

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society
Online Worship Service
September 27, 2020

Forgiveness
Rev. Jeanne Lloyd

(Before I begin my reflection, please bring to your screen something you can write on to capture your thoughts at the end of my reflection.)

These are the days of turning, from the past to the future, from Summer to Fall to Winter, through days of transition and reflection, from ways we have been to ways we hope to be, from regrets . . . to . . . forgiveness . . . to . . . life and hope. *In so doing, we seek life's spirit.*

These are the Days of Awe, the period between Rosh Hashanah and the end of Yom Kippur. This period of 10 days marks the beginning of the Jewish New Year 5781. It is a time for reflecting on one's life, and for fasting and prayer. *In so doing, we seek life's spirit.*

These are the holiest days of the Jewish year: it is a time to reflect on what our relationship has been or could have been with the Mystery of Life. So too, it marks a time to reflect on what our relationship has been or could be with others. *In so doing, we seek life's spirit.*

PAUSE

It is our Universalist heritage that *calls us to believe* that the Spirit of Life which is the breath of life, which some call G*d , will never cut us off, and will always seek reconciliation with us, *if*, likewise, we practice forgiveness of others. *In so doing, we seek life's spirit.*

We are thus called to offer forgiveness to ourselves and to others, who, by some manner or means have become distant *or* alienated from us. We are called to repent. We are called to forgive. *In so doing, we seek the spirit of life.*

PAUSE

I've been thinking a lot about the meaning of forgiveness lately, wondering why it's so hard for some of us to do, wondering why it matters? I have, frankly, found myself conflicted about the concept in those times when I thought I needed to forgive someone, but couldn't quite bring myself to do so. Couldn't let it go.

My confusion lay in three significant misunderstandings. (1) The first one is that I had always thought that to forgive meant to forget. Now, it's not that hard to forget the details of everyday life, there are so many distractions. It's not that hard to forget even the things that are really important to us, that we mean to or want to remember. Paradoxically, however, though we may want to forget a perceived injury, it can be hard to do so. Often it etches itself in our memory. We play it over and over again, seeking understanding, and then if we find

none, we keep playing it over and over again. Still lost in seeking understanding. Why? Why me? Why us?

A perceived injury becomes carved in our brains, on our hearts, and even in the muscles of our body. Just as water creates chasms, caves and rivers out of rock, unforgiven injury, once formed, can be immovable, stone-like . . . frozen.

So, to me, it seems, that forgetting is usually not an option if the grievance is grave. In that case, if forgiving means to forget, then one would be stuck, unable to find life’s spirit.

So I think there must be a way to forgive, without forgetting . . .

PAUSE

- (2) Another confusion I’ve had was over the actual definition of “forgiveness.” So, I looked it up, and the definition is this: “to stop blaming”. I’d never actually put together the concept of forgiveness with the act of not blaming. Blaming someone for their behavior is not a behavior I admire in myself or in others. I try really really hard to not blame people for their behavior. Why? Because it’s so closely connected to judging others. And, if there is one thing I try even harder to do with people, it’s to not judge them (even though I may be sorely tempted at times!). I’m sure none of you have this problem!

I never like judging others, even for their most disturbing behavior. In my better moments, I try to see the larger picture, I try to understand where they are coming from, I try to assume good intent, I try to listen. If I were to develop a personal list of “sins”, “judging others negatively” would be at the top of my list. Why? Because, I’ve always thought that judging others (when you don’t have the facts, haven’t listened, or don’t really care about the person you’re judging) divides us from one another, cuts off communication, and breaks relationships.

In Non-Violent Communication, a form of language developed by Marshall Rosenberg, the act of judging someone is seen as a violent act, an aggressive act. In some cases, it is seen as the act of a bully who takes pride in using their verbal language skills to aggressively thrust someone to the outside of the circle. I truly believe that every time we judge each other harshly, every time we blame, every time we fail to listen to one another in the midst of injury, that we contribute to the total gestalt of injury in the relationship. We become part of a cycle of violence that perpetuates itself. Left to its own devices violence begets violence, over and over again. It cannot be stopped with more violence, angry words, or self-satisfied quick retorts.

