“FORGIVING YOUR ENEMIES AND YOUR FRIENDS”

A sermon Delivered by Rev. Bruce Southworth, Senior Minister of The Community Church of NY Unitarian Universalist,
High Holy Day Sunday, October 2, 2011

This day we hold in our thoughts and prayers, Rabbi Joel Goor of the Metropolitan Synagogue, colleague and friend of more than 25 years, whose cancer has spread and who yesterday underwent surgery once again. I greeted him on Rosh Hashanah, and it was clear that his spirit was strong, even as his body weakens.

The Metropolitan Synagogue has been with us in our church building for over fifty years now.

Rabbi Goor began service here in 1983, and I recall receiving a New Year's card from him. It included the following legend, which for me slices through the hurried busy-ness of my day. It goes as follows:

A tale is told of one who sat in study before Rabbi Mordecai of Nadvorna, of blessed memory [19th century], and before Rosh ha-Shana, the student came to obtain permission to be dismissed.

The rabbi said to him, "Why are you hurrying?"

Said he to him, "I am a Reader, and I must look into the High Holy prayer book, and put my prayers in order."

Said the rabbi to him, “The prayer book is the same as it was last year. But it would be better for you to look into your deeds, and put yourself in order."

Reading the card going up an elevator, I laughed because I had a Jewish prayer book in hand with the thought of getting Sunday High Holy Day prayers in order.

Readings

For our High Holiday Service, I have several brief readings that speak to various themes of the season: spiritual growth, human shortcomings and radiance, and forgiveness.
(1) Dr. James Melvin Washington, professor at Union Theological Seminary, who died at age 49 in 1997, was a Baptist who served us one year as a Visiting Minister. He once said about one of his mentors: “Mrs. Grady … taught me that true spirituality is the ability to see beyond my own prejudices and shortsightedness.”

(2) Frederick Nietzsche offered observations about human nature in reflecting upon parties and social gatherings. He put it this way,

Why do we feel pangs of conscience after ordinary parties?

Because we have taken important matters lightly; because we have discussed people with less than complete loyalty, or because we were silent when we should have spoken; because we did not on occasion jump up and run away; [He concludes.] in short, because we behaved at the party as if we belonged to it.

(HUMAN, ALL TOO HUMAN, U. NEBRASKA, QUOTED IN NY TIMES BOOK REVIEW, Part I § 351, SUMMER '85)

(3) My colleague Reverend Victoria Safford speaks of the reality of human evil, in addition to human potential for good, and I like her forthrightness in naming evil for what it is, as well naming our radiance.

Evil is the capacity, within us and among us, to break sacred bonds with our own souls, with one another, and with the holy. Further, it is the willingness to excuse or justify this damage, to deny it, or to call it virtue. The soil in which it flourishes is a rich compost of ignorance, arrogance, fear, and delusion – mostly self-delusion – all mingled with the sparkling dust of our original, human being.

(4) FORGIVENESS – John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892) writes,

My heart was heavy, for its trust had been
Abused, its kindness answered with foul wrong:
So, turning gloomily from my fellow ... [souls],
One summer Sabbath-day, I strolled among
The green mounds of the village burial place;
Where pondering how all human love and hate
Find one sad level, and how soon or late,
Wronged and wrongdoer, each with meekened face,
And cold hands folded over a still heart,
Pass the green threshold of our common grave,
Whither all footsteps tend, whence none depart,
[In awe]... for myself and pitying my race,
Our common sorrow, like a mighty wave,
Swept all my pride away, and trembling, I forgave.

“FORGIVING YOUR ENEMIES AND YOUR FRIENDS”

High Holy Days of Judaism – Putting Ourselves in Order

I thank my friend and colleague Rabbi Goor for the blessing that his New Year’s card continues to give to my day and for the essential reminder that the religious life requires inward reflection, spiritual self-examination, and attentiveness to our actions over the past year.

It is an invitation: to put ourselves in order.

As we seek lives of character, understanding of Life’s meanings, and celebration of its mysteries and gifts, these Days of Awe invite, demand, action.

