

## Sermon

### Who can forgive?

Rev. Julia Older

Human beings mess up from time to time . . . sometimes by decision, sometimes accidentally. Sometimes other people are hurt. Sometimes institutions, property, animals are hurt . . .and there are other categories. In every case, we are faced with needing to be forgiven or deciding whether to forgive.

Rosh Hashanah was a week ago. Friday evening and Saturday were the Jewish New Year and the beginning of the Days of Awe. Yom Kippur begins tonight. Throughout the week Jews are encouraged to look at themselves and make amends for all the mistakes of the last year. For mistakes against one another, Judaism requires that we work with one another to make things right. Those injuries we have caused to other people, we are required to make right. For sins or failures against each other, we are asked to make amends directly. More than once I got an unexpected call from someone in my home congregation in North Carolina, Judea Reform, who said, “well it’s new years and I need to tell you that I was hurt when . . . , I was disappointed when . . . I wish I had . . . . Many people take this time very seriously.

And what about those acts for which we cannot apologize to people who were hurt with the hope that the relationship can be restored? Perhaps they have died or refuse our apology or our failures were more institutional in nature. How then do we clean it up and make amends?

In Judaism there is a ritual called Tashlick. We’ve sometimes enacted our version here, throwing bread into water and symbolically throwing away the mistakes of the past. People have deep needs for such rituals. I think all religions have some kind of rites that help us to feel free of the past.

Of course there is confession and absolution in Catholic traditions.

I was raised in the Episcopal church. It won’t surprise you to know that I took it all VERY seriously including the sacrament of confession.

I remember one time my parents and I were going on vacation. I might have been ten years old. I decided that I should clean up my wrongdoings by going to

confession before going on a trip. So, I called the priest who agreed to meet me at the church. My parents waited for me in the car . . . rolling their eyes. I'm afraid I probably came back to the car dramatically looking upward toward heaven, hands folded piously, walking deliberately, feeling smugly superior . . . which should have sent me back in to confess again, creating an endless loop. Making confession. Feeling superior. Going back in to confess and be cleansed again, etc., etc. Insufferable really. Or amusing.

I don't believe any more that one person has more holiness than any other. I don't believe that there is a God who might listen to a priest who would not listen to me directly. I don't believe in that sort of God at all. But I do remember how I felt to admit my mistakes and have the priest say, "all is forgiven, your life is washed clean."

All spiritual systems acknowledge that dragging our failures around with us cuts us off from love and creativity. Feeling guilty is life-killing. I would even say it is evil. All spiritual systems offer the promise of forgiveness and redemption. However we interpret those words, whatever level of meaning or mysticism, we need to know that when we fail we are not going to be cast out and thrown away.

I read about a tribal group in Africa, the Dagara. When someone damages the fabric of the community, the perpetrator is asked to sit in the middle of the village while people tell him everything they remember that he has done right. That he has done right! Calling him back to his more generous self and repairing village life.

It is hard to ask someone to forgive us. It is a struggle to find a way, to make the call. It takes courage and a commitment to living a life of integrity.

And then, sometimes, people refuse to accept our apology.

What do we do when we are not offered forgiveness and acceptance? What if there is not someone with genuine power to forgive us?

We have to forgive ourselves. And that is the most difficult. Even when others say, "It's OK. We know your intention was not to do harm." If we mess up and people get hurt, it may feel nearly impossible to let it go.

It may be useful to remember that it is out of our wounds and failures and *humanness*, that we can be intimately connected with others. Carl Jung said that only the wounded can heal. It is clear to me that it is out of our failures and having to live with our imperfections that our compassion grows. If we acknowledge our own mistakes, we will surely be less quick to judge others . . . more willing to accept another's apology.

Sylvia Boorstein is a great teacher. She is a Jewish Buddhist who teaches at Spirit Rock and writes books. She tells a wonderful story about meeting a survivor of the holocaust who was open hearted and, perhaps, even happy with life. The survivor knew a thing or two about pain and hurt and injustice and indignities.

