

The Unitarian Church of Montpelier  
September 27, 2009  
Rev. Mara J. Dowdall

“Five Simple Words”

I want to start this morning by going back to Barbara Marshman’s story “What if Nobody Forgave?”<sup>1</sup>

When it opens, the people of Grudgeville are in a bad way, aren’t they? Their burdens are heavy. Their spirits are low. Their backs are aching from the weight of all the grudges they carry. But then, a miracle takes place. An old woman arrives and gives them the secret to make their burdens disappear. “All you need to know are five simple words,” she tells them. “Say them to each other and mean them—and soon your burdens will disappear.”

So, the desperate Grudgevillians do as she says, and just as she predicted—magic! Their grudges disappear. The townspeople can stand up straight—and even more, they can see and interact with their neighbors. There is dancing in the streets; and soon Grudgeville earns a new name: Joytown!

The day the old woman visits them, the townspeople experience a moment of salvation on earth. They are saved from their sad and downward spiral by their visitor and the lesson she teaches them.

But even more to the point, they are saved when they find the courage to say to one another the five simple words—“I’m sorry; I forgive you.” Put another way, they are saved by those dual and ancient spiritual practices that, from the dawn of human history, have gone hand in hand: repentance and forgiveness.

*No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own, wrote Reinhold Niebuhr, therefore, we are saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness.*<sup>2</sup>

Thankfully, from what I can tell, Montpelier and the other towns from which those of us in this church come are pretty far from Grudgeville—and, in many respects, are arguably more like Joytown.

But even if we are lucky enough NOT to live in a place where people roam around all day stooped over from the weight of our grudge-filled backpacks, I think each of us can still imagine what the townspeople in our story feel like when the wise woman arrives.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Marshman, “What if Nobody Forgave,” in *What if Nobody Forgave and Other Stories*, Colleen McDonald, editor (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2003), 89-90.

<sup>2</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, in *Singing the Living Tradition* #461, (Boston: UUA, 1993)

We can imagine it because each of us knows what it is to carry some kind of intangible burden around with us. And more often than not, I think, the emotional luggage we cart around with us is of the sort that can only be made to disappear with some combination of those five simple words:

I'm—sorry—I—forgive—you.

I chose the theme of forgiveness for today's service to honor Yom Kippur, the culmination of the High Holy Days. On this Day of Atonement, Jews stand before God and acknowledge how they have fallen short or done wrong during the past year. In doing so, they hope to reconcile with God, and thereby start the new year with a clean spiritual slate.

When I was growing up, I learned a bit about Yom Kippur from my Jewish classmates and family on my mother's side. Mainly, I gleaned that it involved not eating or drinking all day—and going to services in the temple that lasted for hours upon hours. The way my friends talked about it didn't sound like much fun.

Of course, over the years, my understanding of the Day of Atonement has grown more nuanced. For one thing, I came to grasp that, despite its tough requirements, there is a certain happiness associated with the holiday because it results in having made peace with the past year.

I also learned something that has less to do with the day of Yom Kippur itself, than it does with the days that precede it.

While Yom Kippur provides Jews with a crucial chance to get right with God, it follows an important period during which they have an opportunity to get right with one another. In the days following Rosh Hashanah and leading up to Yom Kippur, Jews are asked to practice Teshuvah, a word whose root means "to return." Practitioners return to their faith—and their best selves—by seeking out those they have wronged and sincerely asking for forgiveness.

Teshuvah requires true remorse and a commitment to keep seeking forgiveness even if the one you have wronged initially turns you away. According to tradition, you should request forgiveness from a person up to three times until it is granted—and if you are the person from who forgiveness is being asked, it is your responsibility to grant it by the third time if the petitioner is truly remorseful.

Of course, Judaism is not the only tradition that calls us to say "I'm sorry" and "I forgive you." In researching for this sermon, I stumbled on another related holiday while exploring the website of something called the Campaign for Love and Forgiveness, which is an initiative of the Fetzer Institute.

