

“Beginning Again in Love”
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
A Sermon preached by Stephanie Gannon
on 21 February 2016

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Forgiveness is *such* a heavy subject and not exactly the easiest to preach on. Where to begin?? Well, how about with a recent public case of forgiveness that amazed me.

You may have heard of the incident. Unfortunately it’s one of many recent shootings in the US. This one took place at the famous historically-black Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina on the night of June 17, 2015. After attending bible study there, a twenty-one year old white supremacist named Dylann Roof opened fire, killing nine people. Among the dead was senior pastor, Rev. Clementa C. Pinckney, for whom President Barack Obama delivered a beautiful eulogy a few days later.

What many commentators remarked on, and I found so extraordinary, was the immediate response of forgiveness shown to Roof by members of the victims’ families. Some black leaders were especially critical of this, though, saying it seemed disingenuous and didn’t adequately express the anger they must feel.

But listen as I repeat some of the words that were spoken. They were genuine and heartfelt:

"I will never talk with her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again. But I forgive you," said the daughter of 70-year-old victim Ethel Lance.

Felicia Saunders, whose son was killed, declared these words to Roof: “You have killed some of the most beautiful people I know. Every fiber in my body hurts, and I will never be the same. But as we say in Bible study, we enjoyed you. But may God have mercy on you.”

Without getting into the politics or debating whether the white terrorist Roof was worthy of these kind words uttered by a grieving mother and daughter who had just lost their dearest loved ones, let's step back. Perhaps the forgiveness was more for the ones extending it. It was to free them from harboring inside toxic revenge and rage. Can we stop and see the grace and magnanimity of their words? Especially within the context of centuries of systemic racism and violence? These women chose not to perpetuate further the legacy of hate that Roof so clearly represents. Instead they chose love. BIG LOVE. Some of the biggest possible. They were living out Jesus' challenging injunction at Galilee to love your enemy.¹

I don't know about you, but I don't think I could have mustered such a compassionate response. At least not in that moment. I would have been too sick with grief and far too angry at the killer. If ten people were shot in my church community I wouldn't have had any words for the culprit. Instead, like the angry Psalmist who asks why and how long he must endure his suffering (e.g., Psalm 13), my words would probably have been directed at God. The striking examples of forgiveness offered in Charleston made me stop and think about how for each of us forgiveness can't be rushed. As with grieving, it's a deeply personal and individual process. We need to take our time with it and be gentle with ourselves.

Think for a moment of some major situation of forgiveness that's still with you. It might be something very recent, or from the distant past. There's probably a story around it. One of those for me is the end of a 10-year long close friendship. I neither fully understood what I did wrong nor were my apologies ever accepted. *What is that story for you? How does conjuring it up make you feel? Where is this feeling in your body?* When I think about what happened between me and my friend, I feel some lingering sadness. Some part of me longs for closure I'll probably never get. Your task for the next 30 seconds or so is to sit with these feelings and breathe into them, even if they make you uncomfortable. Now will you please repeat after me: ***We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.***

¹ Luke 6: 27-28.

These words from Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs, who co-ministers with his wife at Unity Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, were written for the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur or the Day of Atonement. This is the day in the Jewish calendar when Jews ask for forgiveness for their sins and are purified of them. It's a deeply meaningful annual ritual of approaching people you've hurt and taking responsibility for your actions while also being willing to grant forgiveness to others. After this is done, blessings are received from God, and the new year begins with the sweetness of honey cake as well as singing and dancing. It's at once a somber and joyful holiday.

Part of the deep spiritual work of forgiveness is letting go of old grievances. A couple of Sundays ago I led the Children's Chapel. We read together the story "What If Nobody Forgave?" by Barbara Marshman. In it we learn about the village of Grudgeville in which all of the villagers are burdened by old grudges that have been passed down for generations. The people are miserable.

It's not until a wise old outsider visits and gives them the five magic words "I'm sorry" and "I forgive you," and they recite them to each other with sincerity, that the villagers are free. Grudgeville gets transformed into Joytown, and good relations are suddenly restored. People look up and at each other again. The kids in chapel choreographed a fun dance to feel in their bodies what a difference it makes to release old grudges and heal long-festering wounds. They really got it. Were it only as easy as saying these "magic" words and presto our relationships would immediately become restored to the way they used to be!

We seek out and need forgiveness for our own healing and wholeness, to move forward somehow and to grow. It's not easy, though. All of us know people who are stuck in places of resentment and anger due to old hurts. They can't seem to let go of them, and these old hurts are inhibiting them somehow from experiencing real joy and their own fullness and potential.

