

What Will You Do With Your Second Chance?

A sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen Rolenz

Sunday, October 2, 2022

Unity Church Unitarian – St. Paul, MN

Have you ever been given a second chance? Another opportunity to make something right? You could say my job as an Interim Minister is all about second chances, because in every church I have served, I have made mistakes - and I have always been given a chance to own up to those mistakes – and begin again – with the same congregation, but generally within two years, with a new congregation, where I can remember and apply the learnings from my past mistakes. I have been grateful for second chances throughout my life – the chance to go back and live with my parents when I needed to figure out my next steps; the chance to break a cycle of addiction or habit which had long outlived any purpose it once served.

Life gives us second chances all the time, and sometimes those second chances aren't moral decisions – they are occasions of grace. We wait for the biopsy results and it turns out the tumor is benign or, we are given life-saving medical interventions that buy us more time to spend with loved ones and to consider how we wish to spend the time we have. We lose a beloved spouse or partner and, against all odds, find love again – or find meaning and pleasure in our lives as a single person. We get a second chance to begin again.

There is a longing in all of us who share the human condition, a longing to be in right relationship with ourselves, with our families and our communities, and with the universe itself. If there is wisdom in the ancient Biblical story of an original sin, it can be found in the way that this story mythically identifies this feeling of being separated from our original blessing. Whenever we make a mistake, whenever we do harm, with or without intention, all of us experience that longing, and all of us welcome an opportunity for a second chance, a chance to make it right, a chance to restore right relationship once again. Most faiths have created ritual ways of addressing this longing and inviting restoring right relationship as a spiritual practice, and today we are approaching that ritual day in the Jewish liturgical calendar, Yom Kippur, the day of Atonement. Yom Kippur asks of us something very personal and particular – the chance to repair a relationship when we either ask for forgiveness or offer forgiveness to one another. Yom Kippur invites us to reflect on the very difficult and challenging task involved when we break covenant with our human community.

Most Unitarian Universalist congregations remember and honor these High Holy Days of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur and many will speak today the words in our hymnal written by your Minister Emeritus Rob Eller-Isaacs “We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again....” I know you're wanting me to complete the phrase which you've said many times “we begin again in love,” but forgiveness is not an instant process and it doesn't usually begin in love. In that respect I am with Valarie Kaur whose reading we just quoted. I can't seek or offer forgiveness as a spiritual leap based in faith, the way some families at Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston were able to do.

When I was serving as the interim minister at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis, a gunman entered the Capital Gazette newspaper room and killed five people. One of those persons whom he murdered, was Wendi Winters, a long-time and much beloved member of the church. She was on my Search Committee; she insisted that I give blood for the Red Cross drive she organized every year, she was a force of nature. And I, unlike those families from the Mother Emmanuel Church, who looked Dylan Roof in the eye and forgave him, I could not forgive the man who did this. The devastation to the church community and to the City of Annapolis was palpable. It has taken me a long time to stop hating him, to let go of the hate that poisons the soul. The experience made me realize more deeply the Jewish wisdom that forgiveness is a two-way street. It is a process that requires something of both the perpetrator of harm and the victim of harm. Yom Kippur provides a path so that we may, one day, with practice, begin again in love.

I can't force myself to love – but I can commit to engage in an on-going practice and process of forgiveness. If Yom Kippur is the spiritual Season of Second Chances, then I am encouraged by what they call this process in Hebrew - “t'suvha” – turning. Much has been written and you have no doubt heard before sermons that describe the steps in this “turning” process. In my own life, I remember the steps with three words: Reckoning, Remorse and Repair.

When we inflict harm on each other, unintentionally or sometimes intentionally, having a second chance has to involve your own reckoning, your own awareness of the harm done; a confession and expression of remorse to the person or people harmed, and an attempt to repair the harm done and restore what we call right relationship. I want to look at each one of these – because it is not uncommon for us to take just one or two of these steps and feel spiritually satisfied that we have done well with our second chance.

A reckoning is the awareness that we have harmed another person by our words or by our deeds. It's the lightbulb in the head; or the feeling in the gut that something is not right, or maybe the shame or anger we feel when person we've harmed has the courage to tell us directly.

