

We Begin Again in Love

A sermon given at Mount Vernon Unitarian Church

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by Mimi Gonigam Stevens

Reading:

A Better Past

By Dr. Betsy Yarrison

We UU's have a difficult time with forgiveness. We have no religious mandate to forgive: "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord" does not apply to us. We nurse our grudges, sometimes for years. The parish history of every UU church in America is filled with memories of ancient quarrels, congregational schisms, and smoldering enmities. If we have a credo, it is "revenge first, then, maybe, forgiveness." We love to savor our anger and resentment. We hold ourselves and others to very high standards, and when we fall short, the disappointment we feel in one another is a painful test of our faith that human beings are basically good and capable of rising above self-interest when offered the choice to behave in hurtful ways.

We want to be able to forgive. Our liturgy is filled with reminders that forgiveness is an everyday occurrence when you love someone. Families cannot survive if family members cannot forgive. Parents forgive their children their transgressions; in fact, our children teach *us* how to forgive. They forgive us everything—every cross word, every unfair decision, everything much worse, and while they may resent it for a moment, they eventually just chalk it up to human nature. They accept that their parents can be wrong, unfair, unkind, dishonest, hypocritical, and even vengeful—and they love us anyway, because that's just the way human beings are. If we didn't have to struggle to behave well, there would be no need for us to have codes and rituals for forgiving one another.

In this church, which shuns excommunication and embraces forgiveness, at least in theory, the path to forgiveness is not an easy one. There is no "cheap grace" to be had in Unitarian Universalism--only "costly grace" is available. We expect those who have offended us to take responsibility and to express remorse to us, and we expect their remorse to be genuine. We expect them to make restitution, if possible, and to abandon the hurtful behavior. This process comes from the Jewish tradition of *teshuvah*, passed down to us through Judaism itself, through Christianity, and directly from the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was a powerful voice for forgiveness in an unforgiving era. "Forgive your enemies," he urged. "Forgive those who treat you badly not seven times but seventy times seven...Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." The process of *teshuvah*, the five steps to forgiveness, contain an interesting rule. Once the person who has offended you has accepted responsibility, abandoned the behavior, apologized to you, and made restitution, the burden to forgive shifts to you. Since the offense cannot be undone, the only way for the two of you to move forward is if *you* forgive.

Forgiveness does not mean exculpation; one can forgive a transgression without condoning it. And yet we cling to the notion that to forgive a behavior is to accept it retroactively. Forgiveness is not acceptance of injury; it is simply the conscious act of abandoning the anger and resentment that we feel toward the person who injured us. Forgiveness is not about getting our pound of flesh; it is about learning to live without it, and feeling ok about that. It is not about the object of forgiveness; it is about the forgiver. It is about moving past the injury to a sense of inner peace. It has been said that “resentment is like drinking poison, and waiting for the other person to die.” How silly. And yet that is exactly what we do.

The best definition of forgiveness I have ever heard is one whose author is unknown; it is widely attributed to many pundits but is without an original source. Perhaps it comes from Eastern philosophy. The definition is this: “Forgiveness is abandoning the hope of achieving a better past.” **(repeat slowly)**

What’s done is done. We cannot change the past by looking backward to see what we could have done differently, or by rewriting it in our minds to improve it. If the past is not to haunt us, we must banish it from the emotional present and refuse to let it back in. Without forgiveness, there can be no future.

In the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu: *“To forgive is not just to be altruistic. It is the best form of self-interest. It is also a process that does not exclude hatred and anger. These emotions are all part of being human. However, when I talk of forgiveness, I mean the belief that you can come out the other side a better person than the one being consumed by anger and hatred. Remaining in that state locks you in a state of victimhood, making you almost dependent on the perpetrator. If you can find it in yourself to forgive, then you are no longer chained to the perpetrator.”*

Or, as Francis of Assisi put it, “it is in pardoning that we are pardoned.”