On the Campaign's website, visitors are invited to post their own stories of the power of love and forgiveness. I was struck by the story of a woman named Jodie Alexiev who lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I'm going to share with you what she wrote. Jodie begins<sup>3</sup>:

"As a Peace Corps Volunteer, one of the many traditions I experienced in my service in Bulgaria was called "Den za Proshka" or Day of Forgiveness. Once a year, the Bulgarians reserve a day in which they go seeking and receiving forgiveness amongst friends, relatives, neighbors, anyone.

As a volunteer, despite the fact that I had joined Peace Corps to make a contribution, I found that the Bulgarian people . . . taught me a great lesson in humility that has opened my eyes to the unmitigated power of the act of forgiveness.

Back from the Peace Corps ten years now, my Bulgarian husband and I have had two children. Just this weekend my mother-in-law called me from Bulgaria in observance of "Den za Proshka" to ask forgiveness from me "ako neshto" which means roughly translated, "if I have done anything" (to offend).

I was humbled and caught off guard by her simple petition. In a split second in my mind I went back to struggles she and I have had while she lived with us in our home . . . differences of opinion in raising our children . . . I relived in a millisecond uncomfortable moments in which she and I had struggled with our roles of young mother and grandmother and then . . . in another instant . . .

I forgave her and asked her for her forgiveness in return - which she gave. Instantly I felt lighter as all our petty grievances evaporated into thin air somewhere between Grand Rapids, Michigan and Razlog, Bulgaria."

*No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or for as from our own, therefore, we are saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness.*

Yom Kippur and Den za Proshka. Both require the ancient practices of Repentance and Forgiveness. Which I think may be two of the harder spiritual undertakings we as humans are asked to do.

Even though we know how good it will feel to be released from the burden of carrying around the wrongs we have done others—or the wrongs others have done to us—still, we avoid saying the simple words that will bring us relief.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.fetzer.org/loveandforgive/share-stories/yourstories?page=2&submission\\_id=99&ext=0](http://www.fetzer.org/loveandforgive/share-stories/yourstories?page=2&submission_id=99&ext=0)

Like the green leafy vegetables of the spiritual practice spectrum, repentance and forgiveness are good for us and our spirits—but sometimes we resist them.

Anne Lamott, the wonderfully irreverent writer, captures the spirit of this resistance in her memoir *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*. Lamott writes vividly of her own struggle to embrace forgiveness<sup>4</sup>:

“I went around saying for a long time that I am not one of those Christians who is heavily into forgiveness—that I am one of the other kind. But even though it was funny, and actually true, it started to be too painful to stay this way . . .

By the time I had decided to become one of the ones who *is* heavily into forgiveness, it was like trying to become a marathon runner in middle age; everything inside me either recoiled, as from a hot flame, or laughed a little too hysterically. I tried to will myself into forgiving various people who had harmed me directly or indirectly over the years—four former presidents, three relatives, two old boyfriends, and one teacher in a pear tree—it was “Twelve Days of Christmas” meets Taxi Driver. But in the end I could only pretend that I had.”

Maybe you have felt the way Lamott describes. I know that I have.

But what is it that makes forgiveness—both seeking and giving it—so hard?

Well, my hunch is that our resistance to repenting and forgiving has a lot to do with our humanity, which leads us to fall short in the first place, but also unfortunately tends to get in the way of us making up for our shortcomings.

For starters, our human egos are not want to admit their mistakes—and our tender human hearts resist acknowledging the harm we cause to one another. And if it’s difficult to say “I’m sorry,” I think it can be even harder to say “I forgive you.”

Four years ago, during my summer internship in interfaith hospital chaplaincy, I had a conversation with a fellow intern about the topic of forgiveness. Dominic<sup>5</sup> was an evangelical Anglican, from whom I differed quite a bit theologically, but in whom I nonetheless found a kindred spirit. Dom was a gentle soul, a good listener, and a great friend to talk to after a particularly hard patient visit.

