

forgiveness

*A Worship Service by the REV. JEFF BRIERE
Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga
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CONNECTIONS

Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. I am Matt Hoyt. At this time we begin with Connections. This a time where we share the triumphs and hardships in our lives. Where we can reflect on what is happening about us. This is not a time for announcements, political statements, or expressions of anger. We share our happiness and thereby multiply our joy; and we share our pain, thereby easing the burden we carry.

If you have something to share, please do so. Come forward; tell us your name; and what is on your mind. After each person has spoken, give us a moment to contemplate what they said. If what you share is too personal to share with the congregation, please say so and it won't be mentioned in the worship service.

Spirit we share, let us rejoice in the successes mentioned here. Bring those with pain or suffering the clarity and peace to see those trials through and let our sympathy help them. Let love surround us. Let us contemplate what has been shared and offer hope for any events too painful to be shared.

Amen, let it be so, truly.

Rejoin the world; stand now and greet your friends at the door. Share your love.

Good morning and welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. My name is Jeff Briere and I am the minister of this church. Let's begin with Hymn 16, "Simple Gifts." Number 16.

HYMN 16, Simple Gifts

'Tis a gift to be simple,
'Tis a gift to be free,
'Tis a gift to come down
where we ought to be.

And when we find ourselves
in the place just right,
'Twill be in the valley
of love and delight.

When true simplicity
is gained,
To bow and to bend
we shan't be ashamed;

To turn, to turn
will be our delight.
'Til by turning, turning,
we come 'round right.

GREETINGS

WOLF. Thanks so much for joining us in worship today. We hope you find the service rewarding and that you leave here inspired and uplifted. And thank you so much for helping to create a reverent atmosphere during *Connections*. If you have a particular joy or sorrow or something you'd like added to the prayer of the people, please clearly write it on an index card and drop it in the basket back there. You may sign it or not, as you wish.

A complete listing of announcements is included with the bulletin. The best way to find out what's going on around here is to sign up for a weekly e-mail. To do that, please see Chris in the office.

This morning we are pleased to welcome Tiffany Envid back to our worship service. She brought her father with her this time, so we welcome Gary Demos as well.

PRELUDE: "*Les Pins de Charlanne*"

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

To light the chalice this morning, we have words from a Canadian singer and songwriter, Leonard Cohen. Most often, the words we choose to light the chalice are inspiring or declarative. But these words are from a song, so they are more poetic and revelatory. The meaning will be different for each of us. Your words are in italics.

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering

There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in
That's how the light gets in
That's how the light gets in.

STORY: *Two or Three Important Words*

I have a story this morning about two or three important words. The story is about me, when I was young. I don't remember how young I was, but I was in grade school. Maybe second grade.

I remember being really excited to go to school on Friday. It was the last day of the school week, after all. But this certain Friday was special. I couldn't wait to go to the craft table and look at the models my class had been working on before leaving school the day before.

I have always loved to build models. Airplanes, cars, aircraft carriers. I built a lot of plastic models when I was older, but this was in second grade and that week, we had built models using popsicle sticks.

So there I am, looking at the models my class had made. No one but me in the room. All at once, I lose my balance and fell onto the table, smashing Patty Hindel's boat to pieces. "Oh no!" I thought. "I've ruined Patty's boat. She'll be really mad." Patty and I are friends because we ride the bus together. We get on at the same stop. So I'm looking at the broken boat, wondering what to do, when I hear laughter in the hallway. It's the other students coming into the classroom. I jump into my seat and look like nothing happened.

One by one, the other children come in and sit down. No one goes over to the craft table to look at the models. I'm glad, because I don't want anyone to find out what had happened.

At recess, some of the children wander over to the craft table to

admire the projects. Pretty soon, Patty comes over, too. She sees the wreck. “My boat is broken!” she screams. “Who smashed my boat?” No one says a word, especially me. I’m thinking, “Maybe if I just act like I don’t know anything, no one will ever find out that I am the guilty one.”

