

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

What Does Forgiveness Require?

Rev. Samuel A Trumbore September 20, 2015

Call to Celebration

Alexander Pope in his "Essay on Criticism" wrote these famous words: "to err is human; to forgive, divine."

Being a free thinking congregation, I know we could get a good discussion going about whether to forgive is divine or not.

What I believe we can all agree on is our human propensity to make mistakes.

I know I make mistakes all the time. Even though your dedicated staff strives to put together an error-free accurate order of service each week, sometimes the printed version does have mistakes. Then on Sunday morning, sometimes I mispronounce names, say the wrong number for the hymn or forget a hymn altogether, for that matter. Why, sometimes I even forget the offering ... no, actually, that rarely if ever happens.

Sometimes I do forget to recognize it though. Today Leah, Matt and I came up with a new way that honors your gifts in song rather than words from the pulpit. Please let me know if you like it.

Sometimes people make really big mistakes. I don't want to make any accusations, but I would guess all of us, even the littlest ones of us here, have made big mistakes.

And sometimes we hurt the ones we love when we make those mistakes.

So we need a way to fix it, make up, make amends and restore the health of our relationships. Since we're all in the same boat, we all make mistakes and hurt each other, if we are willing to imagine the other person's situation, to walk in their shoes, we can find a way to care for the person who has hurt us. We can find a way to forgive through cultivating compassion and love for all connected in the web of life.

This is why we need forgiveness and need to offer forgiveness.

In the spirit of the Jewish High Holy Days, the Days of Awe before the Jewish Day of Atonement, called Yom Kippur, let us seek the truth of forgiveness as we join together in the celebration of life.

Readings

Words of Forgiveness offered to Dylann Roof on June 19, 2015

Relatives of the nine parishioners killed at Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina addressed the alleged shooter, Dylann Storm Roof, during a bond hearing less than 48 hours after the shootings.

Those who chose to speak delivered powerful words of forgiveness to Roof, who listened impassively via video feed from the Al Cannon Detention Center in North Charleston.

Here is what they said:

Nadine Collier, daughter of victim Ethel Lance

"I forgive you. You took something very precious away from me. I will never get to talk to her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again, but I forgive you, and have mercy on your soul. ... You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people. If God forgives you, I forgive you."

Relative of Myra Thompson

"I would just like him to know that, to say the same thing that was just said: I forgive him and my family forgives him. But we would like him to take this opportunity to repent. Repent. Confess. Give your life to the one who matters most: Christ. So that He can change him and change your ways, so no matter what happens to you, you'll be okay."

Felicia Sanders, mother of Tywanza Sanders

"We welcomed you Wednesday night in our Bible study with welcome arms. You have killed some of the most beautiful people that I know. Every fiber in my body hurts and I'll, I'll never be the same. Tywanza Sanders was my son. But Tywanza Sanders was my hero. Tywanza was my hero. ... May God have mercy on you."

Wanda Simmons, granddaughter of Daniel Simmons

"Although my grandfather and the other victims died at the hands of hate, this is proof, everyone's plea for your soul, is proof that they lived in love and their legacies will live in love. So hate won't win. And I just want to thank the court for making sure that hate doesn't win."

Sister of DePayne Middleton Doctor

"That was my sister, and I'd like to thank [this court] on behalf of my family for not allowing hate to win. For me, I'm a work in progress. And I acknowledge that I am very angry. But one thing that DePayne always enjoined in our family ... is she taught me that we are the family that love built. We have no room for hating, so we have to forgive. I pray God on your soul."

Here are two passages from the Gospel of Matthew on forgiveness:

Matthew 6:9-15, 18:21,22

"You, therefore, should pray like this: "

'Our Father, who is in heaven,
 May your name be held holy,
 Your kingdom come, your will be done --
 on earth, as in heaven.

Give us today
 the bread we **will** need;
 And forgive **our** debts,
 As we **have** forgiven those to whom we are indebted;
 And do not put us to the test,
 but deliver us from the evil one.

For if you forgive others their offenses, your heavenly Father will forgive you also; but if you do not forgive others their offenses, not even your Father will forgive your offenses.