The High Holy Days have touched me deeply since my college days and each year I welcome their arrival. I have mentioned before how a roommate approached me seeking forgiveness for things he may have done against me or thought against me in the past year, a rather strange request it had seemed to me coming from one whose character was unimpeachable.

The theme of forgiveness, reconciliation and New Life – present in all religious traditions – is potently expressed in Judaism, and such an act by my friend opened new areas of discussion and deepened further our friendship. I have since tried at times to honor this practice, and it can be an amazing blessing.

Original Blessing – Loving Creativity

Judaism embraces in its stories of faith a vision of Original Blessing, so fundamental in our liberal religious faith, and it similarly speaks of a human co-creativity with the Divine in bringing about a better world. It declares as does liberal religion that we have tremendous power over our own lives – not that we always exercise it, nor are we ultimately in charge of the universe – far from it, but that Creative Power is available to us. And, one of the most powerful things it says is that wrongs can be righted.
And, it says if you cannot do it every day, then by God, by the powers of Loving Creativity within us, do it at least once a year. And, is that too much to ask?

Forgiveness changes us and the world.

**Next Steps – Authentic Apologies**

By contrast to this spirit within Judaism and within liberal religion, I want to share with you a story attributed to Christian tradition, and I do so with mixed feelings, which I shall explain in a moment. I came across it in the newsletter of an English Unitarian church.

Once upon a time, a woman came to Francis of Assisi.

She said that she had been guilty of malicious gossip. She wanted to know how she might find forgiveness. Francis said, “Go away and pluck a goose and lay one feather upon the doorstep of the house of each person you have wronged and when you have finished start from the very beginning and collect them up.”

The woman went away, plucked a goose, and commenced her task to place a goose feather upon the doorstep of each person she had wronged. The task was impossible for as soon as she laid down one feather on a doorstep, it was blown away by the wind. Nevertheless, she went about attempting this task. She returned to the wise teacher empty-handed, the wind having blown away every feather she laid down.

He spoke to her kindly and said, “You can never recall the words you have spoken. They have been carried on their way, doing harm, and [here is the big problem, as far as I am concerned]... They have been carried on their way, doing harm, and no compensation is then possible. Go away and pray and ask God to forgive you.”

It’s that last thought that is insufficient. It contrasts markedly with Francis of Assisi’s own prayer that summons us to be instruments of peace, charity, courage and justice. We are called to be active agents of reconciliation in this world in his view.

That call to respond to fellow humans when we have erred is what attracts me to the lesson about apologies from Randy Pausch, author of *The Last Lecture* who spoke of his Unitarian connections. He died three years ago at age 47 from pancreatic cancer.
Regarding apologies, Randy Pausch advises that there are three parts to an apology that reflect the health within us. To say:

1. What I did was wrong.
2. I feel badly that I hurt you.
3. How do I make this better? (162)

That's a hard thing, isn't it? To say, “How do I make things better?”

He notes, “Apologies are not pass/fail. I always told my students, when giving an apology, any performance lower than an A doesn’t cut it.” (161)

I err, I make mistakes, and I need forgiveness from those I hurt if I wish to sustain right relationship. And so do you. You err. You make mistakes. You do, you know. Well, we have two or three absolute saints here, but most of us make mistakes. Apologies help. Like the novelist Ann Tyler, we believe in the Church of the Second Chance, yea even more…

A Spiritual Audit

Judaism also asks of each person to ask the deep inner questions… to address any anger at the world, at God, toward this gift of life… To explore the wounds you nurture, the grudges you hold… and how goes it with thy spirit?

Do you greet each person with joy and reverence?

Do you count your blessings… each day? Once a week? Too busy… too distracted?

Such questions are useful to me, because they call me back to the Creativity and divinity within, to the Spirit of Life, to God, to what my colleague calls “the sparkling dust of our original, human being.”

With attention to them, I become less likely to betray myself… more likely to honor my better self… more likely to find my best self!

Beginning Again in Love

We can seek forgiveness when needed, and we can begin again in love. And, if we do not do so every day, why not work at it at least a few days a year at the High Holy Day season?