So, unless you unplug yourself from the variety of ways that the news streams into your head, and heart, and body, you will hear, everyday news of the violent events that humans inflict on each other. That violence ranges from war, to refusing to offer people refuge when they most need it, to the various systems of oppression that marginalize whole groups of people, to

politicians who call each other names, to criminal acts, to reality TV shows, and, to how we judge one another in our shared lives.

PAUSE

Forgiveness isn't about forgetting an injury, it's about seeking reconciliation with those we care about. It's about knowing that reconciliation *doesn't have a chance, if*, in our hurt, we judge & blame the other.

It's not about forgetting an injustice, it's about caring enough about each other that we hold ourselves and the other accountable to rebuild the relationship. It's not about pushing down your hurt feelings and injury. Nor does it mean you should accept abuse or continue in a destructive relationship. Significant injuries should be addressed, sometimes officially, sometimes even legally. Boundaries should be maintained to avoid abuse.

But, while the legal system or other official channels may offer retributive justice, they usually do not offer restorative justice. And, usually, restorative justice is what is necessary to begin the process of healing. Restorative justice comes when we choose to participate in a reconciliation process. Reconciliation happens when we open ourselves up to the possibility of seeking forgiveness *beyond retributive justice*.

PAUSE

If a breach in relationship is with someone you care about, forgiveness becomes about working together to rebuild the relationship. It's about second chances. (Have *you* ever wanted a second chance?)

It's about seeking the opportunity to start again, but this time, not from a naïve place of assuming we know the other person *well enough* to make judgements about them. When we seek to do the hard work of reconciliation with someone, we get to do so at a new start point, a new place where we now have a deeper level of understanding of the other. We get the opportunity to create a stronger foundation for the relationship. One that will better weather the temporary storms of life. In so doing, *we seek life's spirit together*.

So, I've talked to you about how (1) forgiveness is not about forgetting, and (2) how it's not about blaming. There's a third thing to unpack, as well. This one is big for some of us.

- (3) It's possible to perpetuate your victimhood by blaming yourself for failing to forgive someone else. Many recall Jesus' commandment to "forgive 70 x 7 times." Now I don't know about you, but to me, that seems a pretty tall order! It's hard enough to forgive one time in some cases, much less 70 x 7 times (490 times). Why would he say such a thing? Isn't life hard enough without giving us an impossible commandment to fulfill? Some of us will end up in the double bind of being unable to forgive ourselves for failing to forgive someone else. If ever there was

an unreasonable request, this would be it! And, in its unreasonableness, the inevitable disappointment we experience just distances us further from ourselves and humanity. It’s not a fair request. So why would he say that?

PAUSE

Certainly, it is a commandment rooted in compassion. His words hinge on our capacity to not judge another person too harshly, to not blame. It rests on our ability and willingness to strive for reconciliation with another person, because our soul depends on it. You see, in forgiveness lays not only your healing, but your empowerment. Dr. David Schell (Ed.D) says,

Forgiveness is a powerful survival skill. It helps you find your way through the wilderness of misunderstanding, hurt, resentment, and hatred . . . You cannot change someone for the better by holding a grudge. Grudges only change you – for the worse . . . No one can make you feel bad. Take responsibility for your feelings; claim your power . . . The healing choice is yours to make . . . If you withhold forgiveness until a wrong is made right, you risk condemning yourself to a life sentence of unresolved bitterness; you risk letting your life be shaped by someone else’s actions.

Instead . . . seek life’s spirit.

