

# Forgiveness, Big and Small

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*A service given by the Worship Team*

*at First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque August 30, 2015*

## **Introduction -The Rev. Christine Robinson**

Forgiveness...it's a really big topic. Whether it's a matter of not holding grudges day to day, or being a part of a society learning to live with a national past which included terrible violence and oppression between ethnic groups, or forgiving ourselves, forgiveness is just plain hard!

We all know it's something we're supposed to do, but the doing of it is tricky. We're not entirely in control of our feelings of hurt, outrage, or anger which come in the wake of life's slings and arrows. We can decide we want to forgive, but the forgiveness itself takes its own time and work.

This morning we're going to look at several aspects of this topic...with humor, story, and the hard-won wisdom of our fellow UU's. In our meditation, which will end the morning, you'll each have a chance to consider some part of your life which would be easier if you could only forgive, and do the work of starting the process. So as you listen to our speakers, perhaps you will be reminded of trouble spots of forgiveness...of yourself, of others, of social ills...and you'll be able to work on one yourself...begin or continue the inner process of forgiveness, of letting go and therefore living more fully.

## **Forgiveness Beth Elliot**

What is forgiveness? What is not forgiveness? What are the physical and emotional benefits?

Forgiveness is when we voluntarily give up judgment, revenge and resentment. Forgiveness calls for us to move through our hurt, gain understanding and change our perspective.

Margaret Holmgren called this "seeing with better eyes." A shift in thinking that allows us to recognize that whoever has offended us is a valuable human being who struggles with the same needs, pressures and confusions with which we struggle. Forgiveness allows us to recognize that the incident may not have even been about us. Instead, it was about the wrong doers misguided attempt to meet their own needs. If we can regard people we want to forgive from this new point of view, we can "see them with better eyes."

I suspect that most of us, at one time or another, have mistaken forgiveness for something it is not. Forgiveness is not:

- Reconciliation
- Condoning or accepting the offending behavior
- Justice or fairness
- Weakness
- Forgetting

Lewis Smedes explains, "Forgiveness does not erase the bitter past. Instead, forgiving what we cannot forget creates a new way to remember. We change the memory of our past into a hope for our future."

Forgiveness is an internal process, so we are never dependant upon the person whom we are forgiving. They do not have to participate or feel any repentance. It is possible to forgive those who are no longer in our lives, have died and even those who have no remorse. Forgiveness is less about others and more about us.

When we allow for forgiveness, we take the stories we have been telling ourselves about the past and reframe them. It can be very difficult to change our stories. We can be very attached to them.

I used to be very attached to being "right." When my marriage fell apart, I got stuck seeing myself as the victim. I could prove to myself (and anyone who would listen) how right I was about being wronged.

However, time passed and "being right" started to feel a lot like "being bitter." Years had past, but I was still stuck back in the absolute worst year of my life. I had been keeping myself stuck there, miserable, all for the sake of holding on to my grudges. I started thinking about the past through a new lens, seeing things with a little more compassion. Allowing a more benign view of the past gave me a chance to move towards a better future.

There is growing scientific evidence that being a forgiving person makes you healthier, happier and allows for stronger relationships.

People who practice forgiveness have

- fewer stress related illnesses
- lower blood pressure
- lower rates of heart disease
- stronger immune systems

- fewer episodes of depression
- stronger cardiovascular and nervous systems
- have increased rates of healing

To paraphrase an old adage, “withholding forgiveness is like taking poison and waiting for the other person to die.” If we stew in the wrongs others have done to us, we leave less time and energy for feeling good. It also leaves us trapped in the unhappy past.

For many years, I cared for my paternal grandmother as she journeyed through the ravages of Alzheimer’s. As a child, I had a horrible relationship with this grandmother. I had barely seen her for years when my father died quite suddenly and left me as her sole caregiver. Caring for her and seeing her so vulnerable allowed me to alter my views of her. Most times when I would walk into the room, even if I had only been gone a moment, she would become absolutely ecstatic to see me, something that had never happened before the disease hit her. Underneath the anger and criticism that I had witnessed as a child was this different woman. My younger self had viewed so many of her actions as unkind, but the older me began to understand how the world had been unkind to her. By the time she died, I had not only completely forgiven her, but for the first time I could also say that I loved her.

Each time I have forgiven someone, I see direct evidence that I become happier and healthier. With so many benefits, I often wonder why I still struggle to practice it, but I will keep trying because it is the key to the healthier, happier future for which we strive.

## **Forgiving Myself -Emma Elliot**

I've had to forgive others who have hurt me in my life, and that's hard.

I have also had to ask others to forgive me. But what I have found to be the most difficult, was forgiving myself. Specifically, forgiving my body.

