

**Channing Memorial Church
Unitarian Universalist
Ellicott City, Maryland
The Reverend Susan LaMar, Minister
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A Reasoned Forgiveness

In seminary, when I was doing a field placement in a United Church of Christ (UCC) church in a small town in Massachusetts, I agreed to help a six-year-old Cub Scout with his religion merit badge. Most of the work was done with his family, and I just met with him for a few minutes at the end to have a conversation about some of the ideas they had been talking about and that he had been thinking about. One of those ideas was “forgiveness.” So I asked him, in the course of our conversation, “what do you think it means to forgive someone?” His answer was: “That’s like when you hit your brother and you say you are sorry.” I waited a moment to see if he would say anything else. He didn’t, so I gently said, “Well, I think it is the other way around. I think it is when your brother hits you and you decide not to be mad at him any more.” At first there was no visible reaction, and then that child looked me right in the eye with a look that made it clear that in his view I had totally and completely lost my mind.

And in a way he was right. On the face of it, on the surface, forgiveness makes no reasonable sense.

This morning we continue with our Unitarian Universalist source number five: “Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit. And we are combining that source of our tradition with the tradition of the Lenten season, the season lengthening days. In Christian tradition it is a time of penitence – of deep thinking about one’s life and how one is living it and how one can live it better, so our topics are drawn from traditionally Lenten themes. This morning we take up forgiveness.

Forgiveness. What in the world is it? The word is from a root that means to give up . . . in the sense of letting go. Throughout history it has been held in the spiritual realm. Science didn’t even begin to study it until the early 1990s.

In the language of science, forgiveness happens at the psychological level. I’ll get to that in a few minutes. First I want to talk a little bit about where I see confusion about it. Because there is a lot of confusion. The confusion happens because we confuse forgiveness with lack of accountability.

But forgiveness can be kept completely separate from responsibility and accountability. In other words, you wrong me, I feel the wound – rightfully; I get angry – rightfully; I forgive – let go of the resentment that grows out of anger. BUT – and here is where so many people get confused: That does not mean that the offender does not still have to face the consequences of the offense in the actual, temporal, world. It does not mean that the relationship returns to the same relationship that existed before the offense happened. It does not wipe the slate clean.

I used to see the confusion between accountability and forgiveness when I was working with battered women. In fact, I first saw the phenomenon in my own first and very short-lived marriage, where there was some abuse. There would be an incident of drinking and abuse, and an apology would follow. And the first couple of times I was quick to forgive in the way I understood forgiveness at the time . . . and the way Ted understood it. He was really, really, sorry, and if I forgave him, it would of course, never happen again. And everything was all fine and dandy. This was well before the battered women’s movement had occurred; before the cycle of battering, apology, forgiveness, honeymoon period, stress, battering, apology, and so forth had been documented and had entered the field of sociology.

I remember thinking after one of those rounds, “wait a minute. I can forgive . . . let go of the anger . . . AND make a different choice.” And I remember when Ted came home and apologized all over the place, and asked for forgiveness, and I said, “Yes, I forgive you.” And he said “So you will take me back?” And I said, “No, I won’t. I forgive you and I choose not to live with you any more.”

Years later, when working with victims, it became clear that some were able to make that subtle distinction and some were not. The cruel paradox seems to be that those who are able to forgive . . . to let go . . . are among those who are able to break out of the cycle, and those who are unable to forgive . . . unable to let go . . . are among those who stay trapped.

I also want to add a caveat here: This is only *one* aspect of the very complex dynamics that lead to victims being trapped in cycles of abuse. And because of those complex dynamics it must *never* be interpreted that the victim is responsible for her own abuse. The abuser is *always* ultimately responsible for the abusive acts. AND must be held accountable.

As I have done more thinking about forgiveness, what I am understanding now in a way that I didn’t understand way back then in 1972 is that the verb “to forgive” does not need an object . . . in fact it works far better when there is no object. It is not about the other person at all . . . it is about the self, letting go.

Annie LaMotte says it well: Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die.

Here is another story about the dynamics of forgiveness:

“A former inmate of a Nazi concentration camp was visiting a friend who had shared the ordeal with him.

“Have you forgiven the Nazis?” he asked his friend.

“Yes.”

“Well, I haven’t. I’m still consumed with hatred for them.”

“In that case,” said his friend gently, “they still have you in prison.”¹

This is where the confusion happens. There is such a wide, wide difference between forgiveness – stepping out of one’s own prison of hate -- and holding the offenders accountable. The friend still consumed with hatred is trapped in a psychological prison, using energy that could be used for the good of the world to feel hate. BUT . . . that does not mean that he should ever forget what happened and walk away from holding the Nazis – and any other cruel individuals or ideologists who emerge over the course of history -- accountable for their actions. To fail in the accountability department is a profoundly *unreasonable* act. Forgiveness happens at the psychological (and I would say spiritual) level; accountability happens at the temporal, worldly, secular level. Ideally, through the rule of law.

The dictionary adds to the confusion. The dictionary defines forgive to mean to excuse, and pardon. In the connotation of forgiving monetary debts, it means to absolve from payment. All of those imply that there is no accountability. But reasons tells us that there must be.

Reason says that you must be held accountable . . . even punished . . . for your offenses. There must be appropriate consequences for the act. And forgiveness says that I will let go of my personal animosity.