All day long, I worry. I can’t concentrate on my lessons. I feel big time guilty. I consider telling Patty it had been an accident. But I’m afraid, of what Patty would do to me—not to mention what the teacher would do to me, too.

Our teacher’s name is Sister Cyril. I went to a Catholic school and our teachers were nuns. Sister Cyril was the meanest thing on two wheels. Her habit was so long, I couldn’t see her feet. I thought she moved around on casters. I was flat scared of Sister Cyril.

Finally, the day is over. I am relieved. It’s time to go home.

All day Saturday and all day Sunday I am unhappy. I know I made a mistake and should own up to it, but how could I? My friend will hate me and Sister Cyril will kill me.

On Monday, I meet Patty at the bus stop. “Patty,” I begin, “I’m sorry. I’m the one who smashed your boat.”

“You what?” Patty shouts, dropping her books and standing right in front of me. But I gone this far. Might as well take what’s coming to me. “Before you slug me, it was an accident, I promise. I was thinking how nice your boat was when I slipped and fell on the table. I didn’t mean to break it, honest.”

Patty doesn’t say anything. It gets real quiet. The bus is late. Finally, she smiles. And she says, “Well, if it was an accident, I guess it’s okay. If you really didn’t mean to. I guess I can build another one.”

“Yeah,” I say, “and I can help you. We’ll work on it together.”

And that’s just what Patty and I do that afternoon. And Sister Cyril found some more popsicle sticks for us.

What are the two most difficult words we ever need to say? Three of the most important words?

Thanks for listening to my story. You are free to go to your classes now.

CHILDREN’S RECESSONAL

We hold you in our love
as you go, as you go
May your heart
be at peace as you go.

To nurture the spark
of your precious life
We hold you in our love
as your go.

OFFERTORY: “Claire de Lune”

The topic of our worship service this morning is forgiveness, and that’s a serious subject. But that’s no reason not to have a little fun chuckling at people who have trouble forgiving others.

Frederick William I was the King of Prussia from 1713 to 1740. The pastor attending Frederick William on his deathbed warned him that if he wished to go to heaven he must forgive all his enemies. The king’s thoughts turned to his brother-in-law, George II of England. He hated George.

“In that case,” he told his wife reluctantly, “write to your brother and tell him I forgive him, but do it after I die.”

Marie de Medicis was the Italian-born wife of King Henri II of France. She died in 1642.

On her deathbed, she was visited by Fabio Chigi, who was then papal nuncio in France. The papal nuncio is a diplomatic representative of the pope, sort of like a papal ambassador. To Chigi she vowed to forgive all her enemies, including Cardinal Richelieu.

“Madame,” asked Chigi, “as a mark of reconciliation, will you send him the bracelet you wear on your arm?”

“No,” she replied firmly, “that would be too much.”

And we are glad there is no such thing as too much for the morning offering. We will collect it now, for the support and ministry of this church.

If you have a pledge payment, please mark it as such. As always, the Wood–Wilhoit Memorial Food Bank is happy to accept your donations of non–perishable food and household items for the Community Kitchen. The collection basket for that is by the front door. If you wish to light a personal candle of joy or sorrow, you may step up here and Bonny Sinclair will assist you.

Eternal Spirit of life and love, we are profoundly thankful for the blessings we experience today. Would that we recognize our blessings every day and remember to be thankful for them.

Christina—and Jesse—please lead us in our Hymn of Thanksgiving.

HYMN OF THANKSGIVING

Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day,

For all gathered here, and those far away,
For this time we share, with love and care,
Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day.

ORISON

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. *Dona Nobis Pacem.*

Matt Hoyt suffered a relapse and admitted himself to the hospital in Murphy NC. He called me Friday and I thought he sounded pretty good. Betsey wrote me that Matt sounded even better Saturday morning. He’s receiving oxygen right now, but his physicians have a goal of getting him back onto room air. Please keep him and Betsey and Kate, who is at Georgia Tech in her first semester, in your prayers.

