

We Begin Again in Love
Rev. Linda Thomson
First Unitarian Congregation, Toronto
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I sometimes think if I had the right glasses, that I'd be able to see them. Those backpacks we are all carrying. Some of us have huge ones, others are quite tiny and weigh almost nothing. But, I'd venture a guess that we all have one. Backpacks filled with grudges and hurts and indignation. I have one. Do you? I work on mine, sifting through its contents from time to time, holding up one item after another and reflecting. I turn over an item in my hand, looking at its shape and colour, remembering where I was, what I was thinking and how I was feeling, when I added this one to my collection. The intent when I look through the collection, is to get rid of some of them. But it is hard. I've read books about decluttering. I know about the principles one is supposed to apply. Is it useful? Does it spark joy? And so I lift the grudge up closer so I can see it better. ... Sometimes they are useful, reminding me of a real injustice, or a time when I could usefully have taken steps to guard my safety or dignity. But more often than not, after a look I conclude nope, not useful – usually it still after all these years reminds me of my hurt, and my indignation. It reminds me of my self-righteousness, and my sense of superiority. Those are powerful feelings, and while I know, on some level, they don't serve to make me the person I want to be, I still find it hard to let go. Sometimes the hurt is mine, directed only at myself.. tied up with feelings that stick around, long after they are useful reminders to me. How do we move forward? Does it spark joy? No, truthfully it doesn't. But like the old sweater, the one I used to love, in the back of my drawer – the one I'm holding on to because it reminds me of something I want to remember, or find hard to forget – I can imagine getting rid of my grudge, moving along the road to forgiveness. Some days, when I'm in a cleaning mood, I, in spite of my best efforts, end up folding that grudge up, and tucking it back inside the backpack. Some are just too hard to part with. And I pick up that bag again, put it on my back, and weighed down by its contents, carry on with my day.

Gosh, this is hard work, isn't it? And it is complicated. We know that most religions teach that forgiveness is considered to be an important practice. And yet we live in a world where revenge is equated with justice, in a world where forgiveness is seen as soft. There are plenty of movies and books that feature a hero that exacts revenge – the opposite of forgiveness – on those who have harmed them. Straw Dogs, Gladiator, and even the Princess Bride are a few of them. Dicken's A Tale of Two Cities would make the list, and so too would the Count of Monte Cristo. We have a complicated relationship with the idea of

forgiveness, thinking it both noble, naïve and weak, all at once. And as I said, the opposite of forgiveness is often understood as justice, justice of a 'get even' variety. Popular culture, the Bible and the Quran assure us that an eye for an eye approach to justice is acceptable. But where does that leave us? Ghandi reminded us that an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind. There is a maxim that reminds us that revenge comes at a cost, "Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves." To not forgive exacts a cost.

As I noted earlier, there are religious teachings that hold forgiveness as an important practice. In Christianity, we are reminded of the lessons of the life and death of Jesus... 'Turn the other cheek' we are sometimes told. At his death, according to Christian Scripture, he cried, "Father forgive them, they know not what they do." In Jewish teachings it is an absolute obligation to forgive those who have offered a sincere apology, who have tried to repair the damage they've caused, and who have refrained from repeating the offense. To not forgive is, in this case, unforgiveable. To not forgive is to betray the social contract, to harm the individual and the community. But Jewish law also prevents any proxy forgiveness... if your offense is against God, or another person, then it is they who must do the forgiving. Islam, while allowing for the eye for an eye also holds our forgiveness as a better course of action, saying that the virtuous forgive.

That's all very well and fine. I can value forgiveness; I can work to practice it. And that's not a big stretch for someone who has for the most part, been blessed with a fairly easy path. I have not, in my personal experience, faced the earth shattering hurt that so many have. I have not, in large part, come face to face with the outrageous hurt that comes at the hand of what we, so often, call evil. Yes, I've known some significant hurts, I've seen those I've loved hurt too. But the wrongs I've suffered are, compared to those of so many, really quite ordinary. In spite of the relatively easy path I've had, my backpack still has a few grudges tucked away for safe keeping. Forgiveness may be the ideal, but it is frequently difficult.