I recall vividly an experience of reckoning I had early in my career as a minister. Twenty-five years ago I was serving my first congregation in Knoxville, TN. and I began attending an ecumenical group of clergy who were doing faith-based organizing, all of whom were African American. Throughout the course of the year, we built a relationship of trust and mutual support. Mid-year, the clergy group decided to host an interfaith service honoring the Dr. Martin Luther King holiday. The date was quickly approaching and we hadn't made any firm decisions about the shape of the service. I became impatient with the slow nature of the group process, so finally I said to group: “Look, I don't mean to be slave driver here, but we've got to make some decisions pretty soon.” The room fell silent for a moment for a moment, and then one minister with whom I was building a meaningful friendship continued on to discuss the service, without challenging me, and without excluding me from the conversation.

I didn't even realize what I had said until later when the memory came up in an anti-racist training session about micro-aggressions ! I felt deeply ashamed of how clueless I had been about this remark and, I realized, many other expressions I had used over a time that were an expression of white supremacy culture. It was an important time of reckoning for me in my own self-understanding of what it means to be part of a white dominant group.

So what do we do with this reckoning? Sometimes our first response is shrouded in defensiveness. In order to make those feelings go away, we offer sham apologies. I'm sorry – BUT.We try to excuse our behavior. We protest our innocence. We try to shift the blame to the other person. But if we dig deeper, we know that those attempts will not restore right relationship. In fact, they make things worse. A reckoning begins with an acknowledgement of the damage done, and that we – not somebody else - have caused that harm.

That's really hard. I think about why it's hard for me and it's because it means I'm not perfect. It means that I have to acknowledge how capable I am of causing harm Many of you will likely have heard Rev. Rob preach on the Hindu phrase "Tat Tvan Asi" which is Sanskrit for "I Am That Too." If you weren't there for a sermon, you probably noticed that phrase on Rob's license plate! It is a sobering reality to realize that each one of us is capable of goodness and generosity and love -- and each one of us is capable of intemperate speech, of hurtful anger, and yes, of evil actions. In our anti-racism work white people discover the ways in which we are born into the waters of white supremacy culture and that has a profound impact on what we think, say, and how we act.

I knew that I needed to express remorse and regret for the remark I had made, and I sought out the friend and colleague who had in a way let me off the hook during that meeting to express my remorse privately. I took the second step in the process of turning, the step of confession and remorse, face to face. I was grateful that that my colleague offered me his forgiveness, but looking back on it now, it was all too quick and easy. He said to me: "You know, I have to deal with that kind of thing all the time". He said: "I know you have a good heart". He told me that this one outburst had not damaged my relationship with colleagues I had grown to cherish. So I was quickly given a second chance at continuing these relationships – and yet, I never finished the process of t'shuva with that group. I never explored what it might mean to repair the breach I had created with the whole group.

Repair, as we say here at Unity Church, is "complicated". It's complicated interpersonally and it's complicated collectively. When it comes to white supremacy culture it leads us into a deep conversation about reparations, but that's a conversation for another sermon.

Interpersonally and in congregational life, it may not be immediately obvious after there has been a reckoning and an expression of remorse what it would look like to repair. This is where we have to remember the wisdom that atonement and forgiveness is a two-way street. I told you earlier that I have made mistakes in every single congregation I have served. I have hurt people unintentionally – sometimes, I'm ashamed to say – intentionally. I have committed sins of omission and commission. As I was thinking about today's sermon, I wondered "what

mistake will I make at Unity? Will I not make the same mistake again?" In each congregation, I have also encountered generous hearted church members who, when asked for their forgiveness, granted it and never held my mistakes against me. Repair came because we were able to continue to work together on projects that were meaningful to both of us and to the church. There was a mutual trust that the learning from the breach in covenant was authentic and that the desire to begin again in love was sincere.

When someone give you a second chance to do better, it changes you. It breaks your heart open a bit and it makes you more likely to extend that second chance to someone who has hurt you. Earlier this month, your Board President and I met with Rev. Ashley Horan. Many of you know Ashley. She grew up in and is a member of, this church, found her calling to ministry and was ordained by Unity. She, like many others, spoke up at the May 22 Congregational Meeting prior to the vote to affirm the candidate for Senior Minister. As I continue to process with you the impact of that vote and of the meeting itself, it became clear to me that for some, Ashley's words were hurtful. So Louise and I asked Ashley to reflect on her comments and write a letter to the Board of Trustees. I'm not going to share the entire letter with you this morning, but an excerpt; and I do this with the Board President and Ashley's permission.