21 Then Peter came up, and said to Jesus, "Master, how often am I to forgive someone who wrongs me? As many as seven times?" But Jesus answered: "Not seven times, but seventy times seven."

from "After the Death of My Son: My Journey of Forgiveness and Atonement" by Azim Khamisa quoted from the book *Beyond Forgiveness*, edited by Phil Cousineau

Azim Khamisa's twenty year old son Tariq was murdered delivering pizza to a 14 year-old youth with a gun, high on drugs and alcohol, wanting to impress his gang member buddies.

Azim reports having this experience:

The night Tariq died I had an out-of-body experience. It was like a bomb going off inside me. It was so painful, I couldn't really stay in my body. So I left it. Since then I've heard about a lot of people in trauma, like rape victims, who left their bodies. I went further than that: I went straight into the loving embrace of God. He held me for the longest time.

When the explosions subsided, He sent me back into my body with the wisdom that there were victims at both ends of the gun. That realization wasn't something that came from my head or even my heart; it was something that came from my God.

Sermon

I doubt I could have nor would have spoken the forgiving words those family members offered at Roof's arraignment. My gut reaction at the time was it was just wrong to forgive him without any remorse, repentance or even an offer of restitution on his part. A hate crime had just been committed and Roof needed be held accountable and punished for his crime

against humanity.

Yet Jesus says, forgive your enemies not seven times, but seventy times seven times.

What is going on here? Is Jesus crazy?

Forgiveness is a key part of just about every worldwide religious tradition. Jesus was very clear about teaching loving your enemies and those who persecute you. In this sense of being good Christians and followers of Jesus, the family members showed the courage of their convictions speaking to Roof. Not easily, I expect, as their words convey, but sincerely and resolutely. For that I deeply honor them.

Right now, we are between Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year that began last Sunday night and will end with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, this coming Wednesday evening. These ten Jewish High Holy Days are a time of forgiveness and reconciliation between those who have harmed each other in the past year. In their tradition, the Book of Life remains open during this time. Those who will live for another year have their names inscribed in this metaphorical book. This atonement period, which potentially influences whether one's name will be written or not, culminates in fasting and prayer on Yom Kippur, a time for the whole community to renew their covenant with each other and with God.

Forgiveness is also a very important concept in Islam. Allah, or God, has 99 names, or qualities, that describe every aspect of the divine being. Several of those names have to do with mercy and forgiveness. Almost every sura of the Koran begins with Bismillah, Al-Rahman Al-Rahim "In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful".

Religious preoccupation with forgiveness makes sense in the context of the historical function of religion. Some evolutionary biologists have argued religion has been an effective social strategy to organize people that increases the fitness of their community to survive.

Scientific studies have shown we adapt and function socially most easily in tribal size groups smaller than about 150 people, usually bonded through kinship. To organize people into vastly larger sizes requires relational rules and a shared identity that religions are quite good at providing. That identity manifests in signaling behavior like face painting, hair styles, clothing, food, piercings, tattoos, and genital mutilation. The higher the cost, the more trustworthy its sign of belonging and commitment (the non-reversible procedure of cutting off one's foreskin is no small gesture of identity).

Sadly, our individual tendencies toward greed, hatred and delusion often do not conform to the group norms and can easily move us outside right relations with each other and the status quo. In tribal societies, a common way to resolve social conflict is through the honor system. You hurt me, I hurt you back. An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. What history seems to demonstrate is the honor system fails to be a sustainable method to organize larger groups of more diverse people.

A successful alternative to the honor system to maintain the loyalty and unity of large groups and to restore individuals back into right relationship with the whole has been the process of forgiveness, atonement and reconciliation. What works cross-culturally, is to forgive one another on a regular basis, make amends and begin again in love.

However that communal love is conceived, be it the Greek idea of agape, the Abrahamic love of God and humanity, or some other conception of universal love, it turns out to be a very powerful, cohesive social force. Arun Gandhi, learned this at his grandfather's knee:

Grandfather told me that if we respond to hate with more hate, we only increase hate in the world. He said that we need to transform those who hate us by showing them unconditional love. To be able to love those who hate me, I had to forgive them and practice atonement, first by getting rid of hate within myself and then by helping society see the futility of hate and prejudice. Since that time with Grandfather, this has been my mission in life.

