

FORGIVENESS

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

We stand at the beginning of a new day. Each day is an opportunity to turn away from cynicism, hostility, pettiness and fear. Each day is an opportunity to turn toward our best selves, toward blessing and love.

Today we honor our roots in the Jewish tradition...today we honor our roots in the Christian tradition. From both we inherit rituals of forgiveness, words of atonement, pathways for renewal of spirit.

On Friday, religious Jews marked the ending of the Days of Awe in the Jewish calendar, and the celebration of Yom Kippur, these are the high holy days. A time specifically set aside to concentrate on the meaning of life. It is a time to stop living routinely and to take stock of one's life and actions.

Yom Kippur is the day that marks forgiveness and reconciliation following the days of awe, days in which the faithful have sought forgiveness from those they have wronged. A new beginning, a rebirth is hoped for...when after reconciliation...one's name is written in the Book of Life...and blessing is secured for another year.

Though many of us, as Unitarian Universalists are not theists, we recognize that there is something larger than ourselves- something that goes by many names. We often call it "Spirit of Life". We can feel that we are connected and blessed by that larger whole.

But there are times, many times, when we feel separated from that whole, from the spirit of life itself, we may feel separated because of things we have done or not done, because of ways in which we have been hurt, and we have built up walls to protect ourselves...there are times, many times we are in need of healing.

The writer Nikos Kazantzakis imagines that all of our earthly bodies are also part of the larger invisible body of humankind...he imagines the “Spirit of Life” as a tree. He writes:

"You are not a miserable and momentary body; behind your fleeting mask of clay, a thousand-year-old face lies in ambush. Your passions and your thoughts are older than your heart or brain. Your invisible body is your dead ancestors and your unborn descendants. Your visible body is loving men, women and children.

All of these are limbs of your larger, invisible body. You suffer and rejoice, scattered to the ends of the earth in a thousand bodies, blood of your blood.

Fight on behalf of your larger body just as you fight on behalf of your smaller body. You are a leaf on the great tree.

Feel the earth mounting from dark roots and spreading out into branches and leaves. What is your goal? To struggle and to cling firmly to a branch, either as a leaf or flower or fruit, so that within you the entire tree may move and breath and be renewed.”

You are a leaf on the great tree.

Imagine yourself...a small leaf, yet crucial for the breath and health of the entire tree. We are not for ourselves alone.

Imagine if each crucial leaf on the tree of life...each one of us clung firmly to a branch fulfilling itself as leaf or flower or fruit...imagine if all of humanity lived from an understanding of our fundamental connectedness, our essential reliance on one another and on the whole.

Each faith tradition offers symbols and stories of healing and connectedness. At times we get lost in the stories of brokenness, the stories of alienation – the stories that fill the pages of our newspapers, the stories that bring us to despair and isolation and grief.

And yet, the healing stories are at hand.

Poet John Keats wrote; “Some say the world is a vale of tears. I say it is a place of soul making”.

What do you need to make and remake and heal your soul?

Beauty is one of the ways in which we heal and create at a soul level.

Forgiveness is necessary in the face of tragedies on a global scale and in the moments just before dawn when we struggle with the repercussions of an unkind word.

The creation of art in its many forms, is one avenue for healing souls. I return again and again to a book called “daughters of absence: transforming a Legacy of Loss, edited by Mindy Weisel. All of the artists: painters, writers, poets, musicians in this collection are daughters of holocaust survivors.

In the first chapter, titled Memorial Candles: Beauty as Consolation”, Mindy Weisel writes :

”IN the beginning of my life as a painter, I was, I suppose, what psychologist Dina Wardi calls a “Memorial candle”. She claims that in a survivor’s home, there is a child in the family who becomes the link among past, present, and future. That child grows up feeling responsible for “inter-generational continuity, the one who bears the burden for translating the emotional world of the parents into some kind of coherence.”

Both of Mindy Weisel’s parents were survivors. After some years of working with her dark history and palette, and producing a large body of dark work, passionate and intense colors pushed through the black as if to have their own say.

After her mother died in 1994, Ms. Weisel found her work becoming more and more colorful and full of joy. She took strips of fabric from her mother’s beautiful dresses and did a series of paintings as a way of celebrating her mother’s life. In the weight of the hand made paper she used and in the bold colors, she depicted her mother’s strength and love of beauty. Each piece became a thank you for life itself.

You are a leaf in the big tree that is life...and the world is a place of soul making. We have important choices to make. Each day, we have important choices to make.

Each Sunday we create together a worship service, a celebration of life....a ritual of beauty that comes from the soul.

Today, we make a space in this creation for each of us to consider forgiveness. We make a space for turning in a new direction. A space for transcending old hurts. A space for re-connecting with the larger body of humanity.

Offering and receiving forgiveness is a complex matter. Getting right with our soul is a complex matter.

There is a story in the Christian tradition that lifts up some of this complexity. It is the story of the prodigal son. It is a parable that Jesus is believed to have told in the temple. It is found in Luke chapter 15.

There was a man with two sons. The younger said to his father: "Give me my share of the estate." So the father divided the estate.

Some days later, the younger son gathered all his belongings and left home for a distant land where he squandered his wealth in loose living.

Having spent everything, he was hard pressed when a severe famine broke out in that country. He hired himself out, but paid such low wages, that he was still hungry.

Finally, he decided to return to his father. He planned to say; "Father I have sinned against God and before you. I no longer deserve to be called your son. Treat me then as one of your servants and let me work on the land."

He was a long way off, when his father saw him coming. His father was so deeply moved with compassion that he ran out to meet him, threw his arms around his neck and kissed him.

The father called on the servants : "Quick bring out the finest robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fatted calf and kill it. We shall celebrate and have a feast, for this son of mine was dead, and has come back to life,. He was lost and is found. And the celebration began.

Meanwhile, the elder son who had been working in the fields was on his way home. As he neared the house he heard the sound of music and dancing. When he realized what had happened, the elder son became angry and refused to go in to the celebration.

The indignant son said, “Look I have slaved for you for all these years. Never have I disobeyed your orders. Yet you have never given me even a young goat to celebrate with my friends. Yet, when this son of yours returns after squandering your property, you give a party for him.

The father said, “My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But this brother of yours was dead, and has come back to life. He was lost and is found. And for that we had to celebrate and rejoice.”

This story conveys the preciousness of each son to the father. And the willingness to forgive without question. The father and the younger son, are united as leaves on the tree of life. They have renewed a connection of soul. Their bond has been healed.

But now, the older son is in need of healing. Now the older son, is separated, bereft and behaving with a smallness of character.

What will the older son choose? Will he go into the party and welcome his brother home? Will he go in and be the dutiful son once again, yet withhold true connection?

Again and again we are called to make such choices. Again and again, we are given opportunities to turn toward our better selves.

Both Jewish and Christian traditions emphasize the communal aspects of living faithfully. And in Unitarian Universalism, we also honor and celebrate community in all its forms. We seek wholeness, unity, connection. We long to be included in the tree of life, in the ritual of forgiveness, in the Celebration of life itself.

We long to participate in the creation of beauty, the consolation of music and poetry and dance, we long to participate in the story of the human family...in the beautiful story that transforms our lives from the loneliness of grief and guilt, to the harmony of this one body which we share...this body we call, Beloved Community.

Let us breathe together, all leaves on the tree of life.

May it be so/amen/shalom