



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“Choose Life: Forgiveness and Freedom,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on November 2, 2014

Our theme for this month of November is forgiveness. It seems right that forgiveness follows last month's theme, which was death, because the fact that we are mortal, and don't know how long we have on this earth, ought to nudge us to deal with our unfinished business. Ought to help us to say what we need to say and do what we want to do. Who among us doesn't have some work to do around forgiveness? Who among us doesn't need to do some forgiving of those who have hurt or betrayed us? Who among us doesn't need to be forgiven for the wrongs we have done?

I sense that this need for forgiveness is something that haunts many of us. How many of us carry around hurts and insults we have suffered; some of us, for years? So often, it seems, there is injury on both sides of a broken relationship; both sides feel victimized and blame the other. But no one is willing to take the first step, to take the risk of lowering their defenses and saying, “I am sorry.”

Take this to the international level and you see it in the intractable conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians. There is so much hurt, so much distrust, on both sides that it has become institutionalized. So even as the mothers and fathers of those who have been killed, on both sides, call out for peace and reconciliation, the leaders are the saber-rattlers, not the peacemakers. No one in power wants to be seen as weak.

This is the way of the world, isn't it? Never let them see you sweat. Don't let down your guard. The world is a dangerous place, so you'd better play it safe and live a well-defended life.

You see this so often now in public figures. When they do something wrong, and get caught, more often than not the apology is a carefully-crafted statement that avoids taking any real responsibility and often tries to make excuses, or even worse, blame the victim. What ever happened to good old-fashioned shame, where someone would stand up and admit their guilt and be willing to take the consequences?

If the way of the world, and part of our human nature, is to practice self-defense and denial, to avoid the vulnerability that confession and forgiveness and reconciliation require, then is there any hope that we can live another way?

If you didn't think so, would you be here? Isn't this what it means to be a person of faith--holding out hope for a better world, and working toward that, sometimes in spite of all the evidence to the

contrary? So how do we get there? How do we move from brokenness to wholeness, from imprisonment to freedom?

Do you know the story of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa? After the fall of apartheid, the new government, led by Nelson Mandela, wanted to make a fresh start. They knew they needed to bring the truth to light and give people the opportunity to heal. So they offered amnesty to anyone who would come forward and fully confess their crimes, in front of their victims and the TV cameras. There's a moving documentary about this, and Desmond Tutu, who chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission wrote a book about it, called *No Future Without Forgiveness*.

I wonder about our own country. Would we ever have a Truth and Reconciliation process for the crimes committed against Native American people? For the victims of slavery? For our neighbors in Central America who've suffered mightily from oppression by American government and corporate intervention? Or those who have been killed or injured by our weapons of mass destruction?

In South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation process worked because people had an incentive to come to the table. The only way to get amnesty was by giving a full accounting of your wrongdoing and by asking for forgiveness from your victims. By throwing yourself at their mercy. What a different approach than the one most of us were taught--to never show vulnerability because it's seen as a sign of weakness. When, actually, it's a sign of strength.

You know the joke about men not stopping to ask for directions? It's true, isn't it? I'm as guilty of that as anyone. But the truth is, that's one small way that a person shows vulnerability. "I'm lost and need help." Many of us were taught to not do that.

So what is the incentive to take this risk--to confess your mistakes and ask for forgiveness? Why would we do this? Because it is the only way to be free. Free to more fully live this life you have been given. And you want to live, don't you?

In the Jewish tradition, the new year begins with the Days of Awe, a time for introspection and seeking reconciliation with those you have wronged, culminating in the highest holy day, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. For those of you who grew up Roman Catholic, you know about the practice of making confession. There is wisdom in these traditions, that we need ways to confess our wrongdoing, make amends, seek reconciliation, and begin again.

