

Is Forgiveness the Only Option?©

A sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz

Sunday, September 16, 2018

Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis

Two weeks ago, Rev. John and I held a Question Box sermon, whereby you wrote the questions and we attempted to answer them. I wanted you to know that we typed up all of the questions we received and Rev. John and I are in the process of answering them in writing, and will post them on the website and/or a link in the e-news when we've responded to them. As you might expect, they ranged from playful such as "what is the meaning of life" to which I should have answered "42" to institutional, to theological. But there was one that took my breath away the same one that I promised to talk about today. That question was: *How do I honor the inherent worth and dignity of the man who killed Wendi?* For those of you who may be visiting us for the first time, Wendi Winters was a member of this congregation who was one of the five journalists murdered at the Capital Gazette. Had she lived, Wendi would most definitely have been at the door this morning to greet you and to collect today's offering. She would have asked you if gave blood at yesterday's blood drive held in her memory. Instead, her life and her death have provided the frame for this morning's service.

That question has prompted my thinking in two ways; the first is whether or not we can separate the person from the deed? The second, and related question is, Does Unitarian Universalism insist that because all people have inherent worth and dignity, it is our moral responsibility to forgive?

This Sunday is particularly appropriate to take up such great themes as forgiveness, repentance and atonement, because this evening begins the Jewish High Holy Days between Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year and Yom Kippur, the day of atonement. Judaism's Days of Awe are marked by a somber time of prayer, meditation, reflection, fasting and making amends. These Days of Awe ask Jews, and us, to contemplate the ways our human failings get in the way of having authentic, loving, patient and compassionate relationships with others. And likewise, if we are the person who has been wronged by another, it asks us to reflect on our role in withholding or granting forgiveness.

Let's look at the first question I posed: *Can you separate the person from the deed; in other words, can you be a "good person" in so many other aspects of your life, and contribute to the common good through your life's work and harm others?* This is the question that continues to swirl throughout our nation's conscience in the wake of the #MeToo movement and in the unraveling of the Catholic church's Clergy sexual abuse scandals. Just this week, men in powerful positions at CBS have been accused of sexual misconduct from credible sources and have been removed from their positions. Just this week, the Archbishop of Washington DC has submitted his resignation to Pope Francis. Just last month, the Key School here in Annapolis has finally acknowledged the legitimate claims by former students that they were abused by their teachers in the 1970's.

What we've seen through these and similar stories is that there is often both a personal and institutional response having to do with forgiveness. Up until the #MeToo and #TimesUp movement gained momentum, the institutional response mirrored the personal one; which is to Deny. Cover up. Blame the victim. Stonewall. Deflect guilt. Many of the men accused of sexual misconduct have done all of the above. Their public apologies ring hollow as they seem self-serving and far from truly contrite. It would seem that many of the accused whose careers seemed ruined are angling for comebacks, such as Charlie Rose, Bill O'Reilly, Garrison Keillor and Kevin Spacey. According to an Washington Post op-ed piece written by Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, even Matt Lauer told his fans in late August "Don't worry, I'll be back on TV." Much of the attempts made by the Catholic church to address this crisis seem more geared towards damage control than a willingness to completely surrender to the truth of their behavior and the damage it has caused.

The purpose of making an apology is not to get back on TV; nor is it to check off your list so that you can tell yourself you're a good person. What Judaism's focus on repentance and

redemption teaches us is that *before* you even say you're sorry, you must engage in tshuvah – a deliberate process of repentance and repair for what you've done wrong. It is hard, soul-searching and spiritual work and cannot be accomplished with a simple "I'm sorry – my bad" or worse yet "my bad, but you caused me to be bad..."

That is not an apology and it does not help move us towards another great Jewish tradition – that of creating tikkun – or repairing the world.

What is so hard to fathom is that we human beings are capable of great good AND great harm. So while any of the perpetrators named and those unnamed also have provided us with excellent entertainment, compelling journalism or spiritual guidance, the deeds cannot be separated from the person. This spiritual practice is about ensuring that who you are on the outside and who you are on the inside are the same. That's why daily soul-searching; a kind of spiritual inventory is necessary for us to stay in right relationship with our values and with the person we either believe we are or wish to become. During the next ten days, it would be good to ask ourselves these questions daily: How will I commit acts of kindness today? How will I diminish and extinguish my resentments – today? How will I ask forgiveness for the harm I've caused – today?

For any apology or request for forgiveness to ring true, there are specific steps required. The first of course, is to acknowledge that you have caused harm to another. The Twelve Steps of the program of Alcoholics Anonymous lays out a path of restoration which both those in and out of recovery can take. Steps four through eight all require a thorough and rigorous examination on where an individual's behavior has caused harm. Sometimes those steps can take months if not years.

It isn't until one reaches Step Nine, which is "*made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others,*" when a person's apology actually means something. So you see, just saying "I'm sorry, forgive me" doesn't really cut it unless you do a deep dive into an acceptance of the consequences of your behavior *and* a willingness to make amends.

