

Where Forgiveness Fits
 Sermon for Skagit Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
 April 25, 2021

Thank Sally, Ken, George and any others for their involvement and support. Together we make a joyful noise.

Where does forgiveness fit, in my life and your life and our collective lives as a society, when transgressions are forced on us? Forgiveness is a fruitful topic for sermons. Joseph Bednarik discussed it with us in November and Bruce Bode just weeks ago. In my decades of attending Unitarian Universalist churches, I recall sermons heard from Minneapolis and Ohio pulpits. This one sermon topic stays with me more than most. I am still figuring forgiveness out.

Joseph planted the seeds of this service when he shared in his talk last November that his church cameraperson questioned whether Dick Cheney, the architect for the 2003 war with Iraq, had worth and dignity. Joseph credited Cheney with inherent worth and dignity. That got me thinking about Cheney and forgiveness, showing that whatever is preached, the listener hears and interprets as he wants.

I outlined today's sermon that Sunday afternoon. To answer Joseph now about Cheney, Cheney long ago squandered his inherent worth and dignity. Did he lose it? I don't know, but he buried it under one evil deed after another. His climb back to dignity is through taking responsibility and reconciling – a multi-party, shared process – and, yes, asking for forgiveness. He has lots of work in front of him, if he chooses to try.

Our immediate reflections on forgiveness tend to be for wrongs done to us and our struggle to forgive, especially if the transgressor does not take responsibility. In our discussion after Bruce spoke, Mike Murdock and Susie Wilson recounted past pain, years and decades ago, of having been done wrong with only them and the sinner, to use a word, present. Mike and Susie worked to find forgiveness on their own. But what of the people who hurt them? What is their role and what are their responsibilities and their being held to account so they do not harm again? And what about the torn fabric of their own lives, that they create pain for others?

The biggest wounds in my life are, of course, the most personal – from my father, Bernie, and my former wife Wendy. My dad is now 20 years dead and Wendy has chosen not to speak with me in 15 years. In the year after my father died, whenever I discussed him with my mom, she asked me to forgive him. That was not helpful, not to me and I don't think to the family. It was not honest and it was not fair. It was a sweep things under the rug, put the past behind us sentiment. It did not address my pain and it left my mom and siblings off with no work on their part.

Bruce told us, forgiveness is not about forgetting, saying:
 “How can you ever, and why should you ever, forget the deep hurts and wounds that are so much a part of your life, even when they might be largely healed? If you do forget, you're more likely to get wounded again in the same place. So forgive, but also don't be afraid to remember.”

And he quoted Lewis B. Smedes, who wrote *Forgive and Forget*. I will, too:
 “You do not excuse people by forgiving them; you forgive them at all only because you hold them to account and refuse to excuse them.

“You do not forgive people by smothering conflict; if you forever smother people's differences, you rob them of a chance to forgive.

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“You do not have to tolerate what people do when you forgive them for doing it; you may forgive people, but still refuse to tolerate what they have done.” (p. 49).

I titled this sermon “Where forgiveness fit.” Forgiveness is a process of course, but it is also a value, a moral value that is. It fits in a hierarchy of our ethics, the ways we rank how we behave with others. For me, loyalty is a value that is not as critical, is lower than honesty. Respect is a value, but I place that below truth. I consider forgiveness a personal trait and contrast it with justice, which has critical social dimensions for our larger society and indeed civilization.

Smedes wrote we “forgive [people] at all only because you hold them to account and refuse to excuse them.”

Critical to forgiveness, whether for a personal act against me or actions damaging an entire society, is that there are two parties, one causing harm to the other. Holding the person to account is a social action provided by the web of the community. The social fabric is torn and repair starts with naming those who have ripped it asunder. With my father, when my family recognizes my story and names his role and holds him responsible – accountable – they are recognizing both my pain and its source. They are seeing my wound. Healing of all parties can only start when the victimized is held in the light and love of truth.

Bruce told us that forgiveness is “essentially an *internal* process – typically a slow one – that takes place in the heart and the mind of the person who feels injured or wronged by another.” It is an internal process for all parties, the wronged, the transgressor, and the larger community, whether that is a family or a country, or two countries, as with the U.S. war with Iraq, which caused immense damage to everyone. More on that later.

When the ruling party in South Africa negotiated giving up power to the African National Congress, the social and political movement led by Nelson Mandela, in 1994, essential to the transition to majority rule was a long term, well organized and structured Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a court-like restorative justice body.