And Susan Kennedy thanks you for your calls and cards. Her hip surgery was successful and she says, “Hip! Hip! Hooray!” She really wrote that to me, I didn’t make it up.

Thou, which are everywhere,
Many are your names.
May we always feel your presence,
May your wisdom guide us,
In our deeds as well as in our dreams.
May we have what sustains our body and soul;
Lead us first to forgive the mistakes of others
Even as we hope our own mistakes will soon be forgiven.
May we resist the temptation of the quick and easy,
And be delivered from that which demeans and destroys life.

May we live purposefully and joyfully
in every moment, in every encounter,
now, and in the time to come.

During this time of silence let us hold close to our hearts those who are suffering and those who are jubilant, but let us never forget those who suffer the fallout of war.

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.

RESPONSE

When our heart is in a holy place
When our heart is in a holy place
We are blessed with love and amazing grace
When our heart is in a holy place

HERE

Here may no one be altogether a stranger,
no honesty of thought ignored,
no depth of feeling dismissed,
no life belittled, and no life shut out.

Here may clarity of mind and heart
be humbly treasured,
brought to bear toward word and person.

Here may fellowship be treasured most of all
and paths to sustaining and renewing it
sought and found.

Here may growth of spirit be our purpose;
such understanding as shall lead us
to new ways in which to live our lives.

SERMON: A Duty and a Gift

Before I preach about forgiveness, I want to do something I first did

when I preached about Labor Day. Were you here on that Sunday in September? I brought in about two dozen images that I found on the internet which people had posted and somehow connected with Labor Day. It was a way of learning what other people thought or more accurately, what people felt, about Labor Day. I thought, “Why not try the same thing with forgiveness?” Let’s see what kind of images people connect with forgiveness.

Just to let you know, this morning I am gonna come down on the side of forgiveness. Forgiveness should come naturally to us, but it doesn’t. We are fallible human beings, we make mistakes; in my case, too many. But forgiveness can be a powerful, self-administered salve.

For some of us, forgiveness isn’t something we think much about. For others, it’s second nature. For many, it is misunderstood. If forgiveness is a hard concept for you to grasp, you aren’t alone, I am right there with you. It’s not an easy practice or process, especially if you’re just starting out.

We may be afraid that forgiving an offense will diminish the gravity of the offense. It won’t. Forgiveness is not forgetting. It is not accepting or justifying the offense. It is not pardoning the offender or excusing the offender or condoning offensive actions. It is not reconciling with the offender.

Let me say that again, because I need to hear it. For me, this is the hardest part of forgiveness. Forgiving an offense will not diminish the gravity of the offense. Forgiveness is not forgetting. It is not accepting or justifying the offense. It is not pardoning, excusing, condoning, or even reconciling.

Forgiveness does not give a criminal a get-out-of-jail-free card. Forgiveness does not absolve anyone of their responsibility to make amends for their actions. Forgiveness does not vacate anyone’s responsibility to act better in the future. It does not make a molehill

out of a mountain.

Forgiveness is a conscious, willful choice to turn away from the pain, resentment, and desire for revenge that arises from a betrayal, offense or injustice. A conscious, willful choice. Why would that be so? Because wallowing in the pain and self-pity can feel good, in a bad way. And you must turn away from that bad-good feeling. If you ever picked a scab, you have a good idea of how good it can feel to enjoy the secret pain of injustice. Leaving the scab alone and letting it heal exercises the same muscles needed to forgive.

Robert Enright is a professor of educational psychology at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and he notes these three characteristics of forgiveness:

“First, we acknowledge that the offense was unfair and will always be unfair. Second, we have a moral right to anger; it is fair and reasonable to expect that other people do not have a right to hurt us. We have a right to respect. Third, forgiveness requires that we give up something to which we have a right—our anger or resentment.”