This survivor had moved past the horror of the camps with the belief that, “Each life has other gifts to bring.” Each life has other gifts to bring. Holding on continues to hurt us. Moving on brings new, unexpected possibilities. Even joy is possible.

Forgiveness is a hard business. It is soul work on the deepest level.

Life is plenty difficult for everybody, even without catastrophic events. There are many challenges to equanimity, many challenges to feeling OK. “

“What I think we want most of all as human beings,” says Sylvia, “is to feel safe and content and strong and at ease...it is so hard to feel that. Not to say that we do not sometimes feel at ease and content, but it so easy to have that contentment challenged and so often it is challenged not in small ways... but in major ways; but people nevertheless carry on”

*There is such courage and perseverance required in every life.*

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Isn't the hardest work letting go of our own mistakes? I'll bet you know what I mean. You probably even feel guilty thinking about forgiving yourself and letting go of those things for which you feel you should be in some way punished, for errors in judgment and bad behavior. You may feel that you need to suffer more. After all, we are the children of the puritans.

Possibly you thought about these things over and over and told yourself over and over that you can't change the past and you didn't intend to harm and you are really, really sorry, . . .but still the shame is there. The twist in the gut is still there.

Out of our failures and having to live with our imperfections, our compassion grows. After acknowledging our own mistakes, we have more capacity to minister to one another.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said: “We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies.”

Sidney and Suzanne Simon said: “Forgiveness is freeing up and putting to better use the energy once consumed by holding grudges, harboring resentments, and nursing unhealed wounds. It is rediscovering the strengths we always had and relocating our limitless capacity to understand and accept other people and ourselves. . . . our limitless capacity to understand.”

I’m thinking about interpersonal hurts but also the global scale. Hating other countries or distrusting entire ethnic groups: Where does that get us?

Kathryn Piderman of the Mayo Clinic wrote: “When you don't practice forgiveness, you may be the one who pays most dearly. By embracing forgiveness, you embrace peace, hope, gratitude and joy.”

Forgiveness is a decision. Forgiveness is a decision to let go of resentments and thoughts of revenge.

But doesn't forgiving someone mean you're forgetting or condoning what happened?

Kathryn says, “Absolutely not! Forgiving isn't the same as forgetting what happened to you. The act that hurt or offended you may always remain a part of your life. But forgiveness can lessen its grip on you and help you focus on other, positive parts of your life. Forgiveness also doesn't mean that you deny the other person's responsibility for hurting you, and it doesn't minimize or justify the wrong. You can forgive the person without excusing the act.”

So, how do we get there?

Kathryn writes: “Forgiveness is a commitment to a process of change. It can be difficult and it can take time. Everyone moves toward forgiveness a little differently. One step is to recognize the value of forgiveness and its importance in our lives at a given time. Another is to reflect on the facts of the situation, how we've reacted, and how this combination has affected our lives, our health and our wellbeing. Then, as we are ready, we can actively choose to forgive the one who

has offended us. In this way, we move away from our role as a victim and release the control and power the offending person and situation have had in our lives.”

Forgiveness means that we change old patterns of beliefs and thoughts.

I know what it is to have my mind running around a track that causes me pain and how hard it is to pull my attention away from that pain. The movies in my head are dreadfully vivid. I have sometimes felt addicted to picking at the sore spot. I must consciously work at pulling my thoughts back to more positive things . . . over and over and over. Sometimes I’m terribly frustrated with the way my imagination goes to the injured place. I don’t want to be defined by my injuries.

Talking with my spiritual director helps. She and I create rituals that I can use to pull myself into the present.

Talking with someone you trust may be helpful. Ministers, for example, *might* be good listeners.

It serves life to let go of our own errors and relax our judgment of others. Accept the fact that you — and this may be shocking — are like everyone else — not nearly perfect. Your spiritual task is to accept yourself as well as others.

Life has other gifts to give you and you have other gifts to give the world.

Blessed be.

**Benediction:** Jerusalem Talmud

He who takes vengeance or bears a grudge  
acts like someone who,  
having cut one hand while handling a knife,  
avenges himself by stabbing the other hand.