

## **The Spirit of Forgiveness**

**A sermon preached by Rev. Christine Robinson  
with a Meditation by Ministerial Intern, Carmen Emerson  
On September 20, 2009**

Fall is the season of the Jewish High Holy Days: ten days of reflection, repentance, and beginning anew. Sometime in September or October each year, we UUs, a few of whom are of Jewish background, celebrate with our own reflections on the timeless and eternal themes of this season. I've noticed over the years that the theme of forgiveness is always the most popular and remembered in this rotation, and no surprise. Forgiveness is one of the most difficult emotional and spiritual moves in the human repertoire, and one of the most important to our happiness. So I preach on it every few years.

Thus it was that in the early fall of 2001, I scheduled a sermon on forgiveness. On Monday the title went up on the sign on the corner. On Tuesday, the Twin Towers came down. 9/11. All thought of the sermon disappeared into my own shock, the gatherings we had here at church, the news coverage, the city commemorative gathering where I was emcee at City Plaza. On Friday when I returned from that, there was a message on the church answering machine from a very angry person who had seen the church sign, "Forgiveness," and took us to task in pretty strong language for daring to imagine that we should forgive the terrorists.

I usually am very glad when cranky callers to the church prefer to be anonymous, as it saves me any guilt I might feel about not getting back to them, but I was sorry not to be able to get back to this one. I wanted to tell her that the sermon on forgiveness had been scheduled long ago and forgotten for days, and that I wholeheartedly agreed that it was far too soon to be thinking about forgiveness of terrorists. Oh, well, no chance.

No chance. There so often is no chance to make right what has hurt someone else. There is so often no chance for those who have hurt us to make it right. Sometimes things can't be made right even by the present and willing. They can almost never be made right, right away.

*For so long now I have held tight to my anger, my disappointment, my rage, my pain.*

*But my pain is a righteous pain, because I know that things should have been different.*

*As your daughter, your son, I know that you should have been a different kind of parent.*

*As your sister, your brother, I know that you should have been a different kind of sister or brother to me.*

*As your parent, I know that you should have been a different kind of child.*

*I am your friend, and I am your beloved.*

*I trusted you, I loved you . . . and you hurt me.*

*You hurt me through your denial.*

*You hurt me through your abuse.*

*You hurt me through your neglect.*

*By your indifference you hurt me,*

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And by your betrayal you hurt me.  
You made me ashamed.  
How could you? *How could you?*  
And now, how can I?  
*How can I possibly forgive you?*  
My anger, my disappointment, my defensiveness, my rage, my righteous pain—  
*they* have been my constant companions.  
They are the raging sentinels of my breaking heart who warn me again and again  
that forgiving is just too hard.  
These sentinels, they protect me. They protect my tender heart.  
And, my sentinels tell me, forgiving you would mean that I endorse your terrible  
treatment of me,  
Or that I somehow condone your bad behavior and your hateful choices.  
They tell me that if I forgave you I'd be foolish, a softie, an idiot, ripe for more  
hurt.  
Why, then, should I send them away, and forgive you?

Forgiveness. It's one of the hardest emotional moves in the human repertoire. We practice it over and over. Whether our task is to extend forgiveness to someone else, to ask for forgiveness when we have done the hurting, to feel forgiven when we have been, or to forgive ourselves, forgiveness is just plain hard. If we are wise, we practice forgiveness like musicians practice scales, like artists practice brush strokes, like Buddhists practice meditation. Life offers abundant opportunities for forgiveness, large and small. We take every single one.

There are three elements in the practice of forgiveness: admission, exploration, and willingness.

The first element of the practice of forgiveness is admission, or, as Jack Kornfield says so eloquently, we give up all hope of a better past. The thing that happened to hurt us, the thing we did to hurt someone else or ourself, it happened. Pretending it didn't happen will make it impossible to forgive. Wishing the past away is the path to la-la land. This is where that popular alliteration "forgive and forget" is so destructive, because we often take it to mean "forget to forgive." It doesn't work that way. We shouldn't forget. That sentinel of our own health that Carmen spoke of won't let us. That sentinel wants us to remember, to actually deal with the reality of what has happened to us, to protect ourselves in the future. The first element of the practice of forgiveness is admission. It happened.

The second element of the practice of forgiveness is exploration. Whatever it was is now a part of all that is our lives. We note our hurt, our part in the thing, our pain, the woundedness we brought to the situation. We ask questions, "What was I thinking?!" "Can you tell me why you did that?" We ask ourselves what we want the relationship to be like from now on, and how to be safe within it. We explore this because forgiveness doesn't necessarily mean that the relationship will go on as it has before. Forgiveness is not pardon, passing over an offence as if it didn't matter. You can forgive someone but end the relationship. You can forgive a crime against you while fully supporting the punishment meted out by the court; you can forgive a betrayal but decline to have a

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close relationship with that person any more. You can forgive someone but put safeguards in place against further hurt.

