

The Forgiving Heart

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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The story is told that “Simon Wiesenthal survived the Nazi concentration camp where 89 members of his family perished. He told of being selected at random from a work detail and taken up a back stair to a hospital corridor where a nurse led him into a dark room. He was left in that dark hospital room with a pitiful figure wrapped in white, lying on a bed. The man was a German officer who had been badly wounded. Gauze covered his entire face. In a weak, trembling voice the man offered a confession to Wiesenthal. He recounted his earlier years, telling about days in Hitler’s youth movement. He told about his actions on the Russian front and the harsh treatment of the Jews by his SS (*Schutzstaffel*) unit. Then he told of a horrible atrocity, when his unit herded all the Jews in one town into a wooden building and torched it. He told how some of the Jews, with their clothing on fire, leaped from the second story and the SS troops, he among them, shot them as they fell. Several times Wiesenthal tried to leave the room, but each time the mummy-like figure would reach out with his cold, clammy hand and restrain him from leaving. Finally, after several hours, the German officer explained why he had summoned a Jewish prisoner to his bedside. “I know what I am asking is almost too much for you,” he said, “but without your answer I cannot die in peace.” Then he asked Wiesenthal for forgiveness for all of his crimes against the Jews. He was asking a Jewish prisoner, who might die at the hands of his SS comrades, to forgive him. Wiesenthal stood in silence for some time, staring at the man’s bandaged face. Then he made up his mind and left the room. He left the soldier to die un-forgiven.” (quoted in John Stroman, *Pray in This Way*, pp. 59. www.hopeparkforest.org/sermons/sermon20030323.html by the Rev. Michael J. Heggen)

What do you imagine the people 2000 years ago thought when Jesus was extolling them to not only forgive their friends, but also their enemies? Probably the same thing we might think now – “Do you know how hard that is?”

How many of us might have done the same thing as Simon Wiesenthal? How many of us could forgive the person or people who killed our parents or our son or daughter? These are among the most egregious of crimes we can think of, and mercy is hard to come by in these tragedies. I am always amazed when I hear of parents who have forgiven the murderer of their child. Some particular families were faced with tragedies of this nature on May 4th in the late 1960s at Kent State University in Ohio, near where I lived at the time.

But I also find myself equally mystified when the evening news reports the grief stricken comments of other victims of equally heinous crimes, who declare that “No punishment will ever be enough to pay for what has happened to us!” Somehow this opposite reaction does not make sense to me either. I imagine the prison cell of hate and anger that the victims are sentencing themselves to, that will, to my mind, punish them just as much as the steel barred cell of the one in prison.

I attended my grandmother's Methodist Church on numerous occasions in my childhood, as well as the ecumenical Christian service at Chautauqua each Sunday over the summer, and as a result I uncharacteristically still know the Lord's Prayer by heart. Did the part about trespassing ever make you curious when you were little, too? Of course, eventually I figured out what it meant to say "And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Today we usually think of trespassing only in relation to its "false step" meaning, but it also means "transgression," the biblical image of sin as the deviation from the right way prescribed by God. (Dictionary of Theological Terms, p. 287) Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us. But does this really mean all sins, or just the little ones?

I believe the prayer is about having the capacity in our hearts to be able to forgive the *people* who commit all sins, as difficult as that may be. It is about feeling ourselves to be loved and forgiven, and, in turn, having compassion for our brothers and sisters, whose capacity to trespass is no greater than it is in us. Forgiving someone does not mean forgetting. It is forgiving the person for being human, even if you are still hurting from what they did. To forgive someone, or to forgive yourself which is sometimes even more difficult, is a gift to your own soul.

As Unitarian Universalists we don't typically believe in Original Sin, but we are coming to understand that there is something behind a door in each of us that we don't like to admit is there. We all have the capacity not just to make mistakes, but to intentionally do wrong. It could be that we do not know how we would react and behave toward each other given circumstances we have never experienced in our lives. Several experiments in the field of psychology have illustrated this point.

The story of Simon Wiesenthal and the un-forgiven dying German officer describes sins of great and lasting impact. Yet there are those for whom forgiveness did come. I am humbled by their courage to let go of their justifiable anger. I think anger can be a motivating emotion, sometimes a necessary motivation to get things done, to make changes in an unfair system or provide the energy to keep searching for justice and equality. But it can become that prison I spoke of earlier. I still believe revenge is *not* sweet – but I've discovered some contradictory evidence that, to be fair, I must report to you.