Betsy Greenleaf Yarrison
February 2007

Sermon

by Mimi Gonigam Stevens

We come to light through darkness,
To wisdom in like fashion.
The one who trusts shall be betrayed
And thus shall learn compassion.
To love is to discover
The hardest way to live,
For he who loves must suffer
And then forgive, forgive.

If you were here on January 7, you heard me recite this poem after our minister's sermon of confession. If it seemed appropriate then, as he was asking for our forgiveness, it seems to me even more so now, in the light of what has happened here in the past four weeks.

Let me tell you something about this poem. The title is "Who Loves Shall be Betrayed" and the poet is Jean Todd Freeman. I first encountered this poem in the pages of the Ladies' Home Journal magazine when I was in my teens, at least fifty years ago. It impressed me so much that I cut it out of the magazine and memorized it — a good thing, since I can no longer lay my hands on the printed copy! I have kept and refreshed it in my memory over the years, because it seems there have been so many occurrences in my life for which these words provided comfort and a reminder that I was not alone in having to face betrayal of trust, and that I must go forward in forgiveness and love.

"The one who trusts shall be betrayed, and thus shall learn compassion." It's a hard lesson. Trust is the foundation of community, as well as of relationships, and when trust is lost, it's as if there is a crack in the foundation. Compassion, forgiveness, love — these are elements of the mortar that can be used to fill the crack, shore the foundation up before it crumbles, and even strengthen it against future blows.

I think back to the days when I was raising my children. I knew — and I told them — that everyone screws up sometimes. Everyone will probably at some point in his life do something that is less than honorable, unethical, maybe even illegal. It is not without reason that we can all relate to Jesus' words about casting the first stone. There are plenty of things I have done that I will forever carry in my conscience, knowing that I have been less than the best I could be. But, I told my children, the one thing I ask is that you come clean with me. If you're in trouble, whatever it is you have done, tell me. I may feel that you deserve to be punished, but I will be able to keep trusting you.

To have trust betrayed is indeed to discover the hardest way to live.

When the news about the minister's resignation reached our household, we were stunned. Our immediate response was tears, and Phyllis commented to me, "It feels sort of like a death in the family." As a matter of fact, my own thoughts had been running along those same lines. No matter what the fault, no matter what the reason, a beloved member of our family was being lost to us, and the immediate reaction was grief.

We did not stop to remind ourselves of the extent — the very great extent — to which his own actions had brought things to this pass. We simply wept, for him and for ourselves, and for our community, because there is no denying that this is a loss.

Not only a death, but a sudden, largely unexpected death, so that those left behind were without opportunity to express their feelings, to mend broken connections, to say their farewells.

The stages of grief apply as well in this situation as in an actual death. At least that is how it seems to me. Accelerated, maybe — I don't expect these feelings to last as long as they would when grieving a real death, but I'm feeling them now.

First came denial — this can't be happening! I don't believe it! Tell me it's a bad dream, and I will wake up soon and find that everything is all right.

Then anger, anger about the behaviors that led to this outcome — How could he do this to me? To us? To those who love him? To those who trusted him? (In some ways, it's almost more like reaction to a suicide.)

And even though convention may lead us to deny it, often after a death there may also be a feeling of relief. This, too, is something that over the past few days I have been told I am not alone in feeling. These have been tense and anxious times for us, like waiting to know the outcome of a potential deathwatch — is there a chance for recovery? Or will we have to suffer through the protracted and ultimately quite possibly fatal illness of someone who has shared our lives? However saddened we may be by the final outcome, at least the waiting is over. A conclusion has been reached. Relief.

And so we come to acceptance. This is how it is, and as Betsy's unknown pundit says, we must "... abandon the hope of achieving a better past." Or, to quote an old saying in my family, "What is, is, and you can't un-is it." We have to start from where we are now, and move ahead. Life goes on. Now we have to figure out how we are going to go on from here.

