

## FORGIVENESS: GIVEN AND RECEIVED

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Thomas Strauss

If I had to boil religion and religious community down to a single word, an essential idea – I would offer the word, “Begin”.

We gather, we pray, we hope, we sing, we weep – all so that we can begin again- so we can begin again in love.

Begin Again in Love. This is our intention.

This morning we think together about forgiveness. We create a moment to imagine, to embody and to experience the beginning made possible through confession and forgiveness.

Notice I snuck the word confession in there. For how can forgiveness happen without acknowledgement of wrong doing, or failure, or neglect, or sin or human frailty. Notice, I snuck the word, sin in there.

Tomorrow marks Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement in the Jewish calendar. It is the tenth day of the New Year ...of Rosh Hashanah – the final day to confess and ask for forgiveness, to practice Teshuvah...it is the day when the Book of Life is closed for another year and you hope that your name is written ...and if it is , it is the day when you can begin again.

Judaism, like all religions acknowledges that we, humans, are both beautiful, made in the image of the divine, and flawed...falling short of the mark. Yom Kippur offers repentance, so that we can turn toward our higher, best self. It is a joyful day because it offers the promise that change is possible.

I thank Bob for reading the words of the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous to us this morning. The programs and practices of AA have saved as many lives as organized religion, if not more. The joy of AA is that, it too offers, the promise that change is possible.

As we all know, it takes courage to change. It certainly takes courage to take a moral inventory, to admit our wrongs, and to ask for forgiveness. It takes courage to begin again.

I think of three ways in which we can find the courage to turn our lives in a new direction.

1. Sometimes it is a crisis that propels us into changing our way of being in the world. Our ways of relationship.

Sometimes it is a profound loss, a shock to our system.

September 11, 2001 was such a crisis- on a national scale.

There was a moment in the immediate aftermath, when our country had the opportunity to make a turn toward confession and forgiveness.

Viewing with our own eyes, the death of thousands. Watching people who looked like us jump from their office high rises into certain death- knowing that government workers mere miles away across the river were killed in an instant, we were shocked into awareness of the fragility of life...and the fact that each moment on this earth could be our last.

Processing our shared grief and vulnerability, our country had the possibility of begin again in love. And in small ways, we did.

From that day on...we have all learned to speak more freely of our love for one another. Even eight years out...we overhear phone conversation after phone conversation end with the words..."I love you". I believe this is a change brought about by 9/11 and I believe that cumulatively, it will make a difference.

The crisis of unexpected death of a loved one or of our own death is always with us. Today may be the only day we have.

This truth is a great motivator to be the best person we can be. We can start now. The possibility of change is present in every moment.

The second way that change can happen is through repetition- a kind of spiritual practice. Some people attend AA meetings for years before they break through their resistance and open their hearts to the process and the message....before they begin to heal...and to change their lives.

But attending meeting after meeting after meeting can slowly have its effect. As one observes changes in others, sees leaders deepen their compassion, witnesses one person after another taking the risk to let go and let God...sooner or later it becomes imaginable...I too can change. Perhaps I am not a bad person. Maybe, if these people can love me, perhaps I can love myself.

The third way that we can be moved to change is by our tradition, our religious or cultural tradition.

Several years ago we learned a lesson in forgiveness from an Amish community in Pennsylvania. On Oct 4, 2006 in the small community of Nickel Mines, a man came into a one room schoolhouse and shot five Amish girls to death- before turning the gun on himself. The world was amazed by the reaction of the Amish community. They sought no revenge. In fact they visited the wife of the shooter, brought her gifts and attended his funeral. They believed and lived according to Jesus' words in the Lords' prayer. "and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who have trespassed against us."

Having lived in community apart from the culture of 20<sup>th</sup> c. America, they did not respond to violence with violence, they did not respond to hate with hate. They did not share in our cultural glorification of revenge. When questioned they said; "if we don't forgive, we won't be forgiven."

In their response, they offered us all an image of grace- a love that embraces all...even as they grieved the murder of their own daughters.

To turn and begin again in love does not avoid or deny the unspeakable acts of which we humans are capable. It is in the embrace of our whole humanity that we find true grace, true forgiveness, true serenity. A partial, sanitized truth will not move toward grace.