Do you remember being a child and experiencing some degree of glee that your brother or sister was being punished? It seems this is a complex human phenomenon, recently documented by Swiss scientists, called "*schadenfreude*—the pleasure felt over someone else's misfortune. The author of the study, Ernst Fehr, and his colleagues suggest that the feeling of satisfaction people get from meting out altruistic punishment may be the glue that keeps societies together. 'Theory and experimental evidence show that cooperation among strangers is greatly enhanced by altruistic punishment,' Fehr said. 'Cooperation among strangers breaks down in experiments if altruistic punishment is ruled out.'

Cooperation flourishes if punishment of defectors is possible.”
 (http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/08/0827_040827_punishment.html)

I do admit to finding this a disappointing possibility, and as *my* revenge (I mean rebuttal) will quote George Orwell from an essay he wrote about the aftermath of World War II: “The whole idea of revenge and punishment is a childish daydream. Properly speaking, there is no such thing as revenge. Revenge is an act which you want to commit when you are powerless and because you are powerless: as soon as the sense of impotence is removed, the desire evaporates also.” (http://www.george-orwell.org/Revenge_is_Sour/0.html) The title of the essay is *Revenge is Sour*. So there, schadenfreude!

Nan Wiegersma and I attended a two-day workshop in Boston this week called “Diversity Matters.” It was a well-thought-out and organized two days, building information upon experience upon more information about dominant and subordinated groups in our society. More than once I was reminded of the need for forgiveness in our relationships. When a woman, for example, becomes so bitter toward all men because of an experience with a glass ceiling in a particularly patriarchal organization, that feels to me like an inappropriately large grudge toward an admittedly dominant group, but one that surely isn’t rotten to the very last member! Please tell me it’s not my rose colored glasses speaking here. And when other workshops on diversity I’ve attended have insisted that every white person in this country is racist, I do understand what they are getting at, and look for opportunities to undo institutional racism and personally rebuild bridges, but I will not add the weight of too much more guilt to that heavy burden I mentioned guilt could be in an earlier sermon this year.

Sometimes our worst enemy can be ourselves. We shoot ourselves in the feet all the time (you’ll notice I’m not wearing sandals). We assume the worst of other people or ourselves in advance and end up enabling our own self-fulfilling prophesy. We hold onto grudges and sometimes become too comfortable in our role as the victim.

Grudges are an unfortunate reality of our complicated relationships. But they don’t have to last forever if we don’t want them to last forever. Have you ever had someone obviously upset with you about something but you have no idea what it is? How about the in-laws who will not come visit your house again and you cannot for the life of you figure out what you did wrong with they visited that time a year and a half ago? Are you angry with your nephew for something he did that made you so angry you decided you would never bother yourself with him again – and now you don’t know how to back out of this “thing” you’ve created? I couldn’t believe it when my late husband got so angry with our son for needing a fifth year to finish his undergraduate degree that he said he never wanted to talk to him again. I was devastated. Fortunately it only took a couple of weeks to find a way to help them smooth things over. Grudges! They’re some kind of

emotional blackmail! Homer wrote that “anger is a short madness.” (The Gift of the Ordinary, p. 34) But sometimes anger and the grudges they create are not so short.

I know that there are those of us who are not as fond of our three Christian figures up here in the LaFarge stained glass window as we are with the Tiffany angel. But I want to give you one reason to think something good about the figure of Paul up here on your right. In his letter to the Colossians, a new and struggling Christian community that was having some problems, Paul wrote that the people should “bear with one another...and forgive each other.” A beloved community is one in which the people do the best they can to act out of love toward each other in all that they do. It is exactly what we try to do here. “Love is the Spirit of this church.” OK, Society. Have compassion, listen with that forgiving ear I have sometimes talked about, be willing to listen with appreciation, if not always agreement, to others in the group, “bear with one another...and forgive each other.”

Originally this first service in May was scheduled to be about sin and evil, and I have mentioned some of that this morning. But instead of dwelling on such negatives (there is so much of that around us in the world) I thought it would be good to talk this month about some things that might help us in the difficult, complicated, and emotional conversations we are entering into about long range planning and our Meetinghouse. My sermon on May 18 will be about having the courage to move forward in the face of the unknown.

To try not to harbor your anger or frustration with those of differing opinions, to talk honestly about those differences and our feelings surrounding them, to practice appreciative listening and have forgiving ears, not jumping to conclusions without asking questions, to cultivate compassion and a realization that there may not, in the end, be one clear cut “right” answer to the questions we are asking about our building, to seek what we have in common rather than that which divides us, to imagine St. Paul (up there) reminding us to “bear with one another...and forgive each other,” these are my hopes for all of us – for this, our beloved family – in the weeks, months and years ahead of us.