

Opening Words - from Reinhold Niebuhr

Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore, we are saved by hope.
Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we are saved by faith.

Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love.

No virtuous act is quite virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own; therefore, we are saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.

The reading:

At One by the Rev. Victoria Safford

Imagine this.

On the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, every fall, every year, the people make their peace with anyone they have wronged or slighted or injured or in any way neglected in the past twelve months. The task is not to patch things up, smooth things over, reach a compromise, or sweep mistakes and uneasy memories under the rug; the task is not to feel better. The task is ownership. The goal is truth, for its own redemptive sake. I did this. I said this to you and it was wrong. I neglected this. I botched this. I betrayed you thusly.

I demeaned you, whether you ever knew it or not.

This is the truth in which both of us are living. I ask you to forgive me.

Imagine how many deep breaths you would need to take. Imagine how many doors you'd have to knock on, how many phone calls you'd have to make, how many letters, how many lunches and coffees, how many awkward moments with your children and your parents, and with strangers (that cashier to whom you spoke so sharply). Awkward is irrelevant. The task is not about comfort, it is about truth, about wholeness and holiness. Restoration.

Imagine this.

Someone has been preparing all year to speak with you, to write to you, to ask you a hard question. Perhaps in some way not quite conscious, you have even known this, and you have been preparing too. Finally, you answer the door or the phone, or open the letter with shaky hands, and there it is, what you thought you'd been longing for but really have dreaded: someone is asking your forgiveness. The task is not about comfort, it is about truth. Awkward is irrelevant. You get to choose now, you have to choose, whether and how you will participate in restoration. Abandon the pleasant piety that claims knee-jerk

forgiveness as the unquestioned moral course. You get to choose which way will be right in this case, between you as persons and with all your gods. What response will make the world more whole?

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Imagine healing, wholly, from within.

Casting Off in a New Year

Rev. Kathleen Owens

September 21, 2008

The beginning of a story. There was once a really old man, who had lived a long and very happy life on a beautiful island. He loved his homeland greatly. There on his island, all his family, through all the generations, had lived, made their homes and earned their daily bread. And so, when the old man realized that he was approaching the last days of his life, he asked his sons to take him outside one last time. There, he knelt, and gathered a handful of his native soil, and clutched it tightly in his gnarled old fingers.

Soon afterwards, the old man died and came to the gates of heaven. The angels greeted him joyfully. "You have lived a good life," they exclaimed. "Welcome to the kingdom of heaven. Please come in."

So the old man tried to cross the threshold of the heavenly kingdom, but as he did so, a kindly angel said, "You must let go of the soil you are clutching."

"Oh no, I could never do that," he cried. "This is my native soil, the earth of my beloved island home."

The angels were sad as they went back to heaven, leaving the old man wondering, lonely, outside the gates.

Many years passed, and the angels came again. They brought the old man a taste of the heavenly banquet and feasted with him there, outside the gates, trying to persuade

him to come into the fullness of the kingdom. He wanted so much to join them for all eternity, but again, when they asked him to let go of the soil he was clutching, he couldn't bring himself to do so. And again, they had to leave him standing there, alone.

To what am I clutching/holding and will not release?

This year in our worship, we are exploring monthly transformational themes so that we might go more deeply into such subjects as joy, faith and others. And though not every sermon will focus on the theme, it will be interesting to hear at least two – probably from different points of view and experience. This month's theme is forgiveness and reconciliation. It is a rich subject and one that invites us into reflection, action and renewal.

Next week, people who practice the Jewish faith will begin their celebration of Rosh Hashanah. Beginning next Monday evening, they will not work but spend time in prayer and reflection. It is a New Year and their tradition calls them into ritual and community. For some, it is a time for reconciliation - to ask for and to offer forgiveness. It is also a time for renewal and hope - a time to eat apples dipped in honey - wishing one another a sweet new year.

