

## **Sermon**      “Forgiveness and Unitarian Universalism”

My interest in forgiveness was sparked by a recent harm I committed towards another. Later, the writing of the sermon was complicated by finding out about harm done to my daughter. It occurred to me that I had never attended a service at Channing in which the concepts of forgiveness, sin, and atonement for doing harm to others were spoken about in depth. Perhaps I wasn't at church that day, but my experience was echoed in a sermon given by Barbara Gales of the UU Fellowship of Newark entitled “Forgiveness and New Beginnings Revisited”. In doing research, I discovered a few other sermons and what the UUA has said about forgiveness. Though Gates mentioned that we derive inspiration from World religions, her message was based on what The International Institute of Forgiveness said about it. She made a point to say that the UU Fellowship of Newark was not a church or a congregation, but a fellowship. She emphasized that forgiveness would strengthen fellowship and community. Gates made the declaration that UUs rarely come forward to light a candle and ask forgiveness for an offense. Perhaps it is my Christian roots or my background in psychology, but I have utilized the ritual of lighting a candle during our services to help me wrestle with harms done to me, a loved one, or that I have committed against others. I meditate on what I can do spiritually to lessen the harm. I like that Channing is a church and our ritual of lighting candles can be a vehicle for seeking forgiveness.

There are larger frameworks of ritual related to forgiveness of sins and atonement rooted in Christianity and Judaism. Christianity, in particular places responsibility for forgiveness with a higher authority, clergy or God. The concept of salvation, that Jesus died for our sins and that we are forgiven when we give ourselves over to Christ seems too easy, particularly when the teachings of Christ are not practiced with sincerity. The same is true for confessing sins to a priest and saying the prescribed prayers to be quickly absolved. I admire the Jewish framework of rituals of forgiveness and atonement begun at the start of their New Year, Rosh Hashana and ending on Yom Kippur. There is not only a framework, but also a place to do the hard work of forgiveness. People ask those they think they have harmed for forgiveness. Time is allowed for the process of expressing genuine remorse and reparative action by the person asking for forgiveness and there is time for both parties to reflect and pray. A fast at the end is symbolic of atonement and when it is broken, everyone can start the new year with a clean slate.

The roots of being owed an apology seem to be in both Christianity and Judaism. The Lord's prayer, said in Christian churches as a ritual, asks that we forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors or that we forgive our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. In

Judaism the person who has been harmed is seen as having emotional debt which is owed by the perpetrator.

There is not much that I have found on how to forgive yourself. I think the 12 step programs offer a mechanism for forgiving yourself in the context of forgiving others. The process involves writing down all of your defects, making amends to those you have harmed, and then telling them to another person. By being honest with yourself, making an effort to repair the harm you have done to others, and being honest with another person allows the person to let go of the guilt and shame they have. Often, the person who hears the person out, listens with empathy and without judgement, recognizing the person's humanity which helps them forgive themselves.

What are we UU's to do without a framework or significant rituals to help us with forgiveness? We can't just give our sins to God. This is the dilemma for UU's in general; that our spiritual journeys are up to us, leaving the responsibility and process our burden. We have to decide what forgiveness means to us and how we practice it. Our principle of believing in the inherent worthiness and dignity of every person doesn't address conflict which often results in harm to people.

In general, Unitarian Universalism teachings suggest that forgiveness must be earned through genuine remorse and reparative action: that it is not automatic and depends on the sincerity of the offender and the readiness of the offended to forgive. The person harmed may be aided by the use of empathy; understanding what trauma the offender has endured. The teachings also emphasize self forgiveness, recognizing that holding on to guilt can be spiritually corrosive.

The process of forgiveness can be complicated. Rev Gretchen Haley illustrated Complicated Forgiveness in the questions she asks: What should we ask of those who have hurt us before we offer forgiveness, if anything? Must someone seek your forgiveness in order for you to forgive them? What if they can't or won't? Is there a point where something or someone is beyond forgiveness? What about forgiveness of a group, community, or institution?

The significance of the harm to the other is what makes forgiveness so difficult for me. If the harm is minimal, it's easy to forgive myself or the other. But what if the harm has caused

significant trauma? How do I let go of the pain and tendency to blame the other, even if I know that by not letting go it continues to harm me? How do I forgive someone who has harmed my child? Likewise how do I forgive myself for the harm I've caused someone, particularly if I have been unwilling to forgive others?

What has helped me is relationship, community, spirituality, and therapy. They have helped me wrestle with the sometimes prolonged process of forgiveness. I am a talker and am shored up by the support of others. My spirituality, inspired by music and nature, reminds me of kindness, the impermanence in nature, and the opportunity to start over.