Let me share with you two things I have realized about self-forgiveness.

First of all, If you spend all your time focusing on negative things then it distracts you from living a joyful life. Secondly, the thoughts that go on inside your head should help you, not hurt you. Let me tell you how I faced these challenges.

Last summer, I was diagnosed with a condition called Scoliosis.

Scoliosis meaning my spine is shaped like the letter "S". This condition is sadly, idiopathic, meaning they don't know why it happens. As my orthopedic surgeon explained it: idiopathic means that I have a pathology and HE is the idiot.

Due to my Scoliosis, I am required to wear a back brace. My brace is an odd arrangement of plastic, metal and foam that manipulates my spine closer to where it should be. It works very much like braces for teeth, except it can't ever fix the curves that already exist; it only tries to prevent the curves from getting worse. Wearing the brace can make it hard to move. It is uncomfortable, and at times very painful. It restricts me from doing the things I love, like theater, singing and dancing.

I was very upset when I was first diagnosed. The fear of getting worse and having to face a possible surgery was frightening. I felt like my body had let me down. How do I forgive my own body for doing things that cause me harm? How do I not resent having a brace? I wanted to enjoy growing up without worrying about my health. I began to realize that I had taken my body for granted and now it seemed like an enemy. I resented Scoliosis and my own body for having it.

Being angry at my scoliosis was only making me miserable. It distracted me from my life. I spent too much time worried about the all the extreme worse case scenarios. It used up too much of my time and energy that it didn't leave time for all the things that were good in my life. My hatred towards my scoliosis was making me unhappy. If I could forgive myself, then I wouldn't be limiting my happiness.

In order to forgive myself, I needed to manage my own negative thoughts. A wise person once said, "Nothing in life causes more pain and suffering then the judgments we hold about and

against ourselves." I had thoughts such as, "I am not normal" or "This is ugly" These kinds of thoughts were a constant monologue inside my head. The thoughts were harsh and judgmental and made me feel worse. Forgiving myself started off with me trying to change those unhealthy thoughts. When I would see myself (usually in a selfie) I would say to myself:

"Stop. You are a beautiful and healthy person. No one else notices the straps on your brace or how crooked you feel. They just see that you seem unhappy. Stay in the moment and be patient with yourself. Remember that the brace is helping. My spine is doing the best it can. I still have so much for which I'm grateful."

After repeating affirmations to myself, the negative thoughts began to turn more positive. Positive self-talk also helped me start focusing on what I could do instead of my limitations. I could help my body with what I able to do and feel grateful that it was doing it's job.

I can see now that I have no reason to be ashamed. These changes made me feel better and as I felt better, it was easier to replace those darker thoughts with kinder ones.

Lewis Smedes said, "To forgive, is to set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner was you."

There are lots of reasons to forgive ourselves. We might struggle accepting our physical self or for decisions that hurt other people, or regret choices we've made. But if we recognize that it just limits our happiness, then perhaps changing those negative thoughts might be worth a try.

When I decided I wasn't going to be a prisoner to my spine, or my voices, or my imperfections, I was ready to get on with my life. I have learned to accept myself exactly as I am, twisted spine and all. Frailty, weakness and conflicts are all just part of being human. I only make things worse when I allow my thoughts to be dark and judgmental. This is the only body I will ever have. Learning to love myself, even with the imperfections, brings me peace and helps me be more accepting of others as well. I have slowly learned to not treat myself as something that is broken and instead have learned to **emBRACE** myself. (Get it? **EMBRACE?**) I am learning to let go of how things "should" be and to just be happy with what is. I forgive my spine, I forgive myself for any unkind thoughts, and I continue to love being human.

## **Installing Love (a skit found on the internet with no attribution)**

Tech Support: Tech Support. How can I help you?

Customer: Well, after much consideration, I've decided to install Love. Can you guide me through the process?

Tech Support: Yes. I can help you. Are you ready to proceed?

Customer: Well, I'm not very technical, but I think I'm ready. What do I do first?

Tech Support: The first step is to open your Heart. Have you located your Heart, ma'am?

Customer: Yes, but there are several other programs running now. Is it okay to install Love while they are running?

Tech Support: What programs are running, ma'am?

Customer: Let's see, I have Past Hurt, Low Self-Esteem, Grudge and Resentment running right now.

Tech Support: No problem, Love will gradually erase Past Hurt from your current operating system. It may remain in your permanent memory, but it will no longer disrupt other programs. Love will eventually override Low Self-Esteem with a module of its own called High Self-Esteem. However, you have to completely turn off Grudge and Resentment. Those programs prevent Love from being properly installed. Can you turn those off, ma'am?

