to step outside ourselves and get some perspective. See the bigger picture. Understand the reasons that someone may have hurt you, not because you deserved it but because the trajectory of their lives prevented their capacity for mutuality, love and compassion. They carry within them destructive lessons of the past that often leave them no choice but to act out of their own pain. That they are unaware of what and why they do what they do needs no comment. Some people leave so much pain in their wake, that the only reasonable thing you can do is to limit your interactions with them. If there is someone in your life that repeatedly hurts you and yours, is abusive, or manipulative . . . forgiving 70 x 7 times doesn’t mean forever forgiving them; what it means is to get some perspective, eternal perspective. *Get G*d’s perspective, if you can.* Try to step back from the pain you feel, and, get a new understanding of what’s going on.

And, then, because forgiving them may not be possible, nor deserved, do something else. Let go . . . let go of the power you give them to break your heart over and over again. Refuse to continue to create a place in your heart, for them or the memories of them, to dwell. Step back, see the larger picture, note their mistakes and patterns, and note your incapacity to change them; and then, without recrimination, let go. Let go of the anger; let go of the blame; let go of saying, “how could they?”; let go of playing that scene over and over again; refuse them control of your heart by refusing to give the memories of the pain, a place to dwell. Let go.

PAUSE

Forgiveness means letting go of all those emotions that are consuming you. ‘Letting go’ can happen in at least two ways. (1) You can let go of the disappointment you feel and seek a hoped for reconciliation; or, (2) You can simply let go of the person and the memories that go with them, without blame, thereby releasing their power over you.

Either way of letting go *allows you* to go forward, either through reconciliation with someone who still cares about you; or, with compassion and love for yourself by letting go of those who do not have the capacity for either.

PAUSE

When you are in a relationship with someone who wants to be in good relationship with you, nothing could be better! They see our fallibility and in spite of our very human imperfections, still choose us. This is what we should be striving for in our relationships. When that is not possible, try looking for the larger, broader perspective of one who can see through space and time, one who may be able to forgive when we can’t. And, then with that perspective that we may barely be able to glimpse, wish them well while moving forward.

I close with these words,

“To forgive is to set a prisoner free, only to discover the prisoner was you.”

(Lewis B. Smedes)

May it be so.

Ritual

Today, you may not be ready to forgive someone for the pain they caused you. But, I ask you to consider whether you think they are capable of regret for the damage they have done? Are they sorry? Can they do better? Might reconciliation be possible? More times than not, it is. More often than not it only requires from us a gesture, an invitation.

For those for whom reconciliation is not possible, can you consider evicting them from the place where they dwell in your heart? You don’t have to continue to provide a dwelling place for them in your soul. It is your choice.

We have here a large vessel of water, filled with the healing waters from many water communions at this church. These waters come from across time and oceans, from

many lands. They represent the healing hearts of this community. These waters welcome you and your sorrows.

I invite you to consider the possibility that you can relinquish the power that someone has held in your heart and mind. I invite you to name the emotions that continue to stir in you, in response to a former injury. Write those emotions on the paper you have, and as you are willing, come forward and drop your paper in this water, taking the first steps towards dissolving those emotions that have held you captive. And, as the paper dissolves, resolve to do the work necessary to help the memories evaporate from your heart so that you may move forward into your life with compassion, love, and even joy.

If you are ready to consider letting go of emotions you’ve lived with, too long; . . . come forward, release your paper into the water, and then return to your place in our community.

Ritual

***Call & Response** *We Begin Again in Love (adapted from the work of Rob Eller-Isaacs)*

For remaining silent when a single voice would have made a difference . . .

We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love.

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

We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love.

For each time we have responded in anger without just cause . . .

We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love.

For each time that we have been blinded to the needs of others . . .

We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love.

For selfishness that sets us apart and alone . . .

We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love.

For losing sight of our humanity and the sacred within . . .

We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love.

For ignoring the spirit’s need for healing and wholeness . . .

We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love.

May it be so.

***Closing Words & Extinguishing the Chalice**

Please remain standing as you are able and join hands as you are willing.

We extinguish this flame, but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. We extinguish this flame, but not our spiritual needs and our responsibility to care for them. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

Please be seated to sing our closing.

Closing Song Hymn 95

There is More Love Somewhere*

*There is more love somewhere.
There is more love somewhere.
I'm gonna keep on 'till I find it.
There is more love somewhere.*

*hope, peace, joy

Silent Reflection

Let us sit together in silence as reflect on the message and meaning of today's service.

* Please stand as you are able and comfortable.

Latecomers may be seated.