

“Forgiving Not Forgetting”

**A Sermon by
The Reverend Bill Clark**

Friday evening at sunset marked the beginning of the Jewish Holy Day of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. It is the holiest day in the Jewish calendar year. On this day the belief is that God opens the Book of Life and, after examining people’s lives and their repentance of the previous ten days, beginning with Rosh Hashanah, God writes a final decision on their future. The book is then closed until the next year. The Yom Kippur greeting is, “Have a good signature.” May God note your repentance, your reconciliation and inscribe your name in the book of life.

Rabbi Lieberman, of the Falmouth Jewish Congregation on Cape Cod, summarizes the High Holy Days as follows; “The intervening days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are characterized by the **obligation** to do the work of turning one’s life around. There is intense introspection and attempts to reconcile one’s failings in the past with one’s desire to be a better human being in the New Year.”

Two of the central themes of these ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, or the Days of Awe, are forgiveness and reconciliation. Every Jewish person is expected to spend time in serious self-examination to

reconcile the past so they may look ahead to the future and see what other things the days have to (offer) give them.

Young Patrick grew up in an urban neighborhood. It was there he was taught these lessons of forgiveness and reconciliation. He was taught them by his sister's elegant and stately piano teacher, Mrs. Boutellon. Patrick was very young, first grade or so when he had a run in with some, as he described them, "second grade thugs." They had run by and pushed him face first into a snow bank. Not really a life threatening encounter. But surely a great indignity at that age and he sat there on the stoop crying great tears of outrage, anger and frustration. Mrs. Boutellon had witnessed the incident from her upstairs window. She came down and collected young Patrick from the stoop, brushing away the snow and tears from his face. She brought him up to her kitchen for a cup of hot cocoa and fussed over him and cared for him in a way that seemed to right the world again for this young first grader. "You are angry at these boys for what they did to you, Patrick, and it is natural for you to feel that way. But now you must let it go. This day has other things to give you." (2x)

When Patrick grew up, grew up to become a UU minister, and related his encounter with his neighbor, Mrs. Boutellon, to his mother she added; "that

sounds just like her. You know don't you that the Boutellons were both survivors of the Nazi death camps in the War? Patrick didn't know.

This day has other things to give you? Imagine hearing this from a survivor of the concentration camps? This day has other things to give you.

Besides the hurts and indignities of an unfair world, this day has other things to give you. Besides the anger that you want to carry in your heart for all the wrongs done to you...this day has other things to give you. If you are ready to let go of your anger, to forgive the past events, this day has other things to give you!

The beautiful lesson taught here to young Patrick is the simple and difficult lesson of forgiveness. To intentionally move from the place of woundedness, letting go of the woundedness, letting go of the hurt feelings we harbor from the woundedness and leaving it in our past in order to receive the gifts of the future.

Forgiveness. It is never an easy task. It is never an effortless endeavor. Yet it is a necessary movement from a place of pain, anger and brokenness to a place of healing, health and wholeness. Forgiveness.

I can recall in my first years of ministry telling members of the congregations I was serving that as their minister I would never say to them

that one must forgive. That forgiveness was not absolutely necessary. And yet, now as I have become older and hopefully gain some more wisdom along this journey of life, I believe that forgiveness is absolutely and positively necessary.

And I say this because the act of forgiveness is at the very center of its reasoning, an act of self-respect, an act of self-love and an act of self-care. Forgiveness is **not** about doing something for someone else. Forgiveness is **not** about releasing someone else from his or her words, deeds or actions. Forgiveness is solely about doing a loving and healing action for one self. It is a gift to one self. It is the permission we give ourselves to let go of the pain of the past to see what the days in the future have to give us. It is letting go of the pain so that pain does not define us for the future.

Imagine for a moment that someone has said something to you, perhaps said hateful words of abuse. Or even worst their actions were painful, harmful actions of abuse. And you say, I will never forgive you as long as I live. I will never forgive you as long as I live. Who are you harming? This person harmed you; hurt you and now they are gone. Their words or actions happened once. And now for your entire whole life you hold on to these actions or words. And in so doing the abuse continues and continues. Your

anger continues and continues. Who are you harming? Who are you hurting?
Not the person who said these hateful and harmful things. They are gone.
You are the one still being harmed. You are the one still being hurt.