Board President Louise Livesay and Interim Senior Minister Rev. Kathleen Rolenz recently invited me into conversation to discuss my participation in the congregational meeting on May 22. They asked me to share my intentions in speaking publicly that day, and I listened as they described the concern, hurt, and anger that several people experienced in the wake of my comments. I heard clearly in that conversation that my words felt like rebuke and shaming, coming not from me as an individual but from a clergyperson and the UUA itself. ... I made a serious mistake in not anticipating that my words at the Congregational Meeting would carry such weight and be experienced as coming from the institution for which I work. I acknowledge and regret this significant miscalculation, and I sincerely apologize for the hurt and distress my comments contributed to the situation."

Forgiveness is a two way street. We first must acknowledge the harm we caused with the realization that forgiveness may not be granted to us immediately. Depending on the level of harm and whether the breach this harm caused is irredeemable. But the person who was harmed also has a role and responsibility in this process. In Judaism, if a person comes to you in humility and with complete sincerity fully acknowledges the harm, offers or does make amends and asks for your forgiveness – this is now where the burden of forgiveness shifts to YOU. In Judaism, God lays the responsibility of releasing YOU from the burden of your hardness of heart – on you. That is an important part of Repair.

For me, the process of t'shuva, of reckoning, remorse, and repair offer a powerful alternative to what we see happening all around us among states and within our nation: blaming. In most situations of conflict, it seems our easiest response is to locate blame. Blame is different from accountability. Blame points the finger. Accountability starts with the reckoning instead. Sometimes I am to blame; sometimes you are to blame; but sometimes there are conflicts or

tragedies in which no one is to blame. Who is to blame when siblings discover their childhood bonds do not sustain them in adulthood? Who to blame when a marriage ends, not because of abuse, or addiction or infidelity, but the gradual growing apart of two lovely people? Who's to blame, for example, when I discovered my punk rock friend from college that I hadn't kept up with entertained the idea of becoming a Proud Boy and is a Trump supporter. How is this possible? Who should I blame?

In ancient Israel, they had a ritual way of assigning blame which was once a part of this season of Yom Kippur. They would pick a goat from among the people; the priest would wash himself pure, lay his hands on the goat, and in that laying on of hands, put all the peoples sins – all their mistrust, all their hatred and misdeeds – the priest would take them on himself and then transfer them to the goat. And then, the goat would be led down the center of the town, and people would jeer and throw mud and stones at the goat as it passed by, therefore transferring their guilt onto the goat. The goat would be led outside the walled gates and sent out to wander in the wilderness, presumably to die and with it, the people's sins for that year. This is, of course, where we got the word "scapegoat" because it is in our human nature to want to shift blame from ourselves; from situations beyond our control; to others who have wronged us.

The ancient Israelites knew something of human nature – that we want to place blame on something. But the contemporary practice of t'shuva is more sophisticated than that. It asks us to construct a narrative of our life together; who we are – who the other person is – and not just about what happened. What if we said "I don't want to tell you what happened. I want to tell you how it felt." I think we're learning that the facts are less knowable than our feelings. What we feel – and what we do with those feelings – are the path to forgiveness. You hurt me. I hurt you. I'm sorry. You deserved better from me. These are hard things to say – and sometimes even harder to hear, when I am not ready to forgive. When my ego has been bruised; when my sense of rightness about the world challenged; when I am ashamed or embarrassed about my own human failings.

When we give each other a second chance, I think it's the closest thing to heaven I'll ever experience, because it feels clean and light. I don't walk through my days with that heaviness of heart – of this wound taking up so much space in heart and mind. If there's a goat I want to send out into the wilderness, not to die there, it's that wound of resentment and blame in my heart. Long ago I gave up the idea that Heaven is a place where I'll go when I die. Instead I understand it's a feeling we can share in the here and now. It's a feeling of connection and community; it's the feeling of knowing and being known, and being loved not in spite of our failings but because of them. It's what we are longing for in our covenant to create the beloved community. It's what we find when we give ourselves and each other a second chance to begin again in love.