Here are the important parts of holding a person, or people, to account: recognition of the truth by all sides responsibility for actions, the light of day, the public, and a genuine willingness for all parties to work toward reconciliation.

Bruce brought up justice when he spoke to us, pointing out that without “justice the victims are at the mercy of the perpetrators,” and “the principle of forgiveness is undermined,” Justice ensures accountability with the act of forgiveness.

This reinforces that justice is social, in the community, for the benefit of all of us, is working toward repairing the social fabric purposefully ripped asunder.

So I will give you the punchline now: When I hear forgiveness, I think justice. What does honesty and fairness require? The truth. But truth has to be spoken in the light of day, with all sides in agreement.

Mike and Susie came to a peace within themselves, or at least an acceptance. But the transgressors, the persons who acted badly, were not held accountable. Mike and Susie’s efforts at a personal peace leaves bad actors free to act badly again.

What I wanted from my family with my father was to be heard and recognized. Forgiveness grows in public, not because the grievance is aired but because others recognize the truth that a wrong took place, that an injustice was done and that for the torn fabric, be it between father and son, a professor and student or a war criminal and the two societies torn asunder. Each will only mend in the light of truth. Reconciliation begins in the light of day, with empathy and recognizing the pain, with understanding that pain was willfully caused and then with a group commitment to holding the transgressor accountable. The sinner can only heal when he speaks the truth and asks to be let into the circle of humanity by naming the wrongs he committed and following up with healing actions. The wrongdoer heals by ask for forgiveness and forgiving himself.

I have spoken before of my respect and admiration for Catholic nuns who marched and worked through the Vietnam War and into the Nuclear Freeze moment prompted by Ronald Reagan's presidency, chanting and insisting: without justice there is no peace. The deep, abiding peace that all of us can be a part of is one that recognizes the depth of pain and world broken open by the transgressor, whether it is to a son, a student or a nation is to stop everything until the light of justice provides its healing rays. The prophets did not peach let forgiveness roll down like waters. No, Amos demanded "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

Yes, my father is a source for this sermon, along with Dick Cheney and Joseph Bedarnak. But so are Cheney's partners in war crimes, Donald Rumsfeld and George W. Bush. A sermon in Oxford, Ohio around 2007 on forgiveness prompted the question in after service discussion – talk backs were a common feature of our church culture decades past – the question what about forgiving President Bush for the destruction if Iraq? My response was immediate. None of us has a part in forgiving George Bush. That is between him and his God. That is not our role. Our rule is to address the evil he wrought on two continents and to demand justice on ours.

Not to get into the weeds or minutia of 2009, but President Barack Obama did the nation and the world a tremendous disservice when he prevented the U.S. Senate from holding hearings on the Bush administration's concerted efforts to create the war with Iraq. Truth is served by the light of day. That is how we move toward justice. Preventing the facts from coming out did not heal the nation. Obama preventing the truth from being pursued led to the sense that our two political parties are alike and corrupt and provided an opening for the demagoguery of Donald Trump. Lies will fill the space left by the absence of truth.

But this is a religious sermon not a political rant.

Before I or anyone here today spend time working on forgiving Bush or Cheney, I challenge you to challenge them for their lack of sense, much less compassion and for the very real blood they have on their hands. The best way to help Dick Cheney is to bring him to justice and help him to reconcile his deeds with deaths of the individuals and the whole of two societies that he ruined. Dick Cheney's path to his salvation lies squarely on the road of truth.

That is our challenge, as people of religious conviction: to find our part in helping evildoers become accountable for their actions and walk with them on their path toward their recognition and responsibility for reconciling with those they have harmed. They are the ones in need of asking for forgiveness. We are not in the business of saving anyone in our faith movement, but we can be helping people rediscover and rebuild their worth and dignity. With war criminals we are challenged to live up to our second principle, to promote "justice, equity, and compassion in human relations."

Today's reading is from the old testament prophet Amos. He was not happy with the leaders of his established order, telling them "I hate, I despise your feasts." He took "no delight in your solemn assemblies." He rejected their offerings, even their "fattened animals" and songs.

What does he tell them? "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." He does not call for forgiveness to roll down like waters. Having called them out for their hypocrisy in worship, "Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord!" his litany of criticisms ends with a call for justice.