I am confident that we will be able to move forward into a future that even a few short weeks ago, before January 7, we could not have imagined we would need to deal with. It will take time — healing does take time, and there is surely healing needed. But I would like to think that we will come to it more easily now than has sometimes happened in the past. For one thing, I think we are already starting from a better place, with respect to how, since January 7, we have been dealing with our differing reactions to the revelations that led matters to the present situation. There has been an openness in our dealings with one another that I believe will help us to get through this with less of the confusion that leads to misunderstanding, which in turn leads to ill feelings. Our leadership, especially our Board of Trustees, has been beyond praise. I am more proud than I can possibly express that I am a part of this community. Calm and reason — and compassion as a companion to the search for truth — have been the watchwords of the way this process has been handled, and I was very much aware and appreciative of this even as I wept.

In the past few days, as other people have spoken with me about what has happened, I have been struck by the constant recurrence of the words "sad" and "disappointed." It seemed that nearly everyone I heard from was experiencing a very similar reaction: they were sad, and they were disappointed. This was very definitely not a "we love him, and we don't care what he did" kind of sadness and disappointment. Much more a "we DO care what he did, and we are dismayed to hear it, and because of that we are sad — and disappointed." I think this point really needs to be made, because I have also spoken with those who feared that the outpouring of emotional support for our minister at the two congregational meetings last month meant that too many among us were not giving fair consideration to the seriousness of what had occurred, were using

“forgiveness” as a way of brushing aside the ethical and moral considerations of what he himself admitted he had done.

“To love is to discover the hardest way to live, for he who loves must suffer, and then forgive, forgive.”

“Forgive” — such an easy word to say, so difficult to put into practice. Let us remember, as Betsy has reminded us, that to forgive a person does not mean to condone what he has done. To forgive does not mean to accept actions that are wrong, unethical, immoral, harmful to others. It does mean to hate the sin, but love the sinner. (And please don’t ask me where that quote came from!)

There are probably as many different reactions to what we have learned and what has happened in the last four weeks as there are people who have listened, spoken, borne witness. I believe the strength of this congregation in dealing with this, the strength that will allow us to move forward and not be seriously damaged in our relationships with one another, is that since his disclosures to us on January 7, both the leadership and the congregation have been open with one another, unafraid to say what we really thought and felt even though it might be very far from the thoughts and feelings our neighbor had just expressed. I want to believe that we will be able to forgive, fully, wholeheartedly. I want to believe that we have learned that hardest lesson of love. We have suffered, all of us, whether because our ethical principles were outraged or because we had been the recipients of his loving care in time of need, because in one way or another we all had been in relationship with this man, this minister. We have suffered, and now we must forgive, forgive, for the healing of our own souls.

Speaking yesterday at the memorial service for his sister, MVUC founding member Jane Kofler, Allan Philbrick said this: “Forgiveness is God’s greatest gift from one human being to another.” We must strive to give one another this gift. It is not only the minister who needs our forgiveness. Those who were the recipients of his loving care and personal concern, and spoke so movingly at the open meetings, must forgive those who gave preference to ethical considerations. Those who felt that our church would be diminished by the unethical actions of our minister must forgive those who felt that those concerns were outweighed by the help and comfort he had provided for the sick, the dying, the bereaved among us. “Forgiveness is God’s greatest gift from one human being to another.” This is the difficult task before us: to forgive ourselves and each other.

Those words, like the title of my sermon today, as you may have seen on the front cover of the Order of Service, are taken from Robert Eller-Isaacs’ “A Litany of Atonement.” I chose not to include the entire litany in the service, because the sins, offenses, shortcomings — whatever term you prefer — that it addresses are not really pertinent to what I am saying to you today. But I’m sure the Reverend Eller-Isaacs would not mind if I added a few more to the list, so I would like to close with this:

For the thousand times our vows have been broken —
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For the times when we have let darkness keep us from coming through to light —
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For wisdom which has too often eluded us —
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For betrayal of trust —
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For the suffering that must be lived if we are truly to learn compassion —
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.