

“Forgiveness and Atonement”
by Rev. Meghan Cefalu
UUCM September 23, 2007

This is the second of a two-part sermon coinciding with the Jewish “High Holy Days”. Last week, in honor of Rosh Hashanah, my sermon explored the concept of sin. Rosh Hashanah, as you may know, is the Jewish New Year and it begins a ten-day period called the “Days of Awe”. This is a time of settling all the offenses and misdeeds of the prior year with God and with fellow human beings. These “Days of Awe” came to a culmination on Friday evening at sundown which marked the beginning of Yom Kippur – which means “Day of Atonement”. On Yom Kippur Jews fast and observe certain rituals in the process of settling up - or atoning - with God. But before you can get to the point of seeking atonement with God you are first to seek the forgiveness of the people you have wronged. And, of course, there may be people who will seek your forgiveness during this time as well.

In my exploration of sin last week I looked at the concept from the point of view of several Eastern and Western religions. When I pondered all those various religious perspectives and reflected on my own experience I came to the conclusion that sin is no more than the separation from, and denial of, our essential Oneness. “Integrity” is the word that comes to mind. Integrity understood as “a state of being whole, complete, undivided”. So sins are all the things we do that violate this sense of integrity, of oneness, with ourselves, with God, and with Nature.

Atonement, then, is the process by which this integrity is restored. If we break down the word atonement we get: “At-one-ment”. It is the state of being “at one” with. We seek forgiveness from ourselves and from others in order to regain our sense of wholeness and connectedness and to live in integrity.

I think the impetus to seek atonement is a basic human urge that comes about whenever we feel out of sync with ourselves or with another person. It is probably written somewhere deep in our genetic code. Biologists tell us that all mammals that live in tribes or packs are relational beings that look to one another not only for basic survival but also for our emotional needs. To be shunned by your group is often the worst possible punishment. I’m sure most of us have experienced being ignored at one time or another and know how dreadfully lonely it feels. How many of us have ever given or received the “silent treatment” with a partner or friend? We instinctively know how painful it is to be cut off from relationship even temporarily.

Requesting forgiveness from someone is about asking for acceptance back into relationship. I know that apologizing can be really hard. It does require letting go of a little bit of ego or pride; a lowering of self before another person. We carry a hint of shame along with us when we set off to say “I’m really sorry. I messed up”. But when we ask someone to forgive us what we are doing is taking responsibility and making ourselves accountable. There is also a great deal of dignity in that. When we ask someone to forgive us we are also declaring to them that the relationship is of primary importance.

In Alcoholics Anonymous, and other twelve step programs, the ninth step is about making amends to people you’ve wronged and taking responsibility for your past actions. It is an

essential part of getting back on the right spiritual path and living with integrity. People further along in the program will assure newer ones that not everyone they approach will forgive them. But the point is to make the effort so that the relationship can shift at least in their mind. Once you have tried you can begin to let go. The other person's unwillingness to forgive you does not void your apology. The premise is that the mental relationship you have with the world and with people can be affected even if the actual relationship has not been changed. The ultimate goal is restoring broken relationships but it is also about healing your vision of the relationship that is bogging you down.

Seeking forgiveness, or apologizing, is on the one side of atonement. On the other side, and often much more challenging is the act of forgiving.

Forgiveness is a tricky concept. As children we all had our teachers and parents admonish us from time to time to "Say you're sorry!" to other kids when we got in a scuffle. But I'm not sure if forcing children to say the words actually develops in adults the aptitude for genuine humility and self-reflection. And I know when someone gives me a forced apology through gritted teeth I usually do not tend to want to forgive them.

According to one dictionary to forgive is "to cease to feel resentment." Okay, easy enough. So then what exactly is resentment? The dictionary says resentment is "the feeling of displeasure or indignation at some act, remark, person, etc., regarded as causing injury or insult." So to forgive is to stop feeling displeasure or indignation. The question in my mind becomes: "Is it possible to will ourselves to feel something or to stop feeling something?" I am inclined to think that it is not— any more than forcing a child to say the words makes her actually feel sorry.

In a piece called "The Gift of Forgiveness" renowned UU minister Carl Scovel wrote, "Forgiveness is not something we give or do, but something we receive. It is not an action. It's a gift. It comes when we want it and it does not come before." He takes an interesting perspective. He is saying that forgiveness arrives in our heart only when we are ready for it. We can prepare the way but forgiveness itself cannot be willed.

Some synonyms for the word "forgive" are: release, absolve, pardon, and excuse. Within each of these words there is the suggestion of letting something go. I think that is at the core of forgiveness. When we forgive someone there is usually an accompanying feeling of lightness; like we've just laid down a burden.

I have this image of someone who refuses to forgive people for things in the past as a person carrying a cumbersome load of bags and boxes. Each container filled with the memory of some hurt inflicted and the vessels themselves made sturdy by years of rage and anger. The person's body is bent with the strain and effort of hauling all these heavy parcels around everywhere.

There are some people who drag these resentments around and show them off with pride and indignation to others as if they were medals. I'm sure you've come across people like that – who choose to draw power from their victimization – real or imagined. If they don't sense you feel quite sorry enough they will sit you down and begin telling you all over again how bad they had it and how mistreated they once were.