In spite of our posturing and pretending and trying so hard to hide our shame and our doubt about our own self worth...none of us feels we are good enough, or attractive enough, or clever enough or kind enough or loving enough. And none of us feels we are truly worthy or good or lovable...at least not all the time.

Buddhist teacher, Tara Brach, calls this negative self-hating message, the "Trance of unworthiness". And however that voice got into our heads...that voice that repeats and repeats..."Something is wrong with me", "Why can't I be like him?" "Why can't I be positive and loving and brilliant?" "Why do I always mess up?" doesn't matter as much as believing that another voice is also with us.

We can work at quieting that negative voice...and we can work at accepting and believing instead in the radiance of our own true nature.

The Dalai Lama says that "The basic human nature is gentleness". Imagine if we lived with that message in our head everyday. "My basic nature, my true self is radiant and gentle." "My basic nature, my true self is radiant and gentle"

What a change that would bring. What a person I could become. Turning toward our divine, our Buddha nature is possible-in every moment it is possible..and there is help, guidance to get us going in a new direction.

Whether we find our way though crisis or 12 steps or spiritual practice, or regular church going, or from the values of our religious and cultural tradition...change is possible.

Beginning again in love is possible.

And if we all turn, if we all change and believe in our radiant and gentle nature...wow...what a world, what a wonderful world, this would be.

You may have heard of the Rabbinic teaching of Tikkun Olam...or healing and repair of the world. It originates in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Kabbalist teachings of Issac Luria. The Jewish tradition, like Unitarian Universalism affirms the interdependence and interconnectedness of all life. And therefore it is expected that we will all take collective responsibility for the community and society of which we are a part.

At Yom Kippur, we are to consider not just our own personal sins, and personal need for forgiveness, but also the sins and failings of our community and of our society.

We are called to help heal and repair the whole world.

Rabbi Luria's teaching is found in a creation story...in which God contracted the divine self to make room for creation. Thus, divine light became contained in special vessels. Some of these vessels shattered and broke and scattered the divine light every which way.

Some light attached to the broken shards of the bowl or vase...and these broken pieces constituted evil in the world. It was a task given to Adam to retrieve and restore all of the shards...but he failed in the task and because of this sin, this failure- human souls became imprisoned in the shards...and it is left to all future generations to repair and heal the world by gathering the broken light and the broken souls.

And so each act of confession and forgiveness has a larger purpose. To restore healing and wholeness to the entire community.

And the hope and joy of the day of Atonement, is that change is possible for humanity, that we can each and together...begin again in love.

Amen/Blessed Be/Shalom

## MEDITATION

Father God, Mother God...Spirit of Light and Healing

This morning we come seeking forgiveness.

But first we acknowledge our blessings

The blessings of waking and walking, of food and home, the blessings of books and babies and the energy of youth. We are grateful for friends and lovers, for music and art...we give thanks for this day...in which new life is possible...and we give thanks for the wisdom and freedom of our liberal religious tradition.

One of our most public and prolific UU ministers died this week, after a long fight with cancer. The Reverend Doctor Forrest Church- whom we all called simply "Forrest".

We are so grateful for the gifts he shared with us all through his books and his long ministry at All Souls New York. His legacy will nurture our movement long into the future.

Others have died this week. We hold the family of all the grieving in our hearts.

Others have received difficult medical diagnosis this week.

Some struggle with chronic pain and anxiety.

We, who are people of faith and love ...hold all those in need within our extended religious family...and send healing light into the world.

This day, we continue to mourn for all those lives lost in Iraq and Afghanistan. We pray that world leaders will move us all toward peace and justice.

And we mourn for the earth and the price that our comfort has exacted...we long to bring into greater harmony her resources and our needs.

Here in this sanctuary we come to commit ourselves to greater service...we come to encourage and strengthen one another, we come to transform our lives into that which we can imagine, but so often fall short...

Here, may our hearts be open...

And may we reflect in silence on our need for forgiveness...to be given and to be received.

Silence....

Amen.

## BENEDICTION

Christmas Eve 2007....Forrest Church

Let us savor the world of abundance and possibility that awaits just beyond the self-imposed limits of our imagination.

Let us awaken to the saving gift of forgiveness,

Where we can, in a single breath, free ourselves and free another.

Let us awaken to the possibility of love,

Body, mind, and spirit.

All-saving, all-redeeming love.

Amen