This surprises people, because they don't understand what forgiveness is. Forgiveness is simply this. I am no longer angry. I choose to give up my perfect right to be outraged at what was done to me or what I did to myself. I do that for two reasons. I do it because I come to understand that by hanging on to my outrage, I am only hurting myself with my anger. And about that, nobody said it better than Fredrich Buechner.

Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.<sup>1</sup>

Forgiveness is giving up the anger. After that, we can negotiate the new relationship in a realistic, sadder-but-wiser way. I forgive my toddler who broke the vase I told him not to touch. But I put my other valuables away. I forgive my friend for standing me up for lunch, but next time, I call her that morning. I forgive the crime against me; that is, I am not tied up in knots every time I think of it, but I believe the criminal belongs in jail. I forgive because I don't want to live in the past or be a slave to feelings from the past. We forgive others so that our anger at them will not continue to hurt us.

And we forgive others so that we will be able to accept that others forgive us. We forgive others so that we can feel justified in forgiving ourselves. We forgive others so that, if we believe in a God who forgives but doesn't ever write that message in the stars, we will feel forgiven.

If you can't forgive others, you can't forgive yourself. The only way we can begin to imagine the forgiveness of God is by remembering the forgiveness of Joe, of Mary, of our mother, of our child.

We forgive most often by understanding: what was going on with them, what stresses they faced, what their perception of the situation was, what other factors besides our relationship weighed on their minds and hearts. Sometimes the reasons are too deep and convoluted, or we never know them; then we forgive by letting go of our need to understand and simply accepting reality. This happened. Life is a mystery. People are complex. We can't always understand. That is the way it is.

And then we move on to the third step of forgiveness, which is willingness. We understand or we don't understand. We negotiate changes in the relationship so that we will feel safe to continue, or we decide not to continue. And we ask ourselves to be willing to forgive, to be willing to let go of our perfectly righteous anger, to be willing to stop hurting ourself by dwelling in the hope of a better past rather than in the reality of the flawed present.

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<sup>1</sup> *Wishful Thinking.*

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Are you willing to let go?  
Maybe, maybe I am willing.  
I am willing because I know that it could be different.  
Maybe I am willing to silence my raging sentinels.  
I have satisfied their need for safety, and thanked them for the vigilance.  
In this holy moment my heart sends forth another message:  
It is the message of hope, and with joy I discover that hope is even more powerful  
than my righteous anger.  
I can be willing to let this go.

Willingness is the most powerful thing we can do. We can't, of course, control our anger. It's a feeling. It's not in our control. We can only be willing to let it drain away. Usually our sincere willingness, our attention to our future safety, and our quiet prayer for deliverance from this burden is enough that the healing can begin. When it is not, then our willingness is to explore, usually with another person, why it is not. That takes us back a step, but it is often a very worthy exploration that bears much fruit in our lives. When we are done exploring, then we can be willing to let the anger drain away.

It drains like the water from a hard rain, in its own good time, often unnoticed. In the evening there's a mess of a puddle. It's smaller in the morning, smaller still at noon, you go about your business, and the next time you check, it is gone. All you did was not feed it with the hose of your anger. All you did was go on with your life and let nature take its healing course. And the forgiveness is complete and you are free.

On this morning, in this sacred space, in this shared time, I choose to listen to my heart's steadfast message: love myself enough to forgive those who have hurt me; love my own "wild and precious life" enough to let go of the angers that burden me; forgive and trust myself to love and to hope.

Endorse my *own* life, and my full and joyful living of it.  
Condone my *own* choices for renewal of body, of mind, and of spirit.  
I am willing to forgive.

In a few moments I will lead us into a time of meditation and reflection. But first, before I begin the meditation, I want you to dig in your pockets or your purses for lint, or tiny scraps of old paper, or whatever bit of waste left over from old tasks and all that is your life. Go ahead and start gathering your lint. If you have absolutely clean pockets and purse, check the floor around your feet. You'll find something!

During the ritual of *Tashlich*, observed during Rosh Hashanah, Jews take the lint out of their pockets and throw it into running water, symbolically sending their sins into the depths of the sea. We're going to do a version of that ritual this morning.

After you have your lint, think about it. Sit with it during the meditation, letting it represent that which burdens you, that which separates you from your best and most fulfilling life. Perhaps it is something for which you need to forgive another person, perhaps it is something for which you need to forgive yourself.

When the silence ends, I will invite you to come up to these bowls of water with your bit of lint. Please come forward by way of the wall aisles or the center aisle. We'll

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use a little water to help you let go of your lint, and after yours is gone, you'll pour a bit of water on your neighbor's fingers. Please return to your seat by the side aisles.

Now, please take a deep breath, hold on to your lint, and join me in the silence.