I am drawn to this time of reflection - this need for ritual that asks people to step out of their ordinary lives, to stop with the everyday routine and to spend time looking over this last year. And it's inviting - to spend time reflecting - thinking about the events of the year, the places visited, the friends met, the work that was done. It is harder though to think about the times when I offended others, hurt others with my words, my actions. The deeper draw to this ritual is the desire to examine a year in terms of what forgiveness

means, where it is needed in my life and where do I need to give it. Perhaps this is why Victoria Safford began the reading we heard earlier with the word "Imagine."

One of my favorite curriculums in our children and youth religious education program is one called Neighboring Faiths. In this curriculum our young people study various components of other faith traditions and when part of a larger curriculum, they are encouraged then to compare and contrast our UU faith to those they are studying. Not only does this curriculum involve experiencing the worship services of those traditions, but our youth get to talk about the universal concepts in all faiths – like the Divine, the meaning of life, death and forgiveness. Please note that our youth learn and I'm relating a very broad understanding here – there are many schools within a faith tradition. In the course they learn that in the Buddhist tradition forgiveness is understood as a practice to prevent harmful thoughts from creating havoc on one's mental well-being. In Christianity, forgiveness comes as a result of repentance to God, perhaps more than to another person. The Islamic faith teaches that Allah is the original source of forgiveness and that divine forgiveness can come directly from Allah or from the one who was wronged. In Judaism our youth may encounter reflection questions like: Why is forgiveness so important? Who have you forgiven recently? Do you need to ask someone for forgiveness? They then may ask what our Unitarian Universalist principles say about forgiveness? And how might our faith tradition change if we took one or two days out of the year to reflect, to remember and find ways to forgive and ask for it in return? How would that alter who we are? These are important questions – for our youth and for all of us and I must admit I am curious about what their, and your answers would be.

What is it then that calls us to the place where forgiveness is needed? I do not believe that humanity needs forgiveness because we are evil or bad at our core. We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of people - that you have worth because you are living on the planet. So I disagree with the concept of original sin and that we start out in this life depraved and in need of forgiveness.

Yet I do believe that sin abounds and that we human beings are in need of forgiveness - not from some deity in the sky - but from one another. We need forgiveness from those who have not, because we are greedy. We need forgiveness from those whom we have hurt. We need to forgive, not because we have forgotten the pain but because living with the active feeling of resentment, turning over and over in our minds and hearts the act or word that hurt us - not forgiving continues the pain - prolongs the hurt. That act continues to separate us from each other. We need forgiveness because to not seek it, to not give it - keeps us isolated from one another. There is a definition that rings true for me - sin is that which separates us from the Holy and it is that which separates us from the Whole. Acts of sin – acts of greed, fear and ignorance splinter and fragment us into sharp shards that if left not forgiven, can hurt others as we make our way in the world. I believe that which calls us to forgiveness is our deep need to live in a world that is whole.

So how do we forgive? We live in a society that seems to value individualism more than connection; a society that emphasis' do unto others before they do unto you – and in this kind of environment, learning how to forgive does not come easily. It seems to me that mercy and compassion are needed if I want to forgive or to be forgiven. Forgiveness requires a level of trust and an assumption of goodwill. To forgive requires a willingness on my part to let go of the objection - the hurt, and see the deeper reality of

who we really are. To keep in mind that we are fallible, that we error in judgment and action, that we sin - which literally means, "to miss the mark." And we do miss the mark. Forgiveness can come when there is acknowledgement of what has happened. To forgive we need a vision of ourselves and others that sees our efforts - our trying to live lives of integrity and service. We need to see each other with compassion and then we can choose actions and responses that "will make the world more whole."

How do we ask for forgiveness? Is this harder than to forgive? To ask for it from another requires that we acknowledge we wronged a person - hurt someone, perhaps someone we love. As Riemer said, "it is never easy. ... it means starting over again, and this is always painful." When was the last time you apologized and asked someone to forgive you? Did your heart pound inside your chest? Was it hard to do? And when you ask - are you open to receiving that forgiveness? To acknowledge the hurt, to ask for forgiveness, to accept it and make restitution - and then to live your life with joy again - this takes courage. It is healing work. I think this is part of the work of the church - that in this community we get to practice this way of living. We practice it here with each other in the safety of this place and eventually learn how to do it outside these walls. We learn it here and then take this learning out into the world where we spend most of our lives. How important it is then that we come together for practice - for time to reflect and work with each other and learn how to choose another point of view, to choose another way of being.

