

Mending the Broken Places

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

March 5, 2017

Readings

The Quintessential Story of Forgiveness (paraphrased from Luke 15:11-32)

Jesus told this story:

A man had two sons. The younger asked his father for his portion of the estate. His father gave it to him, and not long after, the son took his money and left. He wasted it on riotous living. And then there was a famine and times were really hard. He was hungry and homeless, and decided – eventually – to return home and ask his father for a job, any job. He would admit that he made mistakes, and would work at whatever his father offered, however menial.

But his father saw him coming home from a distance and ran out to greet him, and brought him nice clothes and gave him a big hug and a kiss and planned a big picnic with great food.

I thought my son was gone forever, the father said. He was lost and now is found.

The older brother was not convinced. He was actually pretty unhappy. He thought he had done all the right things, and his father had never thrown such a great party for him.

But the father said, “Look – everything I have is yours. But we thought your brother was gone, and now he’s back. Lost and found. Let’s celebrate.”

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Paraphrasing the Buddhaghosa – a 5th century Indian Buddhist scholar:

“Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; YOU are the one getting burned.”

Mending the Broken Pieces

the Rev. Anne Bancroft

Wild Geese, Mary Oliver

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about your despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

. . . your place in the family of things.

This is our struggle – finding our place, as individuals, as communities – finding our place and the meaning of it all.

We are a curious lot, we Unitarian Universalists. A mentor of mine used to remark that we are, after all, the land of misfit toys. (I think that's from "Toy Story.") We are too independently minded to be defined by unifying creed or dogma, but also crave – as human beings do – the connections, the wholeness, that we might find in community. And, we are seekers – of truth, of justice, but mostly seekers, whether we are conscious of it or not – of the capacity that allows us to freely love what it loves – to let the soft animal of our bodies love what they love.

That is no small task. The soft animal of our bodies is a vulnerable place: an open, exposed and risk-laden place, that we might get to experience every now and again but usually only with those most trusted otherwise . . . oh, we protect ourselves out of fear, or experience. Like a night-blooming cereus – the exquisite blossom that shows itself in the safety of darkness and closes with the dawn – we

humans retreat from the exposing light of day and cover the soft spaces, and in our defensiveness, in our protection and our isolation, we make mistakes, and we offend. How can we not? We have closed ourselves to love.

Consider the postures of the father and the brother in our parable this morning. The prodigal son returns, and the father's arms are open wide – exposing the soft animal of his body, loving what it loves. We know nothing about this human other than that. And the brother is closed, self-protected, safe from hurt, and alone, and – we imagine – holding the piece of hot coal in his scarred hand.

Years ago, somewhere in the midst of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, our tradition – as partners in the primarily Western liberal religious movement – effected a cultural transformation. Somewhere in the midst of the time of the Enlightenment, liberal religion rejected the theological construct of original sin. Let me share an example of how that influenced our fellow religionists. When I was growing up in the Episcopal church, we shared together every Sunday a General Confession, which included: “ALMIGHTY and most merciful Father; We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us.” It was Augustine who bequeathed that concept to Christianity in the late 4th and 5th centuries – the idea that we were all born with the depravity of Adam and Eve's fall, and that Jesus took on that burden in order to absolve us all, else his sacrifice would have been for naught.

The gift of our liberal inclinations to the more traditional and dogmatic environments like the Episcopal church is that the line, “there is no health in us,” is no longer a part of the General Confession!

This is a gift of liberalism to the more conservative church – a good gift. Now, one confesses their shortcomings without the burden of original and unearned ailing.

But as theologian James Luther Adams reminds us¹, “not all the fruits issuing from the new movement were actually intended or expected by its proponents. . . . religious liberalism, in the name of *intellectual* integrity, tended to neglect the deeper levels both of the human consciousness and of reality itself.”

We do not confess anything to anyone in this church as a regular part of our collective practice or liturgy. We have eschewed words like “sin.” We have appealed to our capacity for **reason**, often in lieu of emotion, those “deeper levels of the human consciousness” that Adams refers to. In our efforts to avoid the problematic trappings of religious construct – heavily loaded rituals and creedal professions – we have narrowed the range of acceptable imaginative expression, or so broadened it that it has few

¹ Adams, James Luther. “The Changing Reputation of Human Nature,” in **The Essential James Luther Adams**: Boston, Skinner House Books, 1998, p. 58-59.

useful particulars, and there has been a cost. It feels that we have folded our arms in, protecting the soft animals of our bodies from exposure, even as we have shaken ourselves loose from theological judgements. What have we lost? I wonder if it is too often the engagement of our hearts with our frailties, our tender and vulnerable broken places.

