

“The Forgiveness Business,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill
on September 27, 2009

We are in the middle of the Jewish high holy days. Rosh Hashana, the start of the new year, was a week ago. Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, begins tomorrow night. Every year at this time, Jews undertake a process of looking at their lives and acknowledging their shortcomings, repenting for the wrongs they have done over the past year, and trying to make amends. The high holy days offer the chance to reconcile with both God and one's neighbors, and make a new beginning.

Something I appreciate about the Jewish tradition is this annual reminder that we need to confess our faults in order to make a fresh start. I'm convinced we need ways to do this, if we are going to live good and happy lives.

There's something in the human condition that allows us to hold on to grudges, to carry things for a lot longer than we should. This happens for individuals, for families, for institutions, for nations. I'm not saying we should forget the past, no. But neither should we be our past. It would be tragic if the mistakes we have made, or the ways others have wronged us, kept us from living fully in the present, and looking with hope toward the future.

I'm convinced that forgiveness, of ourselves and of others, is the way forward. But at the start I want to say that I don't think forgiveness is easy. It's not. Nor should it be forced or rushed. It takes time. There may be someone you need to forgive, eventually, not primarily for their sake, but so you can be free of the hurt that person has caused you. But this takes time. No one should be asked or forced to forgive before they are ready.

The other thing I'm aware of is the power dynamic involved. When it comes to forgiveness it's good to be aware of who has power and who does not. Sometimes the person or the institution with the power can apologize or seek forgiveness as an act of self-preservation, and can actually inflict more pain on the wounded party in the process. We've all seen the fake apologies some celebrities and politicians make in order to redeem their own image, often using their victims in the process. Truly asking for forgiveness is to make yourself vulnerable, to put yourself at the mercy of the one you have wronged. And to truly grant forgiveness to another, or to yourself, is to claim the power you do have--to tell the truth about what happened, and to decide that the events of the past do not have the power to control your future.

Some years ago, I attended a workshop held in a church basement for men and women who were trying to better understand their fathers. It was led by a Harvard psychologist who'd done some good work in this area. He shared his experience and ideas with us, and led us in several exercises. I only remember one. It went this way--we each wrote down on a piece of paper something we were ashamed of. The leader collected the cards, shuffled them up, and passed them back out. Then we went around the circle, fifty or more of us, reading out what had been written down. The statements were anonymous--there was no way to know who had written

which one, only that it was one of us in the room. It was a powerful experience. And then we broke for lunch.

I stepped from that basement out into the street on a beautiful New England fall day. Walking down the sidewalk, I saw people differently. I realized that they had things they were ashamed of too, just like all those people in my workshop. Just like me.

In the UU tradition we don't accept the doctrine of original sin, which says humans are born sinful, and need baptism to wash it away. My own experience as a parent confirms this--looking at my own children as babies, and at other newborns, all I can see is a miracle, a gift from God. A child dedication is a chance for us to come together to simply be amazed at the miracle of new life, to give thanks for it, to commit ourselves to the nurture and support of children and young families.

I have nothing against the name baptism, and I am happy to call this ritual involving water baptism--that's what my wife and I called it when it was our kids. I am just clear that we are not washing anything away. We are saying, "you are beloved on this earth," and "marked as God's own forever."

But just because I don't believe in original sin doesn't make me particularly optimistic about the human condition. The longer I live, the more I am aware of our tendency to cut corners, deceive ourselves and others, and given half a chance, generally make a mess of things. Looking on the bright side, it's actually a wonder that things go as well as they do!

Norman MacLean, writing about learning to cast a fly rod from his father, who was a Presbyterian minister, put it this way:

"...if you have never picked up a fly rod before, you will soon find it factually and theologically true that man by nature is a damn mess. The four-and-a-half-ounce thing in silk wrappings that trembles with the underskin motions of the flesh becomes a stick without brains, refusing anything simple that is wanted of it. All that a rod has to do is lift the line, the leader, and the fly off the water, give them a good toss over the head, and then shoot them forward so they will land in the water without a splash ...

Well, until man is redeemed he will always take a fly rod too far back, just as natural man always overswings with an ax or golf club and loses all his power somewhere in the air: only with a rod it's worse, because the fly often comes so far back it gets caught behind in a bush or rock. ...

Then, since it is natural for man to try to attain power without recovering grace, he whips the line back and forth making it whistle each way, and sometimes even snapping off the fly from the leader, but the power that was going to transport the little fly across the river somehow gets

diverted into building a bird's nest of line, leader, and fly that falls out of the air into the water about ten feet in front of the fisherman.”¹

We mean well, we try hard, but we often fall short of our good intentions. We let down those we love, we break our promises, we are unwilling to do what is needed when we realize the true cost, we make a mess of things.

When I was a kid we used to say these words as part of the confession in church: “We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us.” When they revised the prayer book in the late 70s, that last phrase was taken out. And that’s a good thing--just because we make mistakes doesn’t mean there’s no health in us--it just means we’re human.

I hope you don’t find this focus on our human shortcomings to be too depressing. I hope you may actually find it liberating. There is this view of the church, at least from people on the outside, as the place for people with perfect, pious lives, or at least aspiring toward that or pretending that’s what they have. And that image is probably the church’s fault, for, as our reading this morning² pointed out, focusing on the wrong thing. Focusing on what is right and wrong--the morals business--is something the world already does pretty well, and doesn’t need the church getting involved in. We are in the forgiveness business--something the world doesn’t understand, and needs us to pay attention to, and help it with.

What if we just accepted the fact that we are flawed human beings, that we will hurt and disappoint one another? That we will do this in our families, in our communities, in this church? I’m not saying that we shouldn’t keep our commitments or take seriously our actions, and be accountable for them. I’m not saying that at all. But what if we held things a bit more lightly, with a sense of humor even? What if we practiced confessing the ways we fall short? What if we didn’t store up a long list of the ways we have been wronged, but told the truth: “That hurt me.” “You disappointed me.” What if we took the time to search our own hearts, and ask our selves, “What is my part in this?”

I want us to be a place where you can come in here and let down your guard. Where you can become yourself without shame or fear. Where we can the truth to one another, even when it’s hard to do. Where we know how to ask for forgiveness and how to give it. We learn to do this, and we get better at it, by practice. So I’ve made some copies of a few prayers and confessions and poems that I find helpful, and I’ve put them on the table at the back of the sanctuary and by the Murray Room door. Take them if you like, and use them. Feel free to adapt them in ways that work for you, and if you do, I’d love to see what you come up with.

We are in the forgiveness business. Rumi said,

“Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right-doing,
There is a field -- I'll meet you there.”

¹ Excerpt from *A River Runs Through It*, by Norman Maclean, available at www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/500667.html

² From *Hunting the Divine Fox*, by Robert Capon.

May we be such a place of meeting.

Will you join me now in a prayer of confession and new beginning?

Spirit of life and love, dear God

In your presence we recall the ways we have fallen short:

The times we have taken life and love for granted,

The ways we have not loved our neighbors,

The times we have chosen fear instead of hope.

The things we have done, and those we have left undone.

We confess that we have failed others, and disappointed ourselves.

We remember those things that weigh heavily on our hearts,

And we are sorry.

Spirit of new beginnings, forgive us.

Give us the grace to let go of the past.

Grant us the courage to begin again.

Bless us, this day, renew us, make us glad and grateful,

and lead us, companioned by your love, into this new day.

Amen.