Customer: I don't know how to turn them off. Can you tell me how?

Tech Support : With pleasure. Go to your start menu and invoke Forgiveness. Do this as many times as necessary until Grudge and Resentment have been completely erased.

Customer: Okay, done! Love has started installing itself. Is that normal?

Tech Support: Yes, but remember that you have only the base program. You need to begin connecting to other Hearts in order to get the upgrades.

Customer: Oops! I have an error message already. It says, "Error – Program not run on external components " What should I do?

Tech Support: Don't worry, ma'am. It means that the Love program is set up to run on Internal Hearts, but has not yet been run on your Heart. In non-technical terms, it simply means you have to Love yourself before you can Love others.

Customer: So, what should I do?

Tech Support: Pull down Self-Acceptance; then click on the following files: Forgive-Self; Realize Your Worth; and acknowledge your Limitations.

Customer: Okay, done.

Tech Support: Now, copy them to the "My Heart" directory. The system will overwrite any conflicting files and begin patching faulty programming. Also, you need to delete Verbose Self-Criticism from all directories and empty your Recycle Bin to make sure it is completely gone and never comes back.

Customer: Got it. Hey! My heart is filling up with new files. Smile is playing on my monitor and Peace and Contentment are copying themselves all over My Heart. Is this normal?

Tech Support: Sometimes. For others it takes a while, but eventually everything gets it at the proper time. So Love is installed and running. One more thing before we hang up. Love is Freeware. Be sure to give it and its various modules to everyone you meet. They will in turn share it with others and return some cool modules back to you.

## Reconciliation -Marilyn O'Boyle

We've looked at forgiveness from a couple of angles. Now I'm going to talk about forgiveness and reconciliation. I'm interested in how these concepts play out in society at large, and also in smaller groups, and in my own life.

Reconciliation —-What is meant by forgiveness when that word is linked to reconciliation?

You may remember that In 1993, apartheid finally ended In South Africa. After years of slavery, lynching, land theft, and mass imprisonment, South Africa could have disintegrated into chaos and bloodshed. Instead, the country transitioned relatively peacefully into a multiracial democracy. A lot of the credit for this goes to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that was formed in 1995. Archbishop Desmond Tutu led this commission. Those seeking amnesty for human rights violations had to fully disclose their actions. Some apologized and asked for forgiveness, but not everyone. In the end, only 850 of the 7000 amnesty applications were granted. But an interesting thing happened. The proceedings were watched on television by people all over South Africa, from all walks of life. Everyone witnessed the grief of the survivors and the regret of the perpetrators. So the formal proceedings were mirrored in discussions throughout every level of society.

Looking at South Africa today, what do we see? Many of the reparations were not made, and apartheid's legacy of extreme poverty remains intact. Nevertheless, the spirit of forgiveness

that came out of those proceedings has helped South Africa transcend hundreds of years of hatred and violence.

According to Desmond Tutu, the spirit of forgiveness was enabled by Ubuntu, an ancient South African belief. Ubuntu holds that individuals exist only in relationship with other living beings: I am, because we are. It is our responsibility as relatives to take care of one another. Ubuntu recognizes that we are interdependent beings, and that any action I take has consequences for you and your life. It sounds very much like our Unitarian Universalist Seventh Principle: “respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part”.

Desmond Tutu and his daughter, Mpho Tutu, recently published a book called “How to Ask for Forgiveness”. They call it a “guide for walking the fourfold path of forgiveness”. These four steps are: telling the story, naming the hurt, granting forgiveness and releasing or renewal. This is a guide for both the victim and the perpetrator, allowing both to enter a cycle of forgiveness rather than revenge.

As Beth said earlier, forgiveness and reconciliation are not the same. Forgiveness is an internal process. It’s when you work through the hurt and gain an understanding of what happened. Then you can rebuild a sense of safety and let go of the grudge. The offending party is not necessarily part of the process.

Reconciliation, on the other hand, is an interpersonal process. It involves a dialogue with the offender. You exchange stories, express the hurt, and then listen for the remorse and begin to reestablish trust. It’s a much more complicated and involved process. So it includes forgiveness, but moves beyond it. Lewis Smedes put it this way: “It takes one person to forgive. It takes two people to be reunited”. So it seems to me that the book by Desmond and Mpho Tutu is really a book about reconciliation. Both parties tell their stories, and both have a chance to name the hurt. Then forgiveness can be asked for and granted. Both can move toward release and renewal.