What is interesting is that even modern research is showing that forgiveness cannot be willed. It seems to happen, over time. Just saying it . . . saying “I forgive” . . . isn’t the same thing as forgiving, any more saying “I’m sorry” is the same thing as actually being sorry.

¹ Quoted in Kurtz E. and Ketcham, K., *The Spirituality of Imperfection* [New York: Bantam, 1992], p. 213.

Forgiveness, modern researchers are discovering, “does not come easily, but it does, apparently, come suddenly. (Remember it is coming to the person doing the forgiving, not to the one being forgiven.) Research subjects report, for example, “that they couldn’t force the experience. ‘The harder I tried to forgive, the more I seemed to resent,’ was a frequent description [given to researchers]. Realizing this, they stopped ‘trying to forgive’ and instead ‘just sort of let go’; and then, after varying intervals of time, came the astonishing discovery that the resentment had disappeared, that they somehow already had forgiven.”²

And, of course, as I hinted at earlier, forgiving is not the same as forgetting. It does not wipe the slate clean. Radical philosopher Thomas Szasz said, “The stupid neither forgive nor forget; the naïve forgive and forget; the wise forgive, but they do not forget.”³

Neither should forgiveness happen quickly. It grows over time. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German cleric who fought underground against the Nazis and wound up dying in a concentration camp said: “Quick forgiveness is cheap grace.” Cheap means “of poor quality . . . shoddy, inferior, doesn’t last.” It means easy, feel-good grace. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance . . .

In a pastoral care class, we were once shown a film of sex offenders being interviewed after they were convicted of their offenses and were spending significant time in prison. Some of those offenders had offended many times over and had been involved in various forms of religious counseling, confession and penance through churches and other religious communities. The researchers asked something like the following question:

What could the religious community have done differently to protect the world from the likes of you?

And do you know what the answer was? It was, “You should not have been so quick to forgive!”

These offenders were very articulate about it. Their reasoning . . . sound reasoning, in my view . . . was that it was totally bizarre that the church forgave them with barely a thought to whether they had paid for their acts either through punishment or repentance. What was needed was confrontation and accountability . . . *before* forgiveness.

The Bible story about this is very clear. Peter asks Jesus how many times he had to forgive, seven times? And Jesus says seventy-times-seven times. That’s 490 times – that’s a lot of offenses going on. But Jesus didn’t say it had to happen instantly. In fact, the instruction to forgive comes after a very specific and clear process of holding an offender accountable. First, you confront him individually. Then, if he doesn’t take responsibility, you bring along two or three others to talk to him with you and act as witnesses. If he still doesn’t take responsibility, he is brought before the whole church community. And if he *still* doesn’t take responsibility he is to be shunned – treated as an outsider.

It was only after all of that process had happened that forgiveness was even to be considered.⁴

Quick forgiveness is *cheap* grace. The grace of forgiveness is costly. . . to both the one who has performed a wrong, and to the one doing the forgiving. In the words of Henri Nouwen, it involves living the wounds through. Over time.

I think that the other thing that happened in the situation of the prisoners who felt that the church had been too quick to forgive is that the church was the wrong party to forgive anyway! In legal parlance . . . it didn’t have “standing.” The wrong done wasn’t the church’s to forgive! Only the one victimized can forgive. Otherwise you get an additional victimization at least

² Kurtz and Ketcham, p. 216.

³ Kurtz and Ketcham, p. 223.

⁴ Matthew 18:15-21

implied. The offender can believe: "Well, the church (read God) forgives me, what's *your* problem?"

Science is teaching us that forgiveness, properly worked toward, through the tending of wounds and letting go, has real health benefits. It lowers stress hormones, lessens chronic back pain and depression. It also seems to be one of several coping mechanisms that help people with HIV/AIDS live longer, or at least more satisfying lives.⁵

But you know, I got to this point in writing this sermon and began to have another thought about forgiveness. It came to me because there was something about that big number that Jesus threw out, 490. Forgiving four hundred and ninety times! Man, there sure seems to be an assumption that people aren't treating each other very well if that much forgiveness is needed.

So that got me to thinking about another kind of forgiveness -- not the kind where there is a clear offender and a clear victim. No, this other kind is needed just by living together in marriages and partnerships and in communities. It is not the big, actual *offenses*. No, the hard ones are the zillions of *little* things that lead to resentment. Like clearing their throat in a particularly annoying way. Or not putting the dishes away exactly right. Swallowing too loud. Leaving piles of papers all over the house. (Jack hates it when I do that. . . and I do it all the time.) The disappointments that the people in our lives, even the loved ones, perhaps especially the loved ones, are simply who they are rather than who we want them to be. Which means, of course, that we are simply who we are rather than who our loved ones want us to be.

Recognizing all of this and then letting go. Forgiving. Four hundred and ninety times. Nine hundred and eighty times.

It is not easy. Even knowing that science says it is good for us doesn't make it easy, any more than God saying it is good for us makes it easy. We have to live it through. But we can choose to live it through tenderly. Gently. We can recognize the woundedness in others as well as ourselves, and know that they are living theirs through, too. And we can tend one another.

May it be so.

⁵ *Washington Post*. "Letting Go" by Elizabeth Large, Sunday, December 26, 2004.