I like that: Forgiveness requires giving up something to which we have a right—our anger or resentment. Proclaiming that we have a right to anger and simultaneously relinquishing that right makes me feel better about forgiveness. Makes me feel morally superior. And, apparently, forgiving has physical benefits as well.

Good, reliable evidence associates forgiveness with emotional, mental, and physical well-being. Research shows that forgiveness can reduce depression and anger, increase hopefulness and self-confidence, and improve the health of marriages and families. Forgiveness also shows promise in preventing crime by reducing vengeful responses that can lead to criminal acts.

Why would you want to forgive someone? Really. Why would you forgive someone for the ruthless tactics she used to get herself

promoted ahead of you? Why would you forgive someone for stealing your car or raping your sister? Why would you forgive Mohammed Atta, Timothy McVeigh, Charles Roberts, Nidal Malik Hasan, Jiverly Wong, Eric Harris, Dylan Klebold or Cho-Sung Hui? Why would anyone ever forgive them?

Here are some reasons:

1. You forgive to abate your anger.
2. You forgive because it will change destructive thoughts into healthy thoughts. If you never forgive, those destructive thoughts will invade the rest of your life and make you miserable and everyone around you.
3. You forgive because your behavior will improve; you will act more civilly toward the one who hurt you and everyone else.
4. You forgive so that you get along better with everyone else. This ever happen to you? You're angry with your supervisor and you leave work in a foul mood. Your anger spills over into your relationships with your children or your partner. Forgiving your boss would be a gift to your loved ones.
5. You forgive because it's the right thing to do. Forgiveness, as an act of kindness and love, is a moral good regardless of the response. Regardless of the offense. Regardless of your pain.

As long as we remain imperfect beings, there will be a need to forgive ourselves and others. If forgiveness seems impossible, know that you can do it. Consider the Amish community in Pennsylvania who responded to the shooting of ten Amish schoolgirls by forgiving the man responsible. Consider Heidi Coffee, who, when she lost her husband to a car accident, invited the man responsible to her husband's memorial service. According to Heidi, her husband often said, “Holding a grudge is like taking poison and waiting for your

enemy to die.” Is Heidi any different from you or me? Are the Amish blessed with forgiveness that Unitarian Universalists didn’t get when God passed out virtues? No. We all got the same virtues; we just gotta dig around in our hearts and find them.

In my life, when faced with a huge decision, I take a piece of paper like this, draw a big black line down the center, like this, and written the word PRO and CON like this. Then I sit and stare at the paper until I have listed all the reasons for doing something and all the reasons for not doing something.

Then, if I want, I can give each reason a value and add them up. Then I have a rational numerical basis for my decision. Actually, the one time I did not follow the procedure is when the search committee called me to this pulpit. I said yes immediately.

So, applying this scientific method to the question, “Should I forgive him?” we come up with this:

PRO: If I forgive, I will feel better.

CON: So will he. And I want him to feel as bad as I feel, because when he feels that bad, I’ll feel better. But it won’t be the same kind of feeling better that I’ll feel when I forgive him. Feeling better by feeling worse....Hmmm.

PRO: If I forgive, I will be released.

CON: So will he. And I want him to be forever in my debt. I want him to squirm. Forever in my debt...if he’s forever in my debt, he’ll never repay me. Hmmm.

PRO: It’s the right thing to do.

CON: That doesn’t make it right for me. Or him. He was wrong and doesn’t deserve forgiveness. But if he doesn’t deserve forgiveness

for this injustice, then no one deserves forgiveness, not even me. Hmmm.

If your scorecard has more on the CON side know this: Not forgiving forces you to think about the other person too much, the effects on your physical and mental health are deleterious, you begin to conjure more enemies, you can easily come to believe that you are alone in this, you may find it hard to move on with your life—as if you are stuck in time, good decisions will become hard to make, and your anger will come to dominate your outlook.