I know these folks do not have an easy time of it. I have to think that in the end simply putting down the burden of past injuries would feel better, and require less energy, than continually paying tribute to the insults one has endured. And yet most of us do hold onto some residual anger from one event or another from our past. Why are we reluctant to let go of our anger? Carl Scovel explains that,

“It is easy to cherish anger and hurt. They give us an identity, however false, and sometimes the wrath and pain feel better than the emptiness that comes when we surrender them. But we pay a price for indulging our anger. It cripples us. We become paralyzed... When we forgive we are freed, not from the hurt, but from the dominating power of the hurt. We are able to give up our anger.”¹

I think we sometimes have a difficult time forgiving others because we think we have to **forget**, or **deny** our experience or **excuse** the person who harmed us. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting the experience of betrayal by a lover or friend. Rather it is a refusal to let the memory of the insult to bog us down. Forgiving is also not the *denial* of past hurts. It, in fact, encourages us to look straight into the pain. When we choose to forgive there is no guarantee the ache of the betrayal will go away. And forgiveness does not make *excuses* for the offender. The person who betrayed us is still accountable for his or her actions.

If we can't will it to happen, how do we then invite forgiveness? Buddhists believe that developing our capacity for compassion is the answer. When we feel compassion for a person we are more likely to be able to forgive them. The dictionary says compassion is “a feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for another who is stricken by misfortune, accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the suffering.” But when we are mired in our anger and rage trying to shift to feelings of deep sympathy can feel as impossible as trying to step across a giant chasm.

Buddhist teachers suggest a practice to help expand compassion in our hearts called “meta meditation”. We practiced one form of meta meditation earlier in this service. The idea is that when we ask first for peace in our own hearts and then in the hearts of those with whom we struggle our anger begins to soften.

It is one thing to talking about forgiveness in relation to little everyday hurts and wrongs but what about things that seem so evil, like the sexual abuse of a child, or false imprisonment, or political torture? I hesitate to suggest that someone who has been traumatized forgive the people behind the offense.

I was interested to learn that there are diverse opinions in the Jewish community regarding whether or not survivors of the Holocaust ought to forgive the Nazis. In an interview Rabbi Alan Lew who leads Conservative Congregation Beth Sholom in San Francisco said, "The kind of hatred and anger that Jews inevitably feel...tears us up... It's not [a question of whether] the Nazis deserve to be forgiven. But [that] we deserve to be released from the terrible burden of hatred and vengeance." But Rabbi Lew also admits that because he didn't live through the Holocaust, he feels highly uncomfortable offering survivors advice on

¹ CARL SCOVEL. “The Gift of Forgiveness.” published by Skinner House in 2003 in [Never Far from Home: Stories from the Radio Pulpit](#).

forgiveness. "It may be that there are some crimes that are unforgivable. It seems a little unfair to add to the already tremendous burden [on survivors] something that may be impossible."²

Maybe it **is** true that some things are simply unforgivable. I know that for me forgiveness depends on the contrition of the offender. If someone was not the least bit sorry It would be very hard for me to forgive them. It feels important that the person knows what they did, how it affected me, and feels penitent about it.

But there are times when that is impossible for various reasons. Sometimes people die before we get a chance to resolve our feelings towards them. That is what happened between my grandfather and me. He was a challenging man to put it mildly. He was the sort to say something really hurtful to you in front of a group of people and then slap you on the back laughing and say, "What's wrong? Can't take a joke?"

When he died I was left carrying around a good amount of anger and frustration toward him. I wanted to change my relationship with him even though he could not participate in the process. So I began to talk with him in my meditations. I told him how much he hurt my feelings and how angry I was at him. And then I imagined him telling me that he was sorry and that he just didn't know how to relate to people very well. I know that in the world of the living he and I never had a chance to resolve our feelings – but I feel like I have forgiven him now. By shifting the relationship in my mind my anger towards him has lifted.

I am a visual person and as I was writing and thinking about this sermon an image came to mind. We are all held in a three dimensional network of connection and love. A web, of sorts. And when we have a rift with someone, or even within ourselves, some threads become torn. The threads are the vehicle by which we give and receive energy from one another and the Source in the form of love. If too many threads become torn our own power is weakened. When we seek atonement or offer forgiveness we are looking to reconnect the threads holding us in the web; to plug back in, or open ourselves up once again to the flow.

Rumi writes:

Come, Come whoever you are,
wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving.
Ours is not a caravan of despair.
Come even if you have broken your vows
a thousand times,
Come, come yet again.

² NATALIE WEINSTEIN. "Forgive? Even on Yom Kippur Holocaust survivors say 'No'" from Jewish News Weekly Friday October 10, 1997 http://www.jewishsf.com/content/2-0-/module/displaystory/story_id/7160/edition_id/135/format/html/displaystory.html

Come, Come whoever you are. We have all broken our heartfelt vows – the vows that we take in hope, and break in our humanness. We disappoint one another. We hurt one another's feelings. We betray one another in little and big ways.

But we also have within us the urge to heal; to put back together; to pick up the broken pieces and step back into integrity with one another, whole and complete. With courage and dignity we seek to restore faith in one another.

Ours is not a caravan of despair. Thankfully, perfection is not required to travel together. Put down the burdens of blame and self-loathing.

Come, come yet again and allow atonement and forgiveness to knit us back into the web of relationship with ourselves, with one another and with our sense of the Holy.

Amen