In talking about forgiveness, Dom made the observation that often now a days when someone says to us “I’m sorry,” whether for a small offence or a large transgression, we tend to respond by saying “It’s okay,” instead of “I forgive you.”

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<sup>4</sup> Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, (New York: Random House, 1999), 128.

<sup>5</sup> I’ve changed the name for privacy reasons.

Dom and I agreed that “it’s okay” just doesn’t pack the same punch—or convey the same meaning as “I forgive you.” The former brushes off the harm—in a way, it suggests that the wrong for which someone is apologizing wasn’t that big a deal in the first place. “It’s okay,” belies the fact that whatever happened wasn’t actually okay.

The latter response to “I’m sorry,” on the other hand, acknowledges that something happened that is worth an apology. The person who says “I forgive you” allows that she was hurt by the sorry person’s actions. In doing so, she acknowledges, implicitly her own human vulnerability. And she also gives up the morally superior position of being the one who is offended.

A few days after Dom and I made this sociological observation about the language of apologies, I found myself in the unfortunate position of needing to apologize to him. While sitting side-by-side at the intern computers, Dom and I were reading aloud the daily news online. I can’t remember the details of the tragic story he read to me, but I do remember that my instantaneous response was to express my horror through taking the Lord’s name in vain with a certain amount of gusto!

Clearly, being in divinity school for one year had not cleaned up the tendency toward profane language I’d acquired over three years in DC political land. And though we Unitarians are not overly wed to the Ten Commandments, mindful of my company, I nonetheless felt bad that I had taken in vain the theological language my friend held sacred.

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, my face flushed in embarrassment. Without thinking too long, I looked my pal in the eyes and said, truly meaning it, “I’m sorry.” And without missing a beat, Dom looked right back, and with the initial appearance of affront giving way to something that resembled a mischievous grin, he simply said, “I forgive you.”

*“My friends, these are simple words, yet some people find them hard to say,” counseled the old wise woman, “If you really want to get rid of your grudges, then these five magic words will do the trick. The trick is that you must say them to each other and truly mean them.”<sup>6</sup>*

And now, my friends, I say to you here on this day and in this ancient season of seeking and granting forgiveness, may we remember the magic words more often and say them like we mean them.

Because they are the best way I know of to lay down our unwanted burdens. And the costs of not doing it are just too high.

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<sup>6</sup> Marshman, 89.

We may function with all our grudge-filled baggage intact, but over time, we will be diminished. Like the people of Grudgeville, we can trudge on, but our energy will be exhausted and our joy lessened.

And that would perhaps be reason enough to seek and grant forgiveness. But there is one final thought I want to leave with you here—on the way to the end of this Yom Kippur sermon. Which is this:

Atonement is not just about relieving the personal burdens of guilt and hurt we carry. It is also, in the same breath, about reconciling with those from whom we are separated. It is about repairing relationships and reconnecting across the fault lines of inevitable human flaws and failures.

In his 2001 sermon on Yom Kippur, the UU theologian, pastor and writer, Rev. Dr. Forrest Church, whom we lost this week after his three years living with cancer, observed that the word Atonement, at its root means “At-one-ment.”<sup>7</sup>

At-one-ment. Returning to oneness.

When we say I’m sorry, and I forgive you, we are affirming once again that we are one interconnected human family—a web of living beings—and that the ties that bind us together are stronger than the acts that drive us apart.

This is necessary work; this is sacred work.

And in closing, I offer you again these words we said together earlier – words written by another UU minister:

*For losing sight of our unity,  
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.*

*For those and for so many acts both evident and subtle which have fueled  
our illusion of separateness,*

*We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love*<sup>8</sup>.

May it be so with us, now and in the days to come.

Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://forrestchurch.com/news/pubmin/092601-3.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Eller-Isaacs, *Singing the Living Tradition* #637 (Boston: UUA, 1993).