Some of you may have read, as I have, the book, "The Sunflower", by Simon Wiesenthal. Wiesenthal, a survivor of the Holocaust, was imprisoned, and forced into gruelling labour in one of the labour and death camps. In the book he tells the story of being taken from a labour crew that was working at a hospital near the camp where he was imprisoned. The nurse that summoned him away, took him to the room of a bandaged man, who proceeded to tell a story of the atrocities he had committed in his role as a SS

member. As Wiesenthal recounts the experience, the gravely ill man told him something of his childhood, about his parents and about his indoctrination into the Hitler Youth movement. An eager recruit, he signed up for service when he was old enough and participated willingly in several campaigns. Now near death, he was troubled though, by one action he'd participated in. Hundreds of Jews were herded into a house in which gasoline had been placed, and once locked in, the house was burned. Wiesenthal was an unhappy witness to the man's confession, but he stayed and he listened. He held the man's hand, and swatted a fly from his bandages. At the end of his tale, the dying man explained how he'd asked the nurse to bring a Jew to him, as he felt the need to ask for forgiveness. As he finishes his story, he says, "I know that what I have told you is terrible. In the long nights while I have been waiting for death, time and time again, I have longed to talk about it to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him...I know that what I am asking is almost too much for you, but without your answer I cannot die in peace". One can imagine a few endings, and Wiesenthal did, but in the end, as he describes it, he rose and left the room, without speaking. The book continues, Wiesenthal telling of the conversations he had about the strange event, about the liberation of the camp, and later of his visit to the man's mother, where he let her maintain her belief in 'her good boy'. Finally, he ends his book with these words. "You, who have just read this sad and tragic episode in my life, can mentally change places with me, and ask yourself the crucial question. 'What would I have done?'

What would I have done? What would you have done? I think the truth is, that only the most unfortunate of us can even begin to answer the question. We can think we know the answer, but really, can we? The particular version of the book I own, has commentary by many notable thinkers. Some agree that Wiesenthal was right to refrain from offering the comfort of forgiveness. Others argue that his act of sitting and listening, was an act of compassion and was therefore enough. Others suggest that forgiveness should have been forthcoming... I don't know. I like to think I know what I would have done, but I don't know.

In order to give the question of forgiveness the consideration it deserves, in order to determine what we might do, we need to first understand what is meant by forgiveness. I suspect that one of the reasons it is difficult to discuss forgiveness is because we each have a particular understanding for what it is. Forgiveness is not about being blind to an offense, it doesn't excuse it, it doesn't require that we forget it, it doesn't forgo the right to judgement, moral or legal, nor does it assume reconciliation. I believe that forgiveness is an intentional, conscious, and voluntary process by which a person undergoes a change in

feelings and attitude regarding an offense. Forgiveness involves letting go of negative emotions such as vengefulness, and developing an increased ability to wish the offender well. Forgiveness then, isn't really about the other person, forgiveness is about a change in us. I do not believe that forgiveness is about putting up with behaviour that causes us harm... my brand of forgiveness is not a stand by your man, or stand by anyone – 'even if they are cruel and don't respect you', brand of forgiveness. That would be foolish, and at times, dangerous. Forgiveness is about making a personal choice to seek the positive. Of course my telling someone that I have forgiven them might bring them some peace of mind, but what I really do when I forgive is make an active choice about the attitude and ideas I wish to cultivate. And cultivate it I must. Forgiveness is a process, not an act. It happens over time through a series of choices, through a series of intentions, it is a letting go...

Perhaps Wiesenthal, in that moment, did all that he could do then. If I am correct in assuming that forgiveness, particularly of the most serious of offenses is not a one-time thing, but rather a process, he could not, in that encounter have forgiven. How could a young man, nearly starved, mourning for his previous life, for his family, for his friends, and what he assumed was his very future – how could he, just like that, forgive?

In the commentary that followed Wiesenthal's story I was struck by the comments of the Dalai Lama - he in response to the question posed, tells the story of a Tibetan monk who had spent 18 years in a Chinese prison. The Dalai Lama, in asking the monk about his experience, asked what had seemed to be the greatest threat and danger during the long imprisonment. The extraordinary response that surprised the Dalai Lama? That newly freed monk said he most feared losing his compassion for the Chinese. The commentary stops there. It is an extraordinary response, but when I stop to consider it, I get it... to lose compassion for the Chinese, would for a Buddhist monk, represent a loss of self, of core values. To have lost that would have been tragic. In Buddhist teachings there are sutras that remind us that we are all deserving of compassion. We all need it, because we are all human.