If we do not acknowledge our mistakes, as a discipline, how are we forgiven? And how do we practice forgiving ourselves, or each other? How does the heart mend? Our own, or someone else's?

It is not shameful to be imperfect. It is human.

A former colleague of mine had a picture on his wall of a teacup – pristine and whole. “I know this cup is already broken,” it read, “and so I love it immensely.”

It is the nature of our human existence to be slightly broken already, to varying degrees disconnected. The only problem is when we try to pretend we're not, when we – like the brother – close our arms to protect our hearts, leaving only our heads to explain away our foibles, or think our ways through our disconnections: when we relegate to the mind what the heart feels. The head rationalizes, the heart experiences: I have done things I shouldn't have; I have left undone things I should have done. I'm sorry.

I was reading a sermon called “Faith's Vital Balance,” by the Rev. Harry Hoehler – who was minister at the Weston Unitarian Universalist congregation that was so helpful to Theodore Parker Church in the 80's, providing ministry and funding and congregational assistance. He describes a scene from a book called *Pilgrimage of Buddhism*, by then Williams College professor, James Bissett Pratt. Pratt was visiting a monastery in China. “In a Buddhist temple such as this, one seems transported to another world. . . . in such a setting the chanting of Buddha's praises by the monks seems something eternally appropriate. Long before dawn it begins . . . the last coming at the end of the evening. [As the gongs join in chorus] the gray figure of a monk appears, crossing the lower court in the moonlight and climbing the broad marble staircase before the temple; others silently follow, . . . one by one, swimming through the luminous darkness. One of them opens the temple doors, lights the candles on the altar and the incense sticks. The other monks steal in after him through the moon beams and the shadows. They bow and prostrate themselves . . . and the chanting begins.”

Contrast this, Hoehler writes, with a Unitarian Universalist service he attended in California: a plain meeting hall, no hymns, prayers, or readings. The program consisted of a lively debate over recent denominational resolutions, and there were announcements; then, a discussion about how best to assist in a local justice project. A handshake closed the service. He was assured that “during the fall, winter and spring months soloists and poetry readings were ‘worked into’ the service.”²

² Hoehler, Harry H., “Faith's Vital Balance,” **A Faith for All Seasons**. USA (privately printed), 1994, p. 1-2.

We are somewhere in between these two extremes, I think – with more color and music than our California cousins, but little prostrate practice among us that I have noticed. It's not that one is right and one is wrong, nor even preferable, but Hoehler's point is that each is incomplete without the other. Bowing to the mystery does not change the world as we know it; neither does attending to service alone move our hearts to new levels of wonder, humility, or compassion on its own.

We are considering forgiveness this month as a pathway to wholeness that we Unitarian Universalists often neglect – not a pathway to perfection, but to a repaired sense of being. When we recognize the places of our falling short, and love ourselves anyway; when we see the hurt caused by another, and love them anyway, our arms begin to unfold, to gradually expose the soft animals of our bodies, loving – even in our brokenness – loving what we love immensely.

Someone asked me once if I didn't believe that prayers need a recipient. Don't we need to pray TO something or someone? No. I don't believe so. One can, of course, but it's not a requirement. Prayers are for opening OUR hearts. The conversation is with the life force within ourselves, the spirit that animates us, that gives us being in this particular time and place. Similarly, forgiveness, which comes as a humble function of the acceptance that we are lovable and we are made to be loved, arrives to us. Every tie of I'm sorry and I forgive you binds us closer to that truth. It is a release more than a petition.

I have been re-reading a book by Marilynne Robinson called *Gilead* recently. It is the writing of an elder minister reviewing his life in the form of a letter to his young child. Much of it engages with forgiveness, which is why I chose to re-read it just now. The main character, John Ames, has a lifelong friend who is also a minister, and nearing the end of his life, and not quite up to his former tricks. "If Boughton could be himself, he would utterly pardon every transgression, past, present, and to come, whether or not it was a transgression in fact or his to pardon. He would be that extravagant. That is a thing I would love to see."³

He would be that extravagant – like the father with arms stretched wide; maybe like someone with a very short string from the practice of apology and forgiveness. That extravagant.

Where do you practice forgiveness in your life? How do you come to it? It's a question we need to ask ourselves more often, I think.

And with it, the word grace comes to mind - mysterious and ethereal, with no earthly tether. Grace arrives, bidden or not, when we practice humility, awareness, apology. Grace lands on our hearts like love, forgiving us and reminding us of our potential for extravagant pardon, of our capacity to expose the soft animal of our bodies to love what we love, and find our place in the family of things.

It bears more practice such that our prodigal natures, when lost, are found.

³ Robinson, Marilynne. *Gilead*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004, p. 238.