I don't have kids, but my friends always have. I learned an important lesson from George in the early 1990s, in his backyard in Cincinnati. George has two sons, Tony and Simon. Then, Tony was maybe eight and Simon six. As older brothers do, Tony did a bad thing to Simon. Maybe Simon cried. George came out to find out what was going on. He heard Simon's side of the story. He asked Tony for his version. He then told Tony to apologize to Simon. Tony gave a half-hearted, maybe head down mumbling "I'm sorry." That was not enough for his dad. George did the responsible fatherly duty, hoping Tony would learn something. "Tony," he said, "tell

Simon why you are sorry, what you are sorry for.” And I learned a lesson, of the need to take responsibility for wronging another and naming what you are apologizing for. Thank you, George, for teaching me that.

Justice is a matter of holding people accountable. A first step is having all parties recognize the transgression and the wrongdoer take ownership.

Our religious responsibility is to initiate and insist on justice and equity, not just preach or sing about it. Our work for justice starts with advocating for freeing and protecting the oppressed. But our historic theology and present principles inform us that salvation is possible for everyone, even Dick Cheney.

And what’s more, our faith fails Cheney if it does not offer him a path to gain salvation, to find peace in his own soul and help him to be able to forgive himself.

Mark Morrison Reed is one of our best ministers. Now retired, he served our Toronto church for decades. He is a scholar and author of many books on racial injustice within our Unitarian Universalist movement. I heard him preach in Minneapolis years ago on a quite different topic, on “Dragging the last Universalist kicking and screaming into heaven.”

Think about that title for a moment and our historic Universalist faith, with its theology that all of us go, universally, to heaven. Mark’s point was that even nonbelievers get to heaven, even if they don't want to go, don't believe in our belief. Our God is so great and so loving that everyone gets to heaven.

So I have said, in defining Universalist theology to the uninitiated and the dumbfounded that yes, even Adolf Hitler gets to heaven. But, if I am not wrong, if that defines Universalism, then our historic faith is fundamentally weak. Why does Dick Cheney get a pass and into heaven when he has not been brought to justice in his lifetime? That is not fair. It lets the rest of us off the hook. It does not heal the pain of those he has harmed. Dick Cheney not having justice during our lifetimes is our failure. What type of religious faith do we have if we, individually and collectively, do not hold him to account, do not hear the cries of our broken brothers and sisters, both in Iraq and here at home and act as judge for them, ourselves and our just future?

I don't remember where I heard or read that Universalism as a faith failed enslaved people in all the centuries of their bondage. What kind of faith tells enslaved people that their owners will join them in heaven? What enslaved person would join that so-called religious movement? What tin ear weakness and theological blindness was present that our forefathers did not pursue theological complexity to meet enslaved people’s needs?

Ours cannot be a naïve or simple faith. While I do not believe that evil exists independently, as a force like gravity, I have long held a definition for the very real evil that people choose to perpetuate. People doing bad things on purpose are evil acting people. Whatever is the source leading to their twisted deeds, their actions are evil.

And yet, if our principle is to work toward justice and compassion, we can not leave the sinner behind. Even after Dick Cheney has torn our social fabric asunder, he is part, not outside, of the human community. Like Joseph Bednarik, I am concerned with Dick Cheney’s inherent worth and dignity. What is our responsibility to get him to be responsible? Mark Morrison Reed writes, as we will hear in the closing words, “The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others.”

We are bound to the evildoers, too. Our task, then, is to help them see that they have bonds that bind them to us, to Iraqi children and widows, to the descendants of peoples enslaved for centuries.

I started off with the terms fairness and honesty. The truest cliché there ever was and the most needed Commandment not explicitly spelled out in the Bible is the simple sentence “speak truth to power.” John in chapter 8:32 of the Bible tell us “Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

If we want peace we work for justice. For a 360 degree full circle embrace of forgiveness that sets the transgressor free in his sins we must demand from him and stay with him through a reconciliation process where his victims truths are aired to the world in the light of day and the transgressor tells the truth of his role in bringing harm and destruction to others.

It is the only way to help his victims and for Dick Cheney to heal. That is how he makes it into heaven, kicking and screaming, and how we, a justice seeking people, can walk alongside him reaching toward justice.

end

Reading

Amos 5:18-24

18 Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord!

Why would you have the day of the Lord?

It is darkness, and not light,

19 as if a man fled from a lion,

and a bear met him,

or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall,

and a serpent bit him.

20 Is not the day of the Lord darkness, and not light,
and gloom with no brightness in it?

21 “I hate, I despise your feasts,

and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,

I will not accept them;

and the peace offerings of your fattened animals,

I will not look upon them.

23 Take away from me the noise of your songs;
to the melody of your harps I will not listen.

24 But let justice roll down like waters,

and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Closing words

Mark Morrison Reed

The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for Justice.

It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.