

## **The Myth of Forgiveness**

**Last week at the 108<sup>th</sup> gathering of The Fraters of the Wayside Inn, as we were chatting after dinner, I was asked if I was preaching Sunday and what was my topic, “ Oh, yes, I am,” I replied, “and the topic is ‘The Myth of Forgiveness.’” One would have thought I dropped a stink bomb in the middle of the table as my colleagues hastily pushed away from the table and made a bee-line for the exit with such parting comments as, “You gotta be kidding?” And, “better you than me,” or “good luck with that one!” In other words to quote the great poet Robert Frost, “Lord if you will forgive my little jokes on thee, I will forgive thy great big one on me!”**

**My own brothers and sisters would not touch it with a 10 foot pole.**

**There is no greater challenge to any faith community and its leadership than the concept of forgiveness, for it is one of those ideas that is easily commanded and difficult to practice.**

**To forgive, according to our Judeo-Christian upbringing means, "to pardon, to excuse, to acquit." In other words, to overlook an offending act, and then to ultimately forget and move on as if nothing had happened ... a clean slate granted, a second chance, a new beginning.**

**Those rules applied at a time in history when the theologians and churches were the ethical and moral definers of all of our behaviors. The churches were the voice box and the authority for every conscience,**

**Forgiveness is biblically identified as the one single challenge, next to love, that humans face in their assorted quests for salvation be it here on earth or in the next life, should we be so lucky or cursed as the case remains to be seen. “Forgiveness” is used in our earliest exposure to Christianity, from the line in the Lord’s prayer, “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,” to the final days as Jesus lay dying on the cross, “Father forgive them they know not what they do.”**

As a matter of fact, the references to the word forgive and the derivatives thereof, are mentioned in the New Testament a total of 64 times. What interests me is it is used as a blanket term, all encompassing, never with an explanation as to how to forgive, or when or whether or not there are exceptions or if and when one should forgive at all? A young friend of mine once told me that forgiveness was easy. He had prayed for a new bicycle day after day, until he discovered that God didn't work that way so he stole one then asked for forgiveness. See, he said, nothing to it!

I never gave it another thought until I undertook my first assignment in 1991, as Interim Minister at the UU Church in Westborough, Massachusetts. Their minister had been jailed for sexually abusing 3 Tibetan teenagers brought over to this country by the Westborough congregation. When I arrived, the church was in turmoil, their minister was in jail, his daughter was the RE Director, his son in law was the sexton. On my first service in September, members of the press and assorted media had parked their carcasses inside and out side of the church to pounce on the ingathering Sunday morning sermon, eager for comments from me. I was asked by one young reporter, "is the congregation going to forgive him for what he did?" I very politely told him to get lost, it was my first day on the job and I needed time with my congregation before I attempted to answer any questions, especially that one! Upon meeting with The Board and the staff, the issue of the parameters of forgiveness seemed to be the crux of the dispute between members. Should we or shouldn't we forgive him? If so how are we going to do that, if not why not, after all, we are supposed to be compassionate, understanding, tolerant and forgiving, aren't we? It was then that I realized the impact of that one 11 letter word on the health and the future of this congregation. The word love had been quickly dismissed as a possibility for reconciliation as it had no place in any of our discussions until the complexities of whether to forgive, or not to forgive, was determined.

Only once that was settled, could genuine love come back into their lives as a valid emotion with which to deal with their feelings for one another as a congregation and as a faith community.

As a greenhorn and a neophyte to this real, in your face ministry, away from the safety of books and classes did I realize that my 2 two years in Westborough would be the supreme lesson they cannot teach you in seminary, how to sort out the myths of forgiveness from the reality, being that in this case the act of sexual abuse had to be separated from the whole man.