Who among us has not hurt another. Who among us has not, at least in some measure, felt the sting of self-judgment. Some of my hardest memories are of the times when I've disappointed myself, when I've been careless or even willfully hurtful. I am human and I have at times, been so caught up in my own story, my own needs that I've discounted those of others. I don't think most of my offenses have, in hindsight been of the very serious kind, but they are enough to remind me that I am not as good, or as kind or as careful as I like to

think I might be. They are enough to have made me, on at least a few occasions, feel shame.

I have difficulty, sometimes, forgiving myself. And clearly that is in my own self-interest. How can I be expected to muster the character, the will to forgive another? Thankfully there are examples that remind me that it is possible to forgive. Nelson Mandela invited one of his most bothersome prison guards to his inauguration. Yes, the act was a powerful political statement about the hoped for future of South Africa, but it was also an act of personal courage, one that reminds me of what we can do. Desmond Tutu commenting on the Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa tells of horrible acts, crimes committed and human rights denied. And he tells of those who through the process of telling their stories and facing their tormentors found themselves ready to say 'enough'. Who found themselves ready to say I forgive. Tutu notes of his participation in the hearings, "I have often felt I should say, let us take off our shoes, because at this moment we are standing on holy ground."

I sometimes think if I had the right glasses, that I'd be able to see them. Remember the backpacks, the ones we are all carrying? Some of us have huge ones, others are quite tiny and weigh almost nothing. But, I'd venture a guess that we all have one. Backpacks filled with grudges and hurts and indignation. I have one. I know that my journey would be easier without the load, but sometimes it is hard to let go, sometimes it is hard, sometimes it seems impossible, to forgive.

Forgiveness seems, at times, like a pretty big ask. It isn't easy. And it isn't an overnight thing.

Wiesenthal's question. What would I do? *What would I do?* **What would I do...** I can't, in all honesty, give you a clear answer. But I can tell you what I'd aspire to do. Because for many of us, a lot of the time, forgiveness is more of an aspiration than a reality.

Forgiveness is a process, one that means that I can, over time, let go of negative feelings – perhaps what really happens, is not forgiveness, maybe not all relationships can be redeemed, but rather maybe what we are really striving for is to give up anger, and indignation, and self-righteousness. Why wouldn't I want to give those hurtful feelings up? Forgiveness is about the change that I experience. Psychologists agree that when we can see our way clear to forgiveness we are changed. Our immune systems, our moods, our relationships improve. Forgiveness is good for us. We forgive because we need to. We

forgive because we need to free ourselves, from the negative feelings, from being caught, emotionally, in the nets of hurt and disappointment and betrayal. Forgiveness gives us the freedom to live in the present, and to believe in the possibility of the future, rather than to dwell in the past.

Forgiveness makes a different future possible. As individuals and as communities and societies, we value forgiveness because we need to. An eye for an eye will make the whole world blind. In a world where we have ample evidence to believe in the human capacity for destruction and for hurt we need to forgive. The alternative is nearly unthinkable. As the Former Secretary General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld (hamar-sck-auld) said: Forgiveness may be the only credible option to address the continuing escalation of violence. - It is forgiveness that makes it possible to trust enough to love. Without forgiveness friendship would seem too risky. Our choice to forgive others, means we are reassured that our transgressions may, in turn, be forgiven – without that understanding, who among us would offer our heart to another. Who among us could dare to muster the courage to get out of bed in the morning, or to look back at the face in the mirror. Who among us could love this messy reality of being human.

Forgiveness changes us, it makes much of what we value possible. Forgiveness is messy, and I know from personal experience that it is two steps forward, and one step back process. But it is, at least some of the time, possible. And I am grateful for those ordinary people who have shown extraordinary character, who have shown me how to take the first step. Following the 2015 shooting in a South Carolina Church, many of the family members of those who died, expressed a commitment to forgive the young man who had come to the prayer meeting, with hatred, racism and a gun. In expressing their commitment to forgive, they expressed a commitment to move beyond hate and to not return hate with hate. They expressed a desire for a world with more love, and more compassion and more justice. And those people knew that adding hate on top of hate was not the way to achieve those goals.

Forgiveness isn't cheap, it isn't something that can be demanded, it is something we have to offer. We don't forgive in order to let other people off the hook. We don't forgive to make others feel better. Ultimately I think we strive, and fail, and strive again to forgive for one simple reason. We forgive in order to maintain ourselves, to be the people we want to believe we can be. We forgive, to preserve our own humanity.