If your scorecard has more on the PRO side, know this: Forgiving will make you feel better, you’ll stop blaming others for your misfortune, you can move forward, you will develop responsibility, your expectations for other people’s behavior will improve so that you don’t take it personally, you’ll be better able to cope with challenges and you’ll feel a physical sense of relief and find some peace. And in the future, forgiveness will come more easily.

Thinking about this, it’s no wonder that every major religion in the world urges forgiveness. Every major religion suggests that it’s good practice to forgive those who wrong you. Science agrees. Several experiments conclude that practicing forgiveness is good for you and that merciful people are happier and healthier than those who aren’t.

So whether you are Jewish or Christian, Muslim or Buddhist, or even a Unitarian Universalist, the scriptures of your faith are filled with admonitions against holding a grudge and commendations for practicing forgiveness. If you aren’t religious, the scientific and anecdotal evidence is overwhelming in favor of practicing forgiveness.

Forgiveness comes from Old English, and before that, the German and ultimately, from a proto-language spoken about 5000 years ago in central Asia. This tells me forgiveness is a concept as old as humanity, and thus, critical to the core of what it means to be human.

The root word, in that old, old language, means to give *or* receive; to give *or* receive. From that root, we derive several modern-day English words, but the two that caught my eye are duty and gift. Gift is understandable, but I was amazed that duty comes from the same root word. Duty and gift.

I wondered, “Do we have a *duty* to forgive?”

If we have a duty to forgive, we cannot ignore our duty to establish justice. If there is one theme throughout human history that must be served it is the pursuit of justice. And sometimes, that means the interests of forgiveness conflict with the interests of justice. That is a difficult situation to resolve. But God gave us a brain for difficult situations and will call us to account for it.

Forgiveness, it seems to me, is an absolute. You either forgive or you don't. It's like being pregnant. It's not possible to be partly pregnant and it's not possible to be somewhat forgiving. Justice, however, can be tempered with mercy, and forgiveness can act in concert with punishment to establish justice.

Forgiveness is a gift. Of course, if you forgive someone, that person receives a gift, the gift of being freed from a debt owed to you. But in forgiving, I think you give yourself a gift as well. You give yourself the freedom from attending to your debt.

Think for a moment about what we do when we *do not* forgive. We *harbor* a grudge. We *hold* ill will. We *store up* our anger. We *never* forget. We *pick* at our scabs. We dwell upon the future when our revenge will be sweet.

We expend a lot of energy in pursuit of revenge. It takes a lot of emotional exertion and psychological strength to hold a grudge. A grudge is like a big suitcase full of bricks that we carry around. As long as we nurse our revenge, we can't ever put it down, can't ever rest, we can't ever get over it. Imagine the weight of a suitcase full

of bricks.

Forgiveness is putting down that suitcase of bricks. I mean, why would anyone *want* to carry around a suitcase of bricks? And after carrying around this suitcase of bricks for eleven years, how would we feel after putting it down? Like someone just gave us a gift.

A duty and a gift.

We have a duty to forgive ourselves. This could be easy or difficult, depending on the amount of pride we have in ourselves. Of course, we should all be proud of what we do and how we act. But if we take excessive pride, if we suspect that we are approaching perfection, it will be extremely difficult to forgive ourselves, because perfection admits of no failures.

If you believe you are the best airplane pilot in America and one day, your landing is a tad too bumpy, how can you forgive yourself? *You are the best airline pilot in the country.* How can you forgive yourself if you are the best? But if you are a good pilot who will sometimes make mistakes and lands too fast or too quickly, then you can easily forgive yourself and vow to do better next time.

We have a duty to forgive ourselves. And in doing so, we will give ourselves the gift of humility.

We have a duty to forgive others. This could be easy or difficult, depending on the amount of pride we have in ourselves. Of course, we should all be proud of what we do and how we act. But if we take excessive pride, (Did I say this before?) if we begin to suspect that we are so righteous that the slightest offense is reason enough to break out the dueling pistols, then it will be extremely difficult to forgive others, because the righteous person is righteous and, of course, everyone else is not. And how can we forgive those who are not righteous?