Judaism makes this most explicit when it insists that we seek forgiveness from our fellow humans and that forgiveness for such wrongs we do to one another must come from the injured party, not God. It is up to us to make the approach; if it is rebuked, then we have at least done all we could.
And, for some of us, we may unwittingly have caused pain and never learn of it, and if the other person remains silent and wounded, and does not come to us personally, than a breach may remain... sadly. You may have experienced this.... Ministers do all the time.

It's really that simple, yet we find it difficult.

In thinking about human nature, did you ever hear or read Leo Buscaglia? He writes, "I forgive you for being less than perfect. I will demand that everybody be perfect the day that I become perfect. So you're all safe." We are all safe!

To acknowledge that we are less than perfect is not to say that we are steeped in depravity; it simply says we are human: fallible and fragile, fearful and courageous, foolish and wise, wonderfully and fearfully made. (Some years ago, I heard a blessing from a colleague to us all that is apt: "Good luck with thy honor. Thy right hand and thy left hand will reveal to thee many glorious and terrible things.")

The pangs of conscience come at us in a variety of ways. Sometimes we are too tired and we let important matters go by lightly.

Or, in frustration, we give scorn when compassion is necessary.

Alternatively, perhaps we gossip. That's a big topic in itself. Harmless... sometimes yes, but sometimes no.

Or, we are silent when we should have spoken... Who has not known that experience?

Or, we sit still in the midst of some cruelty or moral outrage instead of putting as much distance between it and us as we can?

Don't we have to fight back at times?

Sometimes, we are too much a part of the world and its flaws.

We hurt one another, not always with willful viciousness, but sometimes that too. And, sometimes it is toward the ones we care about most.

I do not claim to be an expert in every one of these areas, but I know enough about myself and you and everybody else to know that at times, at times, we miss the mark; we need reconciliation and wholeness. Let me say it directly: I know I need it.
Forgiveness is an important part, and a tricky word, and let me define forgiveness – at least today – as "letting go." To forgive is to let go.

Forgiving Our Enemies

Now, getting to the tough part, and believe me I have been wrestling with this: What about forgiving our enemies, brothers or sisters who have harmed us? How often? Seventy times seven, as the teacher Jesus suggested?

Enemies are interesting entities to have in life, and I suspect your experience is akin to mine. It seems I have had only a few; I hope the same is true for you. I have had adversaries or antagonists; those with whom I have clashed over ideas, or strategy or desired courses of action, but those healthy differences of opinion are different and respectful.

I should emphasize a great danger: If we choose to see someone as an enemy we risk turning them into an object – not a person – and damage ourselves.

An enemy is one who wants us out of the way, to kill us, more likely figuratively, than literally. In addition, I am going to assume that most of us do not earn our enemies; we do not go about intentionally abusing other people to engender their hatred. There are simply those people in this world for whatever reasons, often having to do with family and upbringing, who are abusive of others, who have low self-esteem, who are immature or psychologically crippled.

However, maybe we did do something…. Carelessness, not caring, can earn broken relationships.

Let me hypothesize that our enemies are easier to deal with than our friends are. And, that is probably because we can generally succeed in distancing ourselves from our enemies. Of course, if someone is attacking you, it is necessary and right to contain their blows, to stop them, and to get help if necessary.

Yet, we usually are able to distance ourselves spiritually and psychologically, if not physically, from an enemy, someone out to get us. With a little time, most of us realize that even though we may have to protect ourselves from such folks, as best we can, compassion is more fitting than revenge.

There is an old Chinese proverb that says "Whoever pursues revenge, should dig two graves." We know that, and usually come around to accepting that reality.
It is easier to let go of our hurt, easier to forgive, and it is certainly wiser not to let such an enemy cause us to stew, fret, waste energy and the like.

Forgiving our enemies can be a problem; I do not want to minimize it, but this morning I am also interested in how to forgive our friends.

**Forgiving our Friends**

Now, this matter of forgiving our friends may be a bit harder. We care about them. If they hurt us, it is more confusing, and more bewildering because they presumably care about us. This is, of course, more deeply true of family members. The more we care, the more it hurts, and the more difficult it is to accept the pain, let go of the pain, risk a new beginning, be rebuffed, and then risk again and again.

