

Forgiveness
Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson
October 5, 2008

Many mornings, I try to get out and take our dogs for a walk. I had done this very regularly this summer, but since the beginning of the church year, I have found less time for the walks, and have been paying the price in sore muscles and aching joints. Growing older has its advantages to be sure, but disadvantages as well, and the slow breakdown of the body is chief among them.

Since this sermon is about forgiveness, I should mention that one thing for sure is that the body becomes less and less forgiving over time.

When I walk, I have been listening to stories on my iPod, often hoping to find some key to the sermon for that week, or at least some door through which I might walk to enter into the room of the sermon. It is never a case of nothing to say – life is far too full for silence - so when I put on my shoes, got plastic bags and the leashes this Friday morning, plugged in my iPod, and headed out, I was hoping to discover a way in.

I stop and talk to people on my walk, and these days I ask if they are voting No on 8. On Friday I got 5 immediate 'of courses' and one 'why?' which ended, I think, with another No on 8 voter. Be sure to sign our poster if you have done your 5 things.

And I thought about forgiveness, and how complex a topic this is. It is one of those things – of course we should forgive, and of course we should ask for forgiveness, but – as the saying goes: though it is better to light a candle than curse the darkness, it is much less emotionally satisfying. Forgiveness is fine, but carrying a grudge can feel so good, and revenge is, well, terrific. The Bible says it is the Lords, vengeance, that is, and so if we are to be godlike

Forgiveness, our theme this month, is central to most religious traditions, from the Catholic sacrament of confession to the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur.

The story I heard on Friday was by William Trevor and called 'Open Secrets.' It's an odd story; there is no real plot, nothing exactly happens, and it chronicles a day in the life of one woman. She does little in the story except reminisce and think about her day. She shops, and drinks too much and waits for her husband to come home from work.

She is filled with regrets, and at one point asks what place regret has in forgiveness. I suppose it suggests that we are responsible for our own lives and what we do, and for judging our lives by the values and ideals we hold. I think it means that we should hold ourselves up to our own highest standards.

So one question for you this month: what place does regret have in forgiveness? And a second question might be what is the connection, if any, between forgiving and forgetting? There is a suggestion that in old English – from which these come, that they are opposites, as in give and get.

We are in, as you know, the High Holy days of Judaism, beginning with Rosh Hashanah and ending with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, these are the days of awe.

In the ancient Hebrew tradition, at this time of the year, around harvest time, and just after the beginning of the New Year, people attempted to make right with their God and to return anew to the ideal of the covenanted community. The Israelites, as individuals and as a people would atone for their sins and their failings. They would ritually wipe the slate clean so that they could move more easily forward into the New Year and begin another cycle of living. Forgiveness

In that ancient festival, the high priest would take a live goat, ritually confess all the sins of the people and lay those sins upon the goat and drive the goat out into the wilderness - cut off from the healing strength of the community.

One of the great contributions of Judaism to our religious understanding is the idea of a god in community, in history, struggling with a people in time. That, for me, is much more profound than monotheism - also attributed to Judaism. But 'God in community' - now that means something. And Yom Kippur is an important expression of that theological claim.

Like all ancient festivals, the Day of Atonement responds to deep human needs - needs that probably have not changed since the beginning of time. Reconciliation and atonement - at one ment - is vital for all of us. We are all estranged from something - sometimes cut off from our own better self, sometimes from others, sometimes from our communities.

When I was a child, I was taught that I needed to be forgiven for my sins, and I pretty much knew what my sins were - being mean, not saying prayers, being selfish, not obeying my parents, making faces during church - lots of little and big sins. I was taught to ask for forgiveness and to forgive others. 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.'

It built in me an awareness that sin had, on the one hand, to do with separation - that is the meaning of the Hebrew word for sin - separation. But it also had to do with boundaries - with trespass. Taking what belonged to another, whether a thing - I once stole a comic book from a drug store - or taking someone's dignity - I have put down others my share of the time, thought myself better than others. Trespass ... crossing boundaries when we should not.

The Day of Atonement carries with it the profoundly human dream of peace and reconciliation; it speaks to those times of estrangement, of the fight for faith, of the dangers of cynicism and despair, of the possibility of hope and renewal.

Atonement is itself an act of faith. And, perhaps, if there is anything for which we Unitarian Universalists need to atone, it is for our resistance to faith, to the openness to wonder and mystery, to awe and to grace.

How shall we gather together, people of a community to recognize what calls forth awe and worship what is holy? We say we are here to live lives of service and integrity and joy, here to encounter the sacred and to grow our souls, here to build a community and transform the world.

We are a religious people in this room. We are here, for whatever other purpose we might claim, we are here because we share a faith. We are a religious people, which means that we should always seeking ways to connect our lives with each other and with a deeper ground, with what is holy and sacred in our lives.

As a movement, we have argued about, we have denied, sought, ignored, refused, we have ached for what is holy. For some time we spent much of our efforts denying the presence of the sacred in our lives, but, more and more, we yearn for a deeper faith and a richer spirituality that might give our lives more meaning.

We are not always sure of our ability to feel awe. We have called the holy by many names and then disputed the names. Our skepticism has turned into cynicism too often.

We are missing something - even as I believe we have just the way to get to it. Our way of openness, of the use of our whole beings - mind, soul, heart and hands - our willingness to change, our belief that our perception of the truth is dynamic, that it comes from our dialogue with each other and with the world, with history, that dogma limits our growth - all those things should bring us closer to the sacred rather than further from it.