If you believe that your God-given right to travel in the right lane on I-24 was infringed by the person who turned right out of the center lane and cut you off, then you might succumb to a fit of road rage. You might feel dissed. You might be unable to forgive that yahoo from Georgia. Or Alabama. You can easily carry that rage the rest of the day, and it will infect your dealings with the check-out clerk at Bi-Lo, your colleagues, all the other drivers with which you share the road and God forbid, your family.

But if you are a cautious and courteous driver, and if you realize that other drivers are not, then you can forgive that inexperienced driver who cut you off and be happy that he's not sharing the road with you anymore. And you'll both have a decent afternoon.

We have a duty to forgive others, and in doing so, we will receive the gift of love.

We have a duty to forgive God. And by God, I mean the personal deity of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Christian Bible and the Holy Qur'ān. Same guy. Or gal. I also mean the living spirit that permeates all existence, the cosmic glue that holds the universe together, the ground of all being, fortune, misfortune, fate and Nature. Whatever it is that you know to be bigger than you, that's what I mean by God. We have a duty to forgive God. That's not hubris, that's good practice.

Forgiving God is easy. You know you cannot control everything. You cannot control the weather, so forgive God for the drought, for Katrina and for acid rain. You cannot control other people, so forgive God for taxing you with them. You cannot control the economy, so forgive God (and Wall Street) for tossing the dice. You cannot control the world into which you were born, so forgive God for cursing you with it. Forgive God and learn something from living every day.

We have a duty to forgive God and in doing so, we receive the gift of

peace.

A perfect airline pilot. A discourteous driver. A negligent God. These are prosaic examples and I think we'll measure up and be able to forgive them. It will not be as easy to forgive Mohammed Atta, Timothy McVeigh, Charles Roberts, Nidal Malik Hasan, Jiverly Wong, Eric Harris, Dylan Klebold and Cho-Sung Hui. But we have a duty to forgive them.

This is not easy work. Somehow, it may be easier to carry around a suitcase of bricks. For awhile. But someday we'll get tired and we'll put down that suitcase.

Unitarian Universalists take their scripture from a variety of sources, the Christian Bible, the Hebrew Scriptures, the Upanishads, and other ancient texts. We also find meaning in literature, poetry, the natural world and the theatre. So here is something from my scripture to consider in the days ahead.

There once was an old woman who was teaching her grand daughter about the world and humanity and the way people live their lives. The old woman said, "Inside people—inside you and me—are two wolves forever at the other's throat. One is revenge and the other is mercy. They fight and growl and scratch and bite each other all the time, 24/7, day in and day out."

Her grand daughter asked, "Which one wins, Grandma?"

The woman looked at her daughter with neither a smile nor a frown and said, "The one I feed."

I wish us forgiveness and mercy today and in all our days. Please join me now in singing Hymn 331, "Life is the Greatest Gift of All." Number 331.

HYMN 34, "Life is the Greatest Gift of All"

Life is the greatest gift of all
the riches on this earth,
life and its creatures great and small
of high and lowly birth
so treasure it and measure it
with deeds of shining worth.

Mind is the brightest gift of all
its thought no barrier mars
it seeks creation's hidden plan
its quest surmounts all bars
it reins the wind; it chains the storm
it weighs the outmost stars.

We are of life, its shining gift
the measure of all things
up from the dust our temples lift
our vision soars on wings
for seed and root, for flower and fruit
our grateful spirit sings.

EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE

_____, would you please extinguish our chalice?

We extinguish this flame,
but not the light of its truth,
the warmth of this community,
nor the fire of our commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
and share with all the world.

BENEDICTION

My benediction today is from the *Merchant of Venice*, by Shakespeare. In the courtroom, Shylock the Jew demands to know why he must show mercy to Antonio and forgive his debt. Portia replies that compulsion is contrary to the spirit of mercy, which is not forced. She says,

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown;
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptred sway;
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.

POSTLUDE: "The Music of the Night"