**As a minister for 18 years he had done much good for many members of the congregation, walked with them through birth, illness and death, was an inspiring preacher and well liked. We effectively managed to separate out the good from the bad, we honored the ways in which he had touched so many lives, but we also agreed that as a jury of his peers had found him guilty, we would accept that sentence as valid. It was not even a matter of forgiveness for a despicable act, it was instead, first, an acknowledgment that what he had done was unacceptable, and secondly an appreciation of what he had meant to this congregation, and what he had done for them. His daughter, the RE director, who had been unfairly implicated for the sins of her father was apologized to publicly, as were the 5 members, the informers, who turned him in to the police. Then the congregation began to look at one another differently. They now had a way to think about this by separating the offensive act, from the man who had been their leader for so many productive years. Those who loved him continued to care for him, those who were very pained by his actions saw the justice in his conviction. They, then, turned their attention as a congregation to helping the 3 Tibetan girls, who had been forgotten in all the turmoil.**

**It was a tough two years which taught me that forgiveness is not a blanket term, nor is it something that is all or none in its impact. Nor is it unconditional.**

**True forgiveness came to the first UU church in Westboro when they began to look at one another differently, not as pro or con on the issue of their ministers guilt or innocence, as they had, but as bystanders who had done nothing wrong, had been betrayed and in response to that betrayal had begun to persecute one another for their opposing opinions.**

**By law, the minister was getting what he deserved, but it was the congregation that suffered immensely until they could decipher how to think about this and how to reconcile one another's point of view by listening to one another and putting it all into perspective. They had done nothing wrong, but had punished one another severely.**

**Toward the end of my time with Westborough, when the RE director, the jailed ministers daughter, had her newborn son dedicated at my final service and a cheer went up upon the naming, I knew that the congregation had finally forgiven themselves for the pain they inflicted upon one another.**

**Two years later I was finally able to answer that reporters question, Forgiveness is not an absolute idea, nor is it always the answer; one must weigh the offense carefully then discover for oneself whether it is the crime we are expected to forgive, or the memory for good that we are holding on to. They are not one in the same, and there is room for both.**

**There is nothing simple about forgiveness. It is a process we all must consider at sometime in our lives, especially when we have been hurt, emotionally or physically, or betrayed, or disrespected. We need ask ourselves, is it unconditional forgiveness we are seeking for ourselves or to impart, or is it a way to reconcile what has happened and to take the appropriate action. There times when forgiveness is the wrong word, for addressing an issue that is harmful or detrimental to us or others.**

**For me the myth of forgiveness is the ridiculous idea that all behaviors, actions and errors of human choice be unconditionally forgiven as a religious response to biblical directives.**

**There are some instances that require punishment; there are some that need a thoughtful examination before any judgment is made and there are others that require intervention to prevent further damage from being done.**

**The end result, being the ability to sort this all out, not to let it fester, that we may love ourselves again, to live with our choices and to move on in a way that is positive and productive.**

**As I said this is not an easy topic.**

**All of us are at some time in our lives are guilty of something. All of us have wished to be forgiven for something we have done.**

**All of us have been confronted with the pain and agony of how to, or if we should forgive others who have hurt us or those we love.**

**All of us have been faced with deciding “what is the truth”, even when we have not been there to witness what happened. And above all else there comes those rare and difficult times when we must conclude that the enormity of the offense bears no absolution or forgiveness at all. Unless we can love ourselves for our conclusions.**

**And as we think about all of this, and all the complicated and frequent ways we are faced with the times we have forgiven another and been betrayed; the times we have not forgiven another and been proven wrong, or the hurt we have felt and overlooked because it was too hard to judge, or those minor offenses that we held against another for too long; it becomes very apparent that forgiveness is much more than a Biblical idea. It really is our problem in the here and now, not one we can afford leave to a divine resolution in a hazy afterlife.**

**So much of our unhappiness today rests in our inability to come to terms with the fact we are human, we make mistakes, we suffer from indecision and ambivalence.**

**For our innocent mistakes, may we be forgiven. For those that harm others may justice prevail.**

**Maybe we need to ask ourselves if we can really tolerate the evil around us without doing something about it, or dare to see the truth as it really is, to preserve what was good in our hearts and memories and to be willing to accept or inflict the punishment for those actions that cannot, should not be repeated, ever again.**

**I would like to conclude with these words written by the Rev Greta Crosby:**

**" Forgiveness does not mean forgetting  
to forgive means to anchor a wrong in its own time, letting it recede into the past as we  
live  
and move toward the future." 1  
amen.**

**Rev. Helen C. ( Holly) Baylies ©20101. Adapted from the words of Rev. Greta Crosby, Hannah Arendt and an anonymous writer for The New Yorker**