Forgiveness is letting all that go. Forgiveness is releasing those feelings of anger and pain, releasing them out of love and care for yourself. Why should I carry these words of abuse around with me any longer? This was an ignorant person who said these things to me. Why should I feel anger towards an ignorant person? All I can feel is compassion. They are ignorant. May they see the light amidst their darkness of ignorance. With this change the feelings you have generated are not ones of anger or animosity. They are of love and compassion. This is forgiveness.

Now forgiveness is not forgetting. We do not forget these words or actions. But we do not hold to them either so they begin to define us and control us. Forgiveness means I will not be nailed to a spot in the past from which I can never move again. Yes, these words or actions were done to me. But I release them so I may see what other things, the day and my life have to give me.

Within my own journey of life, as I look back and face the indignities and wounds of my past, I do not forget the terrible childhood abuses which were done to me. I do not and cannot forget them. They were horrific. But, I do move forward, I must move forward to a place of forgiveness because I am worth it. My actions of forgiveness are actions of self-respect, self-care and self-love. I will not allow my past to define my present. This reconciliation. This is Forgiveness.

Was this easy work? No, not at all. Was it necessary work? Absolutely. In forgiving the perpetrators of my childhood sexual abuse I release the hold they once had over me. I released the anger, sorrow and pain and literally felt it leave my body. I felt free! Forgiveness is about freedom. It is about moving from a place where one is shackled to the pains of the past and moving towards that place of agape, love seeking to preserve and create, to preserve and create a place of human love, care and community. “Forgiveness does not wipe away guilt, but invites reconciliation.”

As we begin our work of creating that place of agape, that place of human love, care and community, let us invite reconciliation and forgiveness as our companions in this process. As we journey through this life many of us may

have experienced feelings of woundedness, feelings of anger, resentment, ill-will or animosity. Perhaps these are feelings leftover from childhood events, abusive memories or situations. Perhaps these are current feelings from adult experiences, difficult relationships, grief or loss. Perhaps these are feelings connected with this very church, your own religious and spiritual home. Whatever the feelings, wherever the events occurred, this is the day that has been given to us to turn our lives around. To turn from the pain of the past, to face the future with wholeness and hallowedness, because this day, this place, your life as better things to give you.

Rabbi Karyn Kedar writes in her book, God Whispers:

“It is called forgiveness because you give away anger and resentment. To surrender your anger is not to capitulate, or to lose ground or to give in. Surrender to a softer place, a place of peace, not strife. At this moment of surrender, you realize the beauty of your own path. That it was not only the obvious blessing that helped your life emerge, but also the struggle. When anger is replaced by forgiveness, you are free to let love guide your life.”

My friends, I invite you to let love guide your life this morning. I invite you to a time of self-examination, reconciliation and forgiveness.

In front of the pulpit you see this table. I am going to invite you this morning to participate in a ritual of reconciliation and forgiveness. Ritual is a powerful tool that helps to take concepts out of the intellectual framework, our heads, and make them into living, breathing values and moves them onto our hearts.

Now this time is not a public pronouncement of any hurt or harm. Rather it is a time of silent reflection, examination and invitation to reconcile the pain of the past with the light of hope for the future.

The movement of this ritual is as follows. In a few moments, music will fill this Chapel – Samuel Barber’s Adagio for strings. I invite you to spend sometime in quiet reflection on perhaps a person, event, feelings that are weighing heavy like a rock or stone on your heart and soul. These may be feelings of anger, resentment, ill will or animosity toward a person or place. These may be feelings that you have carried around long enough and are ready to let them go. These may be feelings of hurt or harm that either intentionally or unintentionally you have caused....and seeking forgiveness.

Then as you are moved to do so, I invite you to come forward to the table, take a rock, symbolizing the weight of these feelings, hold it in your hand and heart and then with intention move to let it go into the vase of water. Let it go into the water – releasing the heaviness of heart, mind and soul.

Water also symbolizing the cleansing of ones heart, and the movement of turning toward the new.

From here, move forward to light a candle. This candle symbolizes the light of forgiveness, whether you are seeking forgiveness or offering it. Perhaps saying to yourself, "I forgive you or I am sorry." Then simply return to your seat and let the invitation of forgiveness, reconciliation, peace and harmony be with you.

This is our ritual this morning. It is an invitation for reconciliation and forgiveness into our lives.

May love guide your life towards this place of forgiveness, this place of peace and this place of release. Forgiveness is an act of self-love and self care. Do it for yourself. Do it. Invite the power of agape, the power of love to heal your wounds and give you the gift of forgiveness. Do it so we may give our world a better chance of survival. May you all have a good signature in the book of Life.

Blessed be.