And, what do we, as Unitarian Universalists have to draw on in such moments? Many of us believe in a Spirit of Life, in nature, in reflective practices whereby we seek life’s spirit. Often, the type of reconciliation we seek does not rest in reconciliation with a G*d above, but with the Spirit within. It rests in the promise of internal wholeness, of being at peace with oneself, of letting go of the hurt, of embracing the other, and thereby receiving the promise and power of a life freed of bitterness. Our ability to heal and find wholeness rests in our capacity to use *our power* to set aside the judgements, the blaming, the caustic reactions to caustic injuries. With time, it rests in our willingness to use the power of forgiveness to let go, and to heal ourselves and one another.

A caveat. Though I believe it’s important to seek reconciliation whenever possible, I recognize it not always possible. I am not so naïve as to think that forgiveness offered . . . is always accepted. We cannot control other’s reactions. It is in the offering (even if it is only silently) that you release yourself from a prison of regret. It is the act of *trying* to forgive that holds the possibility of release from regret. All this, we have control over.

And, so I suggest to you, that somewhere, inside, if you look, the issue of forgiveness is lurking in a corner of your heart. It is longing for its release. It seeks to empower you to escape from that which still hurts, still holds you back, still consumes you.

Let your mind and heart and body, take the next few minutes to reflect on that need for forgiveness, whether it is a need expressed by someone else, or whether it is your need to forgive yourself. Hone in, focus in, breathe into that space where you can articulate what it is that you regret.

I offer you this invocation . . .

Invocation

We invoke the Spirit of Life and that which calls us to wholeness ...
We are at this moment seeking healing from pain and sorrow
that comes from love lost, conflict, illness,
misunderstanding, regret, anger, grief,
and sources unnamed.
We seek healing for our lives, each other,
and this community.
Now is the time for turning.

Together, let us:
Take back our hope.
Take back our love.
Take back our faith.

Ritual (*instrumental piano in the background*)

Please take the next 5 minutes to reflect on and write down for yourself, a moment, a person, for which you would want to release yourself or another from the bondage of resentment, anger, envy, pettiness, hate, fear. Who needs forgiveness? What for? Try to name it.

(Instrumental music continues)

I ask you to hold on to your intention of forgiveness for yourself or another until after the service. Sometime . . . either today, tomorrow, in a week or in time, take that paper and carefully light it with fire and cast it into water. In that moment, release it with your heart, as well. Release then, whatever written remnants remain of your regrets, sorrow, or pain.

I offer you this Prayer of Atonement by Josh Pawelek.

A Prayer of Atonement¹

Blessed Spirit of Life:
Be with us now in the holy quiet of this hour.
Calm us now, as this beautiful, still autumn day breaks into our lives.

¹ http://uuse.org/a-prayer-of-atonement/#.Vf3WSP_lvb0 9/19/15

Ease the weight of our burdens now,
just as the land begins to yield its final harvest,
giving over the bounty it has carried
through these many months . . .

Place us now,
locate us now,
position us now as the earth's northern regions
move ever further from the sun,
bringing shorter, colder days;
bringing brilliant autumn leaves;
bringing, in time,
barren autumn fields ready for winter rest.

Hold us now, embrace us now,
just as nature's abundance embraces us,
blesses us, sustains us.
Move through us and among us now,
just as autumn wind moves through the trees,
whose floating leaves move through the wind,
finally coming to rest yet still moving through the process of decay,
of becoming one with the dark brown pungent earth.

Blessed Spirit of Life, help us find our center.
Remind us of the people we long to be.
Remind us of our best selves, our brightest selves,
our most authentic selves,
our deepest selves.
Remind us of our beloved community and
what we must do to build it well.

Blessed Spirit of Life in these strange and difficult times,
these partisan times, these fearful times, these angry times,
enable us to keep open the doors of our hearts,
to forgive ourselves when we miss our mark,
to apologize when we harm others,
to return when we have strayed from our vision,
to atone.

Yes, in these strange and difficult times,
these partisan times, these fearful times, these angry times,
enable us to begin again, to care again.
Enable us, as if for the first time,
to hear and be heard, to see and be seen,
to know and be known, to love and be loved.

So May It Be