There have been over 40 Truth and Reconciliation Commissions formed between 1980 and the present. The results have been mixed and not always successful. But they offer a way to move forward in difficult situations, especially for larger groups. Truth telling encounters between those who have been harmed and those who have caused the harm can promote accountability and help move everyone toward reconciliation. This can help to transform social structures. I can see that this kind of work holds special promise for addressing our country’s epidemic of racial violence and injustice.

One example of this is the Ferguson Truth Telling Project, which was formed after the killing of Michael Brown. Victims of police violence and their families come together to share their stories. Hopefully, these stories can serve as documentation that can support structural change. The Project is also planning to create community groups so that people can work together in identifying solutions.

I just got back from a visit with my daughter, Sarah, who is a violinist in the Pittsburgh Symphony. She's having a conflict with a fellow orchestra member, whom she considered to be a good friend. Sarah overheard this person trashing her to a colleague, and was deeply offended. She has decided to avoid playing in the same section with this person. We discussed forgiveness and reconciliation. Sarah does not think reconciliation is a possibility because this person has a tendency to lie when confronted. So, she is wrestling with the option of forgiveness, but for now, she has let go of the idea of reconciliation.

However, there is a place for this process in individual lives. I can see how this could help some friends of mine. They are fabulous music teachers who love children and teach very well. Somehow they have gotten into a huge disagreement about how to teach a certain training course, and have ended up saying very hurtful things to each other and talking about the problem to a lot of other teachers. Both are friends of mine, and I've heard both sides of the problem. They complain with great passion about how mean the other person has been! I think a good mediator might use a truth and reconciliation process to help them resolve this conflict. In my own family, I have been thinking about using this process to help heal the injuries and neglect that my daughters suffered when they were children living with us in a ghetto in Chicago. We were so intent on trying to help that community, that we didn't notice the abuse our daughters were suffering. I have apologized and they say they have forgiven me, but I don't think we've gotten to a true reconciliation. I would like to sit down with each one of them and really let them tell their story again, and I need to tell them my story too. We need to go through the fourfold path that the Tutu's write about. We need to tell our stories with all the details, and then name the hurt. I need to tell them again how sorry I am and wait for them to grant forgiveness. Then we can move forward into release and renewal.

So, are you part of a group of people who might benefit from this kind of process? Or is it something that you could use in your own life? I hope so!

## Forgiveness Meditation –The Rev. Christine Robinson

We may decide to forgive...ourselves, others, god, society...whatever we take to be the source of hurt or threat to us. I hope you have heard some good reasons to do that...better health, clearer thinking, happier life... but all the good reasons in the world don't make it easy to forgive. But in our meditation we're going to take some time to start a process of forgiveness. So... pick a sore place in your life...a place where there is anger or outrage which is still hot in your heart, which causes you still to mutter under your breath, or hijacks your enjoyment of life. If you don't think you have one, think again! No one is so strong that they have never been hurt...although some can't bear to admit that to themselves or others. Sometimes the worst part of the hurt is the embarrassment of being tricked or caught out, or otherwise have our delusions of perfection punctured.... Have you thought of something by now? If not, just stay willing as we continue.....

Give it a title. "He abused me." or "My neighbor's junky yard," or "She just left" or "I didn't deserve that." Give your sore place a label.

Give it a story. Tell yourself briefly what caused your original anguish.

Ask yourself how this is still hurting you? What's the price you are still paying for this painful part of your past? Does your grudge cause you to avoid something or someone? Does it rise up in odd moments and put you in a bad mood? Does it keep you busy? Bore your friends and relatives? Keep you from enjoying your life?

You probably have very good reasons for your anger and your pain and our outrage. But while pure justice may demand your strong feelings, this is your one and only life..and another way to look at this is to say, "I refuse to let you hurt me any more," or "this is a rotten deal, but I'm not going to make it worse."...and then you are ready to begin the process of forgiveness.

If you are, you begin to whisper to yourself, things like, "nobody's perfect," and "sometimes rotten things happen" and "I don't really want to see you again but I wish you well," and, as the song goes, "as for that, there's always blame to share...."

And you catch yourself suffering, when you do...the bad moods and the obsessions, and you say to yourself, "you know, you don't HAVE to do this."

And you work out how you can be safe from whatever hurt you and you walk away into your new life.

It might take some time. The hard ones always do. But that open-hearted place you get to, empty of the morass of anger and blame...that's a good place, a fruitful place, a holy place, a place where all things are new. It's worth the effort.

Spirit of Life and Love, you are with us whenever we strive to grow, whenever we do the hard work of following our longing for a better life. We are grateful for all that nudges us to health and all that helps us to heal...for wisdom and courage and relationship and the inspiration of history.

We remember those who grieve, victims of violence in our nation and around the world, and we rejoice in beauty, health, wisdom and love wherever it is found.

Peace be with you!