



Forgiveness

The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our own faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community.

Forgiveness is one of those words spoken more often than it is genuinely understood, perhaps because it involves much more than we want to admit. We say “forgive and forget” as if amnesia could be a key to the healing we desire, but we are wise to remember that forgiveness is no simple act of erasure. It is a challenging and transformative practice aimed more at the future than it is at an unchangeable past.

In Biblical teachings, no fewer than six words are employed to signify the healing work of forgiveness. In Hebrew, *nasa* refers to the lifting of a burden, *salach*, to sparing, as of a prisoner’s life, and *kaphar* to the theologically intricate constellation of atonement. In Greek, two words, *aphiemi* and *apolo*, both refer to letting go, while *charizomai* suggests an interaction leavened by grace that makes way for renewed relationship.

What do we mean when we use the word *forgive*? Can one word actually be spacious, agile, and strong enough to carry all of the above meanings?

We might begin by noticing that our English word, like its counterparts in Spanish and French, is built on what is *given*. Forgiveness cannot be demanded or even negotiated, but rather is granted or given by the one harmed. (Yes, we sometimes need to forgive ourselves, but mainly when the harm we’ve inflicted has been on *us*.)

It can also be helpful to note that forgiveness does not change anything in the past but truthfully acknowledges what has occurred in a way that opens the possibility for something new to unfold in the future. If it lifts a burden, it does so not by denying its heft but by shifting how the weight of the past is carried forward. If it is about letting go,

it is not about releasing the past beyond reach of recall, but rather releasing the future from repeating the patterns of the past. True forgiveness honors past suffering while offering a pivot point from which we might move on in an entirely new direction.

Finally, as the Greek word *charizomai* notes, forgiveness is relational and a tool of liberation. As we work to address and heal the world’s injustices, oppressive systems, and violence, forgiveness offers a way to remain engaged with one another *despite our failings* and the injuries they cause. Certainly, not every relationship can be healed. What then might free our relationship with the future from the patterns of oppression that have shaped us all, if not forgiveness and the compassion it springs from?

“Forgiveness,” the saying goes, “means giving up all hope of a better past.” By doing that, it creates a new hope for a different and better future.

No single path or act or five-step program makes this deep work possible. Forgiveness is a posture more than a gesture, an orientation more than a deed, a practice rather than a creed.

The Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg was leading a guided meditation on forgiveness in Israel, when she noticed a participant shifting frequently during the meditation, unable to hold still. Afterwards, he approached her and confessed he was overwhelmed by the forgiveness practice. He explained that he had recently survived a terrorist attack and was still in pain from buckshot that could not be removed from his body. He was not sure he could learn to forgive, he told her. But, he added, he believed it was both possible and necessary to learn to stop hating.

Each of us is likely living with the pain of some emotional shrapnel that cannot be removed. For any number of reasons, it may not be the right time to forgive. But what shifting might lift our burden? What spiritual practices might release our future from the patterns of a painful past, and what renewed relationships might be possible when we engage those practices? What postures might open the possibility of forgiveness, or at the very least an end to hatred or resentment?

“What we are developing,” writes adrienne maree brown, “is not a more perfect way of walking, but a more forgiving and compassionate way of dancing.” Will we join that dance, as transformative and revolutionary as it might be?

From Associate Minister Karen Hering on behalf of this month's theme team:

Ahmed Anzaldúa, Janne Eller-Isaacs, Rob Eller-Isaacs, Lisa Friedman, KP Hong

Forgiveness Theme Resources

BOOKS

No Future without Forgiveness by Desmond Tutu

Four Ways to Forgiveness, short stories by Ursula K. Le Guin

Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince by J.K. Rowling

I'm Sorry, children’s book by Sam McBratney, illustrated by Jennifer Eachus

"A Case for Reparations," article by Ta Nehisi-Coates

MOVIES

Lady Bird (2017)

The Tale of Despereaux (2008), based on the children's book by Kate DiCamillo