In our current judicial system, the only way to make amends to the harm done to victims or to

society at large is to imprison or execute the perpetrator. In the case of Wendi's murderer, there is nothing he can say to me – or to any of us – that will bring her back. Although I may recognize that earlier in his life he was an innocent infant and child, that he is some mother's son, that he, by virtue of being a human has inherent worth and dignity, he has diminished that principle by his heinous, self-serving crime. I want him punished and imprisoned. It is my hope that in prison he is able to engage in restorative justice; that he do the same kind of soul searching required at Yom Kippur and come to fully comprehend the enormity of his actions. It is my hope that the lessons he has learned from that kind of soul searching can have a positive influence on other's lives who carry the same kind of rage within them. But this is where Judaism recognizes the limits of human intervention. For Jews, there is a point at which only God can redeem a soul. That it is not up to me or to us as humans to do that.

It is between a person and their God. At this point, I am not willing to forgive the man who committed the crime at the Capital Gazette, because he has not done the work to merit that forgiveness. I can pray, however, that he will. Until that time, it is out of our hands.

What if you are not (this time) the wound-er, but one who has been wounded by another person's carelessness, indifference, deception or malice? What if you harbor deep resentment against another person? Do you have to forgive them? At the bond hearing of Dylann Roof, who murdered nine members of an AME church in Charleston, SC, several of the relatives of the victims said that God forgives him and that they could forgive him. I remember hearing that and admired their spiritual courage to do so. But at the same time, I wondered, if put to the test like that, is forgiveness the only option? The media seized upon the statements of forgiveness too quickly, I thought, as if to find a way to move on from the story – from the complex feelings of rage and grief, loss and betrayal that accompany such a crime. Granting forgiveness to a perpetrator who has not even asked for it, who in fact, doesn't believe that he did anything wrong is, what German Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls "cheap grace." Bonhoeffer identifies one aspect of cheap grace as "forgiveness without requiring

repentance...” To ask forgiveness of another is a process which requires acknowledgement of the wrong doing committed and an attempt to make amends in a way that the person who was wronged can accept.

Because my worship leader this morning is a practicing Buddhist, I wanted to look at the ways in which Buddhism deals with wrong-doing and forgiveness. In Mahayana Buddhism, there are four powers of karmic purification. They are: regret, reliance, remedy, and resolution. *Regret* (or remorse) means to acknowledge the harm or wrong we have done, to know we have done wrong and to regret it. *Reliance* means to renew our connection with spiritual values. *Remedy* means to do what we can to remedy the harm or wrong or, if that is not possible, to do some good, not as compensation (let alone penance), but to set the evolution of habits in a different direction. Finally, *resolution* means to stop feeding the inner patterns that moved us to do that harm. Like the Twelve Steps of AA, like the process undertaken by Jews during Yom Kippur, these offer a way out of suffering; out of the hell created by one’s own actions. Now, imagine a person standing before you has done all of those things and comes to you and asks for your forgiveness – are you obligated to do so? The answer is yes.

Why? Here’s where forgiveness becomes a spiritual practice for both the wound-er and the wounded. If someone has made more than a sincere effort to repair the damage, and you continue to hold that hate in your heart, then the work of restoration now shifts – to you. Now it is your turn to examine your heart and mind and soul to see the ways in which this hatred is harming you. Please don’t hear me say that you should turn the other cheek or offer forgiveness when the perpetrator has not done their work.

But, if he or she has, and you still cannot find it in your heart to forgive, the responsibility for tikkun – for healing the world – now shifts to you. Why? Because you yourself – because all of us – have done harm to others.

And what’s even more troubling for us is to realize that all of us have the capacity to do harm. Terrence, a young Greek playwright from the 2nd century is famous for his quote: I am human and I

think nothing human is alien to me.” The Hindu phrase “I am that too” is a profound reminder that anyone of us, given the wrong circumstances could do great harm. Thich Nhat Han’s poem “call me by my true name” reminds us of this when he writes: I am the frog swimming in a pond, and I am the grass-snake that feeds on the frog...I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones...and I am the arms merchant, selling deadly weapons to Uganda” I am that too – I have the potential to be both. Just by living on this earth we do damage or harm to something else; whether intentionally by greed or anger or fear or carelessness. Just by being human we hurt and harm and create suffering for each other...AND, just by being human we have the capacity to forgive one another because other people and things have forgiven us.

Forgiveness. Atonement. Reconciliation. Reparations. Restoration. All of these are hard and all of these are absolutely necessary for us to return again, to the home of our soul as the chant reminds us. All of this is necessary because we know we too are cracked and broken and we too are containers of light.

I want to leave you with this poem, by Harin-dranath Chatt-o-padya, a 20th century poet, dramatist, actor and musician and it’s entitled simply “Forgiveness.”

Each moment things forgive you.
All your hours are crowded with rich penitence
unknown even to you.
Shot birds and trampled flowers,
And worms that you have murdered with a stone in
idle sport –
Yea, and the well whose deep, translucent, green
and solitary sleep
You stirred into harsh wrinkles with a stick.
Red mud that you have bound into a brick,
Old wood that you have wrought into a bark,
Flame in the street-lamp held to light the dark
And fierce red rubies chiseled for a ring...
You are forgiven each hour by everything!

If each hour you are indeed forgiven by everything,
then go forth from this time and place, and do
likewise. May it be so.