

“FORGIVENESS”

A sermon given at the First Parish in Wayland, Mass.

on October 9, 2005

by the Rev. Ken Sawyer

We are in the midst of the Jewish high holy days. Rosh Hashanah, the New Year, is behind us, and the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, lies just ahead.

These are not holidays I was brought up in. And while I have preached about both, hoping to share some of the wisdom and hope they have to offer even non-Jews, I have never imagined I knew either so well that I could offer more than an outsider's respect.

So I know that Yom Kippur is not just about forgiveness, but that is one of the deep religious matters it involves, and the holiday calls me to reflect upon forgiveness in a way that no Christian holiday does, nor any other religious holiday I know of.

Because Yom Kippur is about acknowledging one's failings, seeking the restoration of relations and the turning of one's own life away from past error toward a different, more virtuous future.

The restoration of relations, admitting one's harmful ways and opening up to the possibilities of remorse, repentance, apology, forgiveness, and healing – by the time these ideas reach my ear they are – for all my book learning – probably not exactly what those of you were raised Jews remember as the message of Yom Kippur.

But they are close enough that I thank the Jewish heritage for bringing forgiveness to mind in a regular annual way as well worth reflecting on, as a human concern, an activity, a failing sometimes, a virtue sometimes, and a quandary as mysterious and powerful as greed or fear or hope or love – and not just in our personal lives.

No, questions about forgiveness and moving on weigh heavily on humankind around the world. But first, about the only humor I have to offer today, which a member of the church's governing board, Jon Winder, offered at the board's monthly meeting last Wednesday. Now Jon was not just gratuitously inserting jollity into the agenda – the board begins every meeting with an inspirational reading and something funny. It's assigned, and a very good idea.

And in this case, relevant to this morning's topic. The comic Emo Phillips relates that "When I was a kid, I used to pray every night for a new bike. Then I realized, the Lord doesn't work that way. So I just stole one and asked Him to forgive me."

Having introduced Emo Phillips into the morning, before I get back to quite serious concerns, I will offer what just last month was voted to be the best religious joke ever, as reported in the British newspaper, The Guardian. For Phillips, the downside is that twenty years after he wrote and performed this joke, it was attributed to "anonymous."

Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!" He said, "Nobody loves me." I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?"

He said, "Yes." I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian." I said, "Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too! What franchise?" He said, "Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." I said, "Me, too!"

Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912." I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over.

But I digress.... I don't know how many of you have been closely tracking the events in Algeria. I confess, I ordinarily do not do so myself, but the vote they took there nine days ago caught my attention, knowing that I was going to be preaching on forgiveness today.

The vote was a referendum on a proposed amnesty for rebels who have been fighting against the government since 1992. Called the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation, the referendum was put forward by Algerian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika. It was supported by 97% of those who voted. "The charter excuses rebels, except those implicated in rapes, massacres, or bombings, and will shorten sentences of those detained. It also offers compensation for the families of the victims, including relatives of those who disappeared ... after being allegedly arrested by government forces for supporting armed groups."

But "Algeria's two main opposition groups ... urged Algerians to boycott the referendum, saying there could be no reconciliation without proper justice." They say the government's report of 80% voter turnout is vastly exaggerated. "They demand an

accounting for the thousands who went missing during the conflict. [One said] ‘I am against the idea of forgiving killers. They must face the same fate as their victims’

“But many Algerians, who are exhausted from the decades-long civil war [in which over 100,000 people died], want to put the country’s past behind them and move on.

“‘We are fed up with the tears. It’s time to forget the past and build a future,’” said one voter in Algiers.” [Aljazeera.com, 9/30/05]

Algeria’s dilemma is, of course, one faced by country after country, notably South Africa, which opted for amnesty with disclosure, where paramilitary men and others were expected to admit their misdeeds as part of the process. The issue is very much alive in Argentina, Bosnia, Rwanda, and elsewhere.

And earlier: One thinks of countries like France, occupied during the Second World War, deciding afterwards what to do with those who collaborated with the Nazis. Or Germany after reunification, with citizens who served in the East German secret service or collaborated with them; or Cambodia after Pol Pot; or the United States after the Civil War.

When is it time to move on, “to forget the past and build a future”? When should peace and reconciliation be the paramount goal? And when does justice demand punishment, or at least an accounting first, so the lessons are learned on which to build the future, lessons other than, people can get away with almost anything most of the time?