Poet David Whyte writes that, "At the end of life, the wish to be forgiven is ultimately the chief desire of almost every human being."² You

² David Whyte, *Consolations* (Langley, Washington: Many Rivers Press) 69.

may have seen recent articles about regrets people have as they're dying. One of the things they often mention are lingering unresolved feelings:

"Many people suppressed their feelings in order to keep peace with others. As a result, they settled for a mediocre existence and never became who they were truly capable of becoming. Many developed illnesses relating to the bitterness and resentment they carried as a result."³

Friends of mine who are chaplains working in nursing homes have told me stories of how determined dying elders are to talk about wounds that may have been opened many decades ago but are still so present. Before they pass, they yearn to be released from them and finally have peace. Needless to say, we don't want to wait this long!!

Jean Vanier talks about forgiveness in the fifth and final Massey Lecture he gave in 1998, which was broadcast on the CBC. He reminds us that *asphesis*, the Greek work for forgiveness, means to liberate or release from bondage. Vanier speaks of forgiveness as a "process of removing barriers; it is the process by which we start to accept and to love those who have hurt us. This is the final stage of inner liberation."⁴ He lifts up the possibility of a transforming love. If we can open ourselves to it, our lives can be forever improved. For him, forgiveness is the "supreme gift"⁵ because it can free us from the hurts of the past that keep us from living fully and loving others and ourselves.

Buddhist meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg also stresses that forgiveness is always a process that can't be rushed. Her approach is that we start by acknowledging our pain and grieve what was lost to us. We look at the context of what happened and attempt to find compassion for everyone involved, beginning with ourselves. According to her, we can be the agents in our own forgiveness.

Compassion and lovingkindness meditation may open us up to the possibility of forgiveness, but that doesn't mean that we'll actually be able to

³ Susie Steiner, "Top Five Regrets of the Dying," *The Guardian*, 1 February 2012: <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/feb/01/top-five-regrets-of-the-dying>.

⁴ Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1998) 136.

⁵ *Ibid*, 139.

forgive. As she cautions, “Forgiveness is a way of loosening the grip of fixation, but I’ve seen over and over again that it is a process. It is not a decision, and it does not come about by force of will. We may decide after exploring forgiveness that we...do not want to see that person again. For some, forgiving and understanding the relationship is over may be the viable path. People can really hurt other people and there is no need to think: *Well, I’ve got to get over this so you can be my best friend again.* If we can find a way to forgive and free our hearts, we are saying life is bigger, we are bigger, we are stronger than the hurt and the feelings around it.”⁶ If we’re lucky, forgiveness can bring us greater peace. But again, as Salzberg warns us, forgiveness can be bittersweet and may not yield us the results we want either in ourselves or in the other person.

I want to leave you this morning with what I call my theology of imperfection. It’s about cultivating a spirit of self-acceptance and love and experiencing the sacred or holy within our imperfection. Encapsulated in a few words: we are enough as we are right now. Even as we strive to be our best selves and to live into the beloved community, we’ll invariably make mistakes and stumble. Can we allow ourselves space for more play and creativity as we resist living as if we were perfect? Can we lovingly embrace our own brokenness and see it as a potential gift and strength? Maybe as we let go of a certain level of criticism and judgement of both ourselves and of others, this will leave us more open to the possibility of forgiveness and greater healing.

Oddly enough, this theology gets expressed well by these well-known lyrics from the brilliant Canadian songwriter Leonard Cohen:

Ring the bells that still can ring.
Forget your perfect offering.
There’s a crack in everything.
That’s how the light gets in.

Even as we go at our own pace, let us engage in this challenging and rich spiritual practice of forgiveness. Let us begin again *in love* and be bold enough

⁶ Sharon Salzberg, “Forgiveness Can Be Bittersweet,” *On Being Blog*, August 17, 2015: <http://www.onbeing.org/blog/sharon-salzberg-forgiveness-can-be-bittersweet/7827>.

to risk healing broken hearts—first and foremost our own—so that we may grow into our fullest selves.

May we be freed from the anger and resentments that might still be festering within by a transforming love and Spirit that knows there's something greater—more aliveness and wholeness on the other side of the barriers we erect of hate, fear, and old grudges.

Taking courage from examples like that of the forgiveness shown by survivors of the shootings in Charleston, may we choose to love more. As Sharon Salzberg writes, "*What happens in [our] heart[s] is the field of [our] freedom.*"⁷ Let us support each other in working towards that expansive vision of oneness and communion so beautifully articulated by Jean Vanier but also contained in the teachings on forgiveness across all of the world's religions.

Blessed be and Amen.

⁷ Ibid.