Along these lines, I recall Susan Cheever's book *HOME BEFORE DARK*, which is a biographical memoir of her father, the writer John Cheever. His life had a stormy side to it. She reports often being afraid of her father because of his biting sarcasm, and yet the memoir is a loving one. She has been able to let go of the hurts, to forgive her father. An underlying love healed them both.

They were graced with the bonds of love, and they could begin again in love.

With family and friends, forgiving is not always easy, but possible.

It is also easy as an injured party to bask in one’s self-righteous and sense of moral superiority, and stay stuck, instead of reaching out.

Have you ever done something wrong, apologized for it and then had it used as a club against you? Do you then forgive or enter the fray in the same way?

Of course, if there is to be any reconciliation, then both have to let go, let go of silly pride, take a step forward even if you are the injured party. Keep moving forward toward a person if you want to heal a relationship; do not swing; do not run; do not hide – at least hide only as long as it takes to gather your composure and strength.

To forgive is to heal a breach in a relationship. To be forgiven by another heals a breach in a relationship.

Either to withhold forgiveness or not to seek it only means continued pain.... I am not saying anything new.
What I do suggest is that this is a special season of the year. It is an especially good time to look at our own souls, feel the hurts we have received and be honest with ourselves about when we have been hurtful. Feel the pain deeply. If it means crying aloud in anger or frustration, do that too. Pay attention to the broken places and broken relationships.

In addition, then try to let go. Let go of pride; let go of arrogance. Not one of us is perfect or pure, but each one of us has a divine spark within – and yes, sometimes we have to dig deeply or look deeply, but we are one family – children of a gracious creation … o, to see that again, as difficult as that is to honor all the time. In addition, in the spirit of the season, if you or I are at odds, or you with others here, or in your family, or workplace, let us try some of this spiritual work.

In doing so, we change the world!

And if all is good with you and yours, give thanks, be at peace and be glad.

Recently I saw a provocative, challenging documentary titled *Forgiving Dr. Mengele*. It’s about Eva Kor, who with her twin sister Miriam, was a victim at Auschwitz of the medical experiments of a Nazi doctor. She learned to let go, to heal, to forgive, and to live anew.

If we do not learn how to forgive, at least to let go, we cannot become whole.

This week at this season, let me encourage you to find a quiet moment, to calm your soul; let your heart speak its anger or its pain and then find its courage; then to reach out, take a risk. You may have to duck, but you may also begin rebuilding a bridge, recapture something important.

One of the lessons of the High Holy Days declares, as does liberal religion, that we have tremendous power over our own lives – not that we are always able to exercise it, nor are we ultimately in charge of the universe – far from it, but that creative power is available to us. And, one of the most powerful things it says is that wrongs can be righted because of the “sparkling dust of our original being.”

And, it says if we are not able to do it every day, and then by God, by the powers of Loving Creativity within us, let’s do it at least once a year. And, is that too much to ask? To begin again in love?

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May each one of us be inscribed and sealed for a good year. May the final seal on the Book of Life be for Good.
Meditation from THE GATES OF REPENTANCE

Now is the time for turning. The leaves are beginning to turn from green to red and orange. The birds are beginning to turn and are heading once more toward the South. The animals are beginning to turn to storing their food for the winter. For leaves, birds, and animals turning comes instinctively.

But for us turning does not come so easily. It takes an act of will for us to make a turn. It means breaking with old habits. It means admitting that we have been wrong; and this is never easy. It means losing face; it means starting all over again; and this is always painful.

It means saying: I am sorry. It means recognizing that we have the ability to change. These things are terribly hard to do. But unless we turn, we will be trapped forever in yesterday’s ways.

Spirit of Life, help us to turn - from callousness to sensitivity, from hostility to love, from pettiness to purpose, from envy to contentment, from carelessness to discipline, from fear to faith. Turn us around, O God ... Revive our lives, as at the beginning. And turn us toward each other ... for in isolation there is no life.

Amen.