Just ten days before the Algerian vote, Simon Wiesenthal died at 96. Wiesenthal, who barely survived the Nazi concentration camps, devoted the decades after the war to bringing Nazi war criminals to justice, totaling more than 1,100. The director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center [Rabbi Marvin Heir] noted that “When the Holocaust ended in 1945 and the whole world went home to forget, he alone remained behind to remember. He did not forget.” Wiesenthal’s book is called, *Justice, Not Vengeance*.

Justice. Some atoning to be done, some confirmation that there are things that are not to be forgiven lightly. The German poet and satirist Heinrich Heine’s opinion was that “One should forgive one’s enemies, but not before they are hanged.” Well, that’s carrying it a little far, but no farther than others go in the other direction, toward a forgiveness readily given, even universally. This was, you recall, Jesus’ take on the subject.

This universal spirit of forgiveness shows up again in the most important book in the history of American Universalism, *A Treatise on Atonement*, written by Hosea Ballou. This year marks the 200th anniversary of its publication.

It established the basic tenets of what was still a new religion – the first Universalist church building in America is celebrating its own 200th anniversary this year in Gloucester, Mass. (One of the things they’re celebrating, by the way, is the role they played in ending the deal that churches like this one had, being supported by taxes.)

But on one point Ballou was too leniently liberal for most of his fellow Universalists. The Universalists’ big thing was, nobody’s going to end up in hell. An all-powerful, all-loving God will welcome all people into heaven, thanks to Jesus. And you didn’t have to believe in Jesus, everybody’s going.

But as most Universalists pictured it, there was a hell or some place or other your soul went when you died if you were a bad person, so God’s all-powerful love could work on you until you were a good person and ready to appreciate heaven. By the end of time, even Hitler goes to heaven, having become a different person than he was here on earth.

But Ballou said no, he goes right away. Everybody does. Thanks to Jesus, everybody goes to heaven when they die straightaway. Sure, you did some things wrong, but it’s time to move on.

As I say, people found that too forgiving. In fact, most of America found Universalism’s basic idea that no one ends up in hell deeply disturbing. There should be some accounting, some consequences for one’s deeds, some justice.

Most of us here don’t put the argument in those terms any more, who’s going to heaven or hell and why and for how long. But I find myself on the side of those who muddle along in between the extremes, neither ready to let everyone off the hook nor bloodthirsty for revenge. I can be stirred both by Simon Wiesenthal and by Jesus.

I am a member of Amnesty International, which has expressed grave concern that Algeria’s Peace Charter will lead to laws that exonerate people who committed serious crimes. But I feel for those who are “fed up with the tears,” who think “It’s time to forget the past and build a future.” It upsets me that the United States gave up so soon on Reconstruction and allowed white southerners to build a future of Jim Crow laws and tyranny. But it upsets me too that people have not given up caring over some battle or difference of opinion centuries ago, as in Kosovo or Iraq.

And every complexity, every murky nuance that makes it so hard to know how to do forgiveness right on the international scene pertains as well to national matters, and local matters, and every relationship we have. To do forgiveness right in every relationship we have: Should we forgive everybody everything, or demand just retribution for every failing we can find, or muddle along in between those extremes, doing the best we can? And what about our own failings: what forgiveness can we hope for, what forgiveness should we expect?

You may be thinking of a slight you suffered this week, hard to forgive; or the awful behavior that so hurt you forty years ago, forever unforgivable. Your heart may be hurting because someone has not forgiven you for something you do not deserve to be blamed for at all; or because there is something that you think you so deserve to be blamed for, forgiveness seems a mercy you have no hope of ever receiving. Questions of forgiving or not, being forgiven or not, and how and why, have that kind of power in our lives, most of us, much of the time.

Of course, it can be taken to extremes in a variety of ways. There are those who feel hurts and slights on every hand, every day, even every hour, who collect them and tend them and keep the list of them full and at hand. And there are those who just as often worry that they have given some awful affront, turning everyday blunders into occasions for feeling shame. And then there are those so oblivious to human feelings that they do not even notice when they have been insulted, a blessing of sorts; or do not notice when they have behaved so badly that they really should apologize, a more hurtful limitation.

The truth is, maybe most of us are prone to all of those extremes at times, at least a little. But mostly, we dwell in the middle ground, where we hope to be forgiven; where we hope to be forgiving; where we hope to have a good sense of proportion about how large a matter a failing may be or how small; where we try to move on when holding on to a grievance or hurt is of no further purpose; where we try to notice our own failings and make amends; where we try not to notice too many failings of others; where we hope our standards are not too high or too low for others or for ourselves; where we are usually at our best, revenge and pettiness are minimal, and love is the strongest force of all.

And so may it be.