But, can we atone first? Can we atone in these high holy days, these days of awe? When do we set aside time to truly atone for what has separated ourselves from what is holy - from what is best in us? Would it be possible for any of us, or for all of us, to kneel, to bend our knee in forgiveness or in

contrition? Asking for forgiveness takes some humility – not the first virtue connected with UUs. But can we? Can I? Can you?

Not so easily. In a poem called 'The Network of the Imaginary Mother' Robin Morgan has these lines:

Blessed be my brain
that I may conceive of my own power.
Blessed be my breast
that I may give sustenance to those I love.
Blessed be my womb
that I may create what I choose to create.
Blessed be my knees
that I may bend so as not to break
Blessed be my feet
that I may walk in the path of my highest will.
Blessed be my knees
that I may bend so as not to break

You know what you need to forgive in yourself and you know what you need to forgive in others. Do that now. Forgive yourself for your failings. Do that now. I mean right now. Forgive others for their failings. Do that. Do that now. Forgive yourself. Forgive others. Let it go.

Cormac McCarthy's novel *All The Pretty Horses*, is about two young boys who set out from their home in Texas to Mexico for adventure in the early fifties. It turns into quite a journey and the book is a lyrical expression of their coming into maturity in a world filled with violence and unkindness, but also a world filled with love and tenderness.

I think McCarthy is an extraordinary writer. There is a great deal of violence in his novels but it is never gratuitous; it is instructive and his writing is of such lyrical skill that his words and rhythms carry you along. His books, though they mostly take place on the border between the modern and pre-modern world are about our world today, about the human condition and the arbitrary nature of our relationships, the accidental nature of our lives. McCarthy is unsparing in his recognition of the darker side of our lives and I find him refreshingly honest; he does not pull punches. What is disarming is the beauty of his language.

All the Pretty Horses is the first part of a trilogy, called *The Border Trilogy*, and while the border is clearly the US-Mexican border [through two novels] the border is also metaphoric - the border between innocence and wisdom, between tragedy and acceptance, between good and evil, between wild and domestic, between primitive and modern - perhaps even the border between atonement and redemption.

The second part of the trilogy is called *The Crossing*. McCarthy tells the story of Billy Parham and his little brother Body in their journey into the wild. The first part of the novel concerns Billy's capture of a she-wolf and his return of the wolf to the Mexican mountains. The second part deals with Billy and Boyd's search for their parents murderers who have escaped into Mexico.

IN the first part of the novel, Billy and his father have been tracking the wolf for some time, unsuccessfully, until Billy finally captures it in a trap. He was able to trap the wolf because he has finally understood her; he sees the world the way she does, and, rather than killing it - which is expected - he sets out, all fourteen years old of him - to return the wolf to Mexico.

He gets some help along the way and it becomes clear that Billy and the wolf establish a sort of understanding, a bond grows though they remain always wary of each other - the wolf is never domesticated. This is not a romance, this novel.

But Billy is captured by bandits, the wolf is captured as well and Billy is sent home. He returns, however, to find the wolf used to fight dogs; the wolf has fought a number of dogs already when the boy arrives and he knows that dogs will be brought continuously until the wolf is herself killed.

He steps into the fight ring and goes and stands by the wolf. He is asked what he is doing and he says that he brought the wolf into Mexico after trapping her in New Mexico; he says that he is the guardian of the wolf and that the wolf does not know anything of boundaries. Billy is told that that is too bad for the wolf because the boundaries are there in any case.

Billy then unties the wolf and stands by it. The person talking to Billy raises his revolver and points it at the wolf, telling Billy to re-tie her. Billy does, knowing that the wolf will be shot if he does not. Billy then walks out of the tent, and the fighting will begin again.

But Billy goes to his own horse, gets his rifle, re-enters the tent and shoots the wolf. He trades the rifle for the wolf's body and takes her to the mountains to bury her in the mountains of her home.

McCarthy understands that we need forgiveness and redeeming, that we are imperfect, that we are finite, that ours is a very flawed world. He says that all acts need witnesses, so Billy is witness to the wolf's freedom and the wolf to Billy's stewardship of her. Billy understands, in a very direct way, that he, as soon as he traps the wolf, is responsible. He has to make some act of forgiveness for trapping the wolf and stealing her freedom. Somehow, he must atone for trapping the wolf - he has, after, violated her freedom, violated her necessity of being; he has trespassed in a deep sense - and that his atonement is to return her to the mountains of her home. In that, he finds redemption; he is forgiven.

The Day of Atonement requires that we do something to make amends. The ancient Israelites had a ritual that symbolically made atonement, but the requirement was that people would change; they would recommit themselves to their covenant.

Redemption is not just given; it is earned; it is earned by how we live. There is no cheap grace in this world just as there is no cheap redemption.

We need deep loyalties in our lives. We need much more than our jobs and much, much more than ourselves. We need loyalties to what is transcendent and holy - to freedom, to truth, to stewardship. This congregation exists to call its members out of themselves into a larger world- to be part of a social contract, to take part in a larger belief system, to be a part of a tradition - to express the courage to be a part of something greater than our own selves.

This chalice we light is a symbol of the light that burns in us all, of the light which burns in the community, of the light of faith that can guide through the dark days of our lives.

These are the days of awe and wonder. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

So may it be. So may it be. Amen