The extreme test of this philosophy, as the relatives of the victims of Roof's hateful, murderous rampage experienced, is devastating personal loss. I shared with you Azim Khamisa's story earlier because of what his strong faith encouraged him to do in response to losing his son in a senseless act of violence. His actions, shaped by his beliefs no doubt, but also his process and his religious practice and habits of his approach to existence, were the agents that transformed him and his loss.

Knowing that there are two ends of a gun, that there is pain and suffering on both sides ... is not enough. As Azim puts it, "You don't get to say, 'I forgive,' and then it's all over. It's a daily practice."

He teaches three steps in the forgiveness process. "The first milestone or step is a hard one. You need to acknowledge that you have been wronged, which leads to a painful grieving process."

The second step, perhaps even harder, is to give up all the resulting resentment. The second step is to let go of the almost biological urge to get an eye-for-an-eye. It is the deep recognition of what Gandhi taught that harming another cannot bring resolution to one's grief and pain.

Azim believes the way one moves through this stage is through empathy. He had to learn about the youth, named Tony, who murdered his son. He needed to learn that he was an unwanted child abandoned first by his father then by his mother. Tony was a child who endured a lot of abuse and rejection. He was ripe for gang life. He writes:

Five months after Tariq died, I met Pies Felix, the grandfather of the kid who killed my son. This meeting led to my meeting Tony five years later.

I sat near him in prison and looked into his eyes for a very long time. I saw him with

my "real eyes," and I remember trying to see if there was a murderer there. I didn't find one. I didn't find a murderer. I saw another soul, much like mine; I found my own soul in him. I didn't see any difference between us. Through his eyes, I was able to touch his soul and feel his humanity.

Azim, through his empathy for Tony, could recognize the mistake Tony had made from a deluded mind. This process was not easy for Azim, but as he puts it, necessary for his healing process.

"The third step is to go beyond forgiveness and reach out to the offender in love and compassion in order to create 'spiritual currency' for the departed.

Atonement lives in these actions. [Azim writes] It means that you have taken something that is meaningless, random, tragic, unwanted, and dark, and you've transformed it into light. You've reached out, and you've realized that you're no different from the person who harmed you-that we're all human beings. You realize that the person has made a big mistake, but that doesn't mean he isn't human.

Azim and Tony's grandfather have created a foundation to prevent this kind of violence, doing presentations on non-violence to youth all over the nation. This is the atonement work Azim has done to make meaning out of a meaningless loss. Tony's grandfather, also a victim of this crime, losing his grandson to prison, is able to make meaning out his loss as well.

None of this requires any change in Tony. But Azim's process of forgiveness opened up and assisted Tony's transformation to make meaning out of his mistake and begin his process of atonement.

There is an enormous amount of wrong that has been done, is being done right now, and will be done in the future. I doubt there will ever be an end to it. I do believe we can choose, individually and collectively, forgiveness, atonement, and ultimately reconciliation. In the process, none of us need remain victims.

Let us close with Michael Beckwith's wise words:

...you cannot determine my destiny; only my perception can determine my destiny. When I forgive you, I take my power back. When I give you back affirmative energy for something you may have done, I own my power-and now I own my destiny. My destiny is not in the hands of what you, did or did not do to me. If we accept responsibility for our actions, we emerge out of being a victim.

In South Africa, Nelson Mandela invited to sit with him at a banquet a man who had urinated on him when he was in prison on Robben Island, off the coast of Cape Town. Mandela also hired his ex-jailers to act as tour guides and serve as ferry operators to and from Robben Island. With these acts he was granting forgiveness and inviting atonement. He was turning the other cheek, giving one form of energy for another.

No one would have thought it out of sorts if Mandela and others had slapped those ex-guards around the prison, or embarrassed them, or staged a war tribunal. But by forgiving them and by actually committing a positive act, he was displaying a very high state of consciousness. Likewise, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in the 1960s, kept individuals from shooting and sniping, saying, "We're going to give love for hate. Know that our cause is just. We're going to forgive and we're going to continue to withstand the blows, and continue to love our enemy until we convert the enemy to a friend."

May we follow their example. So be it.

Benediction

Azim Khamisa:

There's no reconciliation without a complete healing process. I teach that empathy leads to compassion, compassion leads to forgiveness, forgiveness leads to atonement. These qualities are prerequisites for real reconciliation.

May we find ways to forgive ourselves and each other that open our hearts and our wills to reconciliation with those we have wronged, and those who have wronged us.