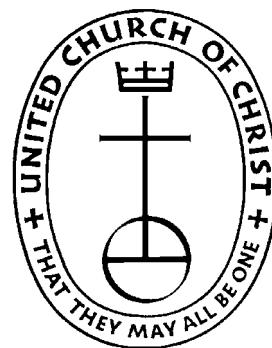


Cultivating the Intention to Practice Forgiveness

A Sermon By —
JERALD M. STINSON
August 1, 2010



This sermon makes four statements about forgiveness: Forgiveness presupposes grieving over the harm that has been done; forgiveness is not forgetting. Forgiveness arises from our understanding of God and the nature of humanity. Forgiveness is a liberating form of cleansing. Forgiveness is a spiritual practice; we must cultivate the intention to engage in that practice.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,
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2010 Jerald M. Stinson

Rev. Jerald Stinson
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Reading: Luke 6:35-37

First Congregational Church
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Cultivating the Intention to Practice Forgiveness

Forgiveness is at the core of Christian theology – our being forgiven by God, and the need for us to forgive ourselves and to forgive others. Forgiveness was at the heart of Jesus' teaching and was integral to the way he lived.

Luke attributes these words to Jesus:

Love your enemies and do good to them. Lend without expecting repayment, and your reward will be great. You'll rightly be called children of the Most High, since God is good even to the ungrateful and the wicked.

Be compassionate, as your loving God is compassionate. Don't judge, and you won't be judged. Don't condemn, and you won't be condemned. Forgive, and you'll be forgiven."

"Forgive and you'll be forgiven." In the prayer of Jesus recorded by Matthew: "Forgive us our debts, O God, as we forgive those indebted to us." In Mark, Jesus told his followers, "When you stand praying, forgive anyone against whom you have a grievance, so that your loving God in heaven may in turn forgive you your faults."

Forgiveness was so important to Jesus, and yet it is so difficult for us to practice.

The lives of two important Jewish leaders recently intersected.

Richard Goldstone, a highly respected South African judge whose rulings helped bring down the apartheid regime, was chief prosecutor of the United Nation's International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. Last year, Goldstone led a United Nations fact-finding mission investigating human rights violations related to the Gaza War. The mission's findings that Israel and Hamas had both committed serious violations led to outrage by those who ardently support Israel. Major portions of the American Jewish community began to vilify Goldstone.

The second figure – Rabbi Michael Lerner, founder of the Network of Spiritual Progressives and editor of *Tikkun* magazine, a journal of Jewish social justice. Lerner announced earlier this year that Tikkun would give Judge Goldstone an award. People were outraged and Lerner was overwhelmed with hate mail.

Prominent law professor and ardent Zionist Alan Dershowitz wrote an inflammatory article in the *Jerusalem Post* criticizing any rabbis supporting Goldstone, saying, "These 'rabbis for Hamas' have no shame and no credibility ... The worst of these rabbis, Michael Lerner," he wrote, "has decided to honor Richard Goldstone with *Tikkun* magazine's 'Ethics Award.'"

A couple days after that article appeared, Rabbi Lerner's Berkeley home was vandalized – signs glued to the house accused him of supporting terror and being an Islamofascist. The Berkeley police called this a "hate crime."

Clearly the vandalism shook up Lerner and his family. More hate mail arrived from Americans who strongly support Israel: "You're worse than Hitler. We are going to kill you," said one. Another, "You are the worst enemy of the Jewish people." Another: "You are vermin and deserve to be exterminated."

Listen to what Rabbi Lerner wrote: "Every night since the attack on my home by right-wing Zionists, I've been saying a prayer of forgiveness for them ... On the spiritual level," he said, "it is very important to not let negativity, even terrorism or violence, get the upper hand by bringing us down to the same level of anger or hatred that motivates those who violently attack or demean the critics of Israel's treatment of Palestine."

He said, "If we are going to build a world of love, we have to constantly work against the impulse to respond to anger and hatred with our own angry, hateful responses. So every night, I work on forgiving those who have assaulted my home, those who publicly demean me and those who spread hatred."

He's right – there is a human impulse that wants retaliation when we are wronged; we desire revenge, an eye for an eye.

But Jesus, the teacher of forgiveness, made it so clear: "You have heard it said of old, 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,' but I say unto you" – and then he offered a whole new ethic of forgiveness and compassion.

Psychologist Victor Frankl said: "Between a stimulus and response, there is space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."

When we are wronged, there is a space in which to choose our response – retaliate or forgive; strike back or show mercy.

Struggling to be forgiving, Lerner gained real wisdom from a workshop led by Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield and Stanford psychologist Fred Luskin. Today, I want

to take some of Kornfield and Luskin's ideas and put them into four statements about practicing forgiveness.

First, forgiveness presupposes grieving over the harm that has been done. Those two workshop leaders emphasized the necessity of honest grieving over harm experienced even as we seek to cultivate the intention to practice forgiveness. "The heart needs to feel its legitimate pain before it can be moved to let it go." Before Rabbi Lerner can honestly forgive those who have and are attacking him he must be honest about the pain he feels, the fear and anxiety.

Honest grieving is critical to being able to forgive. African American novelist James Baldwin said: "I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain." So if you focus on hating one who hurt you, you can numb the pain to some extent, but it won't go away until you deal with it.

A political wonder of the 20th century was South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. People came before that commission seeking amnesty for acts committed while working for the racist apartheid government or acts resisting that government in the freedom fighter movement. The perpetrators of violence had to talk with the victims or victims' families. They had to honestly tell what they had done and why. Commission sessions were incredibly painful, but in order for South Africa to move beyond the agony of its past, it had to deal honestly with that past.