Though the word "forgiveness" is not found in our principles, I think its meaning is implied in them. Think of the words we use, read and quote most often: respect, inherent worth, compassion, acceptance, encouragement, responsible, peace, and justice.

Maybe the word "forgiveness" isn't found in our principles because the very word would beg the questions - from whom, and for what. It is like the hymn Amazing Grace in our hymnal; it allows a person the choice to sing "to save a wretch like me" or "to save a soul like me." That choice can often stop a person from singing altogether - and pulls one into a theological debate in their heads - thus removing them from the song and its meaning. Maybe that's a reason forgiveness is implied but never spoken in our principles and maybe even rarely discussed in our churches. It's too easy to be pulled into the debate about forgiveness from whom and for what - and it would stop us from the **act** - it would stop us from participating in the act of seeking and offering forgiveness. I believe these actions are important and needed in who we are and how we see ourselves in relation to others in this world. To ask for and to offer forgiveness implies a relationship - be it between two people, two groups or two nations. Even in the act of acknowledging the need for it, we assert the importance of the relationship - that the relationship is more valuable than the fact that the mark was missed. The relationship is more important than the hurt. To forgive and to ask for forgiveness says you are more important than my saving face - or my pride; and because I value you more than I value being right, I want to make it right between us.

Next week's holiday of Rosh Hashanah is also one of reflection and taking stock of the year. Many ask questions that seek to uncover that which is most important in life, for instance: how often do I express my feelings to those who mean the most to me? What project, if left undone, will I most regret? When do I most feel that my life is meaningful? These questions and others like them help get us back to the basics. They put the New Year into perspective and start us off with what is foremost important. Here

at First Church we have many opportunities to help focus our conversations around what is most important to us. We have some exciting changes happening in our church - from saying goodbye to Bard Hall and hello to its reconstruction, to a new Saturday afternoon worship service and a new First Church campus in the South Bay, to new members and more opportunities for justice work in our city and state. We are exploring new ways for our Ministry teams to work together and tying into our church's mission in deeper ways. I wonder how will our actions bring transformation to our lives and thus more healing and wholeness to San Diego and to our neighborhoods? We have the opportunity to start off this year reflecting on our priorities and focusing on what is most important. In this time of reflection and renewal – the renewal that comes from offering and receiving forgiveness, we get to start fresh – with a clean slate, if we choose it.

Remember the story we started with: we left the old man, clutching his earth, standing outside the gates of heaven, alone. Here's the end of the story: Finally, after many more years had passed, the angels came again, and this time, they brought with them the old man's granddaughter, who had grown old in the meantime and had died herself. She was delighted to see her beloved grandfather standing there. "Oh Grandad," she cried, "I'm so happy you are here. Please come and join us in the heavenly kingdom. We love you so much, and we want you with us for all eternity." The old man was overwhelmed to see his little granddaughter there, and in his joy, he flung out his arms to embrace her. And as he did so, the soil slipped right through his fingers.

With great joy, the angels now led him into his heavenly home, and the first thing he saw there was the whole of his beloved island, waiting there to greet him.

What are we clutching with closed fists that keep us from experiencing a greater sense of joy and life? What hurt, what pain keeps our fists clenched and us isolated? There is a ritual that some people do on the first day of Rosh Hashanah. Folks walk to a body of flowing water - a river or creek and there at the water's edge, they empty their pockets into the water - symbolically casting off the sins of the year. How shall we cast off that which is holding us back from entering this new year - ready to learn, ready to be of use for a better world? Imagine this: learning to pause, reflect and practice the art of forgiveness - of asking for it and giving it. Imagine who we might become when we let go of fear, and choose options that make the world more whole. Imagine healing, wholly, from within and saying a larger Yes to life and to love. Imagine. Shalom and Blessed Be.