In our tradition, we tend to swing the other way. We focus on people's inherent goodness. When I bless or baptize a baby, I tell the parents that we don't believe in original sin here; we don't think there's anything their baby needs to be cleansed of. I haven't met a new parent yet who believed that. What they want is to bless and give thanks for this new precious life.

But as we grow we do make mistakes--we're human. We get ourselves in trouble. We need ways to practice confessing our wrongs so we can start to set things right. We need ways to practice forgiving others. So we can be free. In the gospel according to Matthew, Peter, who is something of a do-gooder, always looking for praise, asks Jesus, "How often should I forgive someone who sins

against me? Seven times?" And Jesus responds, "No, not seven times, but seventy times seven!" (Matt. 18:21-22).

Jesus is saying we need to make a lifelong practice of forgiveness. Because life is going to regularly be presenting us with these opportunities! People will always be annoying and offending us. And we will forever be hurting and disappointing our friends and family members and co-workers, each other here, in this community, whether we intend to or not.

We could talk about big and shining examples of forgiveness, the kind they make movies about. Those stories certainly are inspiring. But I worry that they put forgiveness up on a pedestal, something only saints and Nobel Peace Prize winners are capable of. And we need forgiveness to be as common a practice as brushing our teeth.

One day I was out doing a project in our driveway, and it wasn't going well, and I was frustrated. When my neighbor walked by, pushing her son in a stroller, and she said, "Hi," and "How's it going?," I couldn't contain my aggravation and I said, "Not so good. This project is driving me crazy. Sometimes I want to put a gun to my head." She smiled and walked on home, and I went back to work.

But a minute later my heart sank. I remembered, of course, that my neighbor's brother had taken his own life just a few years ago. How could I have been so insensitive, so stupid? I looked across the street. They were still outside, so I put down my tools and walked over. "I'm so sorry," I said. "That was a terrible thing to say."

"Oh it's okay," she replied. "I understand. My husband and I even catch ourselves saying things like that every once in a while. Don't worry about it. But thanks." We stood there and talked for a few minutes, and then I went back to my work. And my heart was lighter. It seemed like a little miracle. In the course of just a few minutes, I had done something harmful, I'd realized it and regretted it, I'd apologized and had been forgiven. Just like that. In traditional religious language I had sinned, had felt contrition, had made confession, had received absolution and found reconciliation--all this in ten minutes!

One thing I'm learning is that it's so much better to speak up, to tell the truth, rather than to keep things to yourself. It's not always easy, or comfortable, but it's worth the risk. We can't do this work all on our own. We need others to help hold us accountable, to remind us what things look like from where they stand.

Reinhold Niebuhr was a 20th century theologian who was widely respected as a thinker, truth-teller and observer of human nature and public life. He offered a necessary corrective to the sunny optimism of many religious liberals of his day. He is the person responsible for the "serenity prayer":

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
The courage to change the things I can,  
And the wisdom to know the difference.

You can hear Niebuhr's realism in the words that were our reading this morning. He describes the fragmentary nature of human life and says we can't fix that, and so we must find serenity amidst the messiness of life.

"Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime;" Niebuhr said, "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 as 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."<sup>1</sup>

The people and communities we belong to: our families, or friends, this congregation; sometimes they drive us crazy. And sometimes we return the favor. But the truth is, we need one another, for support and accountability.

Some people appear intent on holding grudges for a lifetime. But is this any kind of life at all? To choose not to forgive is to be forever trapped in your own toxic mess. Anne Lamott says it's "like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die."<sup>2</sup> Who wants to live like that?

In the book of Deuteronomy in the Hebrew Bible, God says, "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live" (Deut. 30:19).

You have a choice. You always do. There will always be voices urging you to look out for number one, to protect and defend yourself against real and imagined enemies. To never admit any fault or weakness. But what kind of life is that?

We are part of a long and good tradition that offers another way. A way less traveled, but one that leads to life. It charges us: choose to tell the truth, cost what it may. Choose to confess your faults. Choose to forgive those who have wronged you. Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*.