So to forgive is not to forget. There are instances of personal and social evil that must be remembered, lest we repeat those horrors. That's why we remember the agony of Hiroshima and Nagasaki next week. That's why we remember the Nazi holocaust. That's why we remember the massacre in Gaza.

So, the first statement: forgiveness presupposes grieving over the harm that has been done.

A second statement: forgiveness is rooted in progressive Christian understandings of God and the nature of humanity. Poet Dee Dee Risher said: "Our unwillingness to forgive affects our relationship with God because forgiveness is God's nature ... Any probing of forgiveness must start with need. We need forgiveness. And we need to forgive. Forgiveness is not an ethical injunction. Rather, forgiveness lies at the core of the mystery of God. It is a spiritual necessity. It restores our relationships to our community and to God. It releases us from the cycle of evil."

It also reflects our understanding of God in relation to humankind. Liberal Christians talk about original blessing rather than original sin. We speak of a God of unconditional love in whose image each person is made. There is innate goodness in every human being, though sometimes that goodness is buried beneath layers of hurtful behavior. The practice of forgiveness grows out of this sense of our own goodness and of the goodness of all our neighbors. It recognizes each person's innate capacity for wisdom or love. Kornfield and Luskin speak of the capacity for kindness being hardwired into our neural circuitry.

There is a story about a woman attending the trial of a 14-year-old gang member who had murdered her teenage son in a drive-by shooting. As the boy was taken out of the courtroom after sentencing, she coldly looked him in the eye and said, "I'll kill you for what you have done."

Several months later she began visiting the boy in prison, taking him magazines, sitting and talking. Over the next several years she became a regular visitor for this young man who had no one else. As the time approached for his release, he didn't know where he was going to stay. The woman said to him: "You don't have anyone in the world to look after you. You killed my boy, so I don't have anyone at home to take care of. Why don't you stay with me for a while and see how it works out."

The boy accepted. Eventually the woman adopted him, saying, "I told you that day in court that I would kill you. Well, I have. The boy who killed my son no longer exists. I've killed him by being kind. You couldn't kill anyone now the way you did then. And now you can live with me in that boy's place."

Now I don't know whether that story is factually true. But it does point to digging deep to find a core of kindness, of love, of possibility in those around us. That's critical for forgiveness.

Holocaust survivor Elie Weisel said, "Hate comes from seeing the other as a stranger. I believe," he said, "it is possible for you or me or anyone to humanize destiny and give the world a different way to find and understand truth: a way without cruelty, without pain."

My third statement: forgiveness becomes a liberating form of cleansing. Hatred and the desire for revenge fills us with a poison that can turn our lives into a constant nightmare. Fred Luskin, that Stanford psychologist, says not being able to forgive, staying in bitterness, anger and hostility is like drinking a cup of poison and then waiting for the other person to die.

Jack Kornfield told of two prisoners of war being released to return home. One asked the other, "Have you forgiven our captors?" The second one said, "No, I'll never forgive them." The first one replied, "They still have you in prison then, don't they?"

Members of Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation speak of the freedom they find when they give up the desire for the execution of one who killed a family member or friend.

In Israel and Palestine, the Parents' Circle and Family Forum is made up of parents and family members who have lost loved ones in that war-torn part of the Middle East. These are incredible people who give up their thirst for revenge in order to partner with those they previously saw as the enemy. Together, grieving Israeli and Palestinian parents go into schools to speak about peace, about seeing everyone as a child of God.

I am in awe of Nomika Zion, an Israeli in Sderot where the Qassam missiles from Gaza have hit. She refuses to allow bitterness to consume her life; she refuses to give up hope. She co-founded Other Voice, an Israeli group that won't see the people of Gaza as enemies; seeking dialogue and reconciliation instead.

Episcopal writer William Countryman said: "I need to forgive others for the sake of my own well-being. If I refuse to begin the process of forgiveness, I will find myself locked up in the pain of past wrongs. I'll no longer be shaped and determined primarily by the blessings and opportunities of my life, but by the harm someone else has done to me."

Our desire for revenge locks us into our own prison; it fills us with devastating poisonous hatred that can literally destroy our souls – and forgiveness is a liberating form of cleansing.

Now my final statement: forgiveness is a spiritual practice and we must cultivate the intention to engage in that practice. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Forgiveness is not an occasional act; it is a permanent attitude."

Forgiveness is the daily lifelong practice that cuts through layers of hurt and grief in order to replace that poison with compassion and kindness.

Kornfield and Luskin suggest we start practicing where it is easiest – on the dog for tearing up the carpet or a child for spilling something on the kitchen floor. We must practice forgiving ourselves for losing our cool in rush hour traffic or forgetting to pay the phone bill on time. Then we can "broaden and build" –practicing forgiveness in more challenging situations or with more challenging people where the stakes get higher. They say that life is full of "forgiveness moments," big and small where we can

practice over and over remaining open-hearted.

Four statements then:

- Forgiveness presupposes grieving over the harm that has been done. Forgiveness is not forgetting.
- Forgiveness arises from our understanding of God and the nature of humanity.
- Forgiveness is a liberating form of cleansing.
- Forgiveness is a spiritual practice. We must cultivate the intention to engage in that practice.

William Countryman said: "Forgiveness derives from God's life flowing into us, leading us to grow and mature in God's love. If we let ourselves think of forgiveness merely in terms of rules and duty, we've missed the boat. We want to forgive, we need to forgive, and we can forgive – not because we ought to, but because forgiveness is a source of life and joy for us."

Struggling to forgive expands our hearts and draws us closer to God, the ground of our being.

Sheila Cassidy, a victim of torture in Chile, said: "When I wrestle with forgiveness, I find myself against a wall of mystery. Frankly I do not understand forgiveness. I know only that it is something very holy, very healing and quite simply a gift of God."

May each of us cultivate the intention to practice that holy, healing gift of God – the gift of forgiveness.