

Homily: "Reviving Life" – Rev. Martha Hodges
Sept. 23, 2007

"Forgiving is giving up all hopes for a different yesterday," wrote some unknown sage. I love that. Think about it for a minute. "Forgiving is giving up all hopes for a different yesterday." It's funny, but it also completely true and worth remembering. It's equally true when applied to forgiving ourselves for past transgressions. Anguishing over the past certainly will not change it. So what good is remorse?

Other religions offer ways to deal with regrets in a constructive way. The Catholic practice of confession may seem shallow and facile to some of us. Ritualized confession can be this. It can also be coercive. And the penance that follows confession may seem empty and rote, or even bullying – a way for the religious establishment to maintain its power over believers. The Protestant reformation which gave birth to Unitarianism and Universalism was in part a reaction against this ritualized practice and the abuse of church power that it enabled. Confession and atonement became personal matters between the believer and God.

But I think we lost something in the process. Outside of psychotherapy and the penal system, we liberally religious types – and our society as a whole -- don't really know what to do with guilt. We tend to get stuck in our regrets, unsure how to move beyond it, or at the other extreme, to let ourselves off too easily. We may apologize less out of a desire to make amends than out of a wish to gain relief by passing the burden of acceptance on to the other person. We may use apology to make ourselves feel better, rather than to help heal the other.

The Jews, on the other hand, take the question of confession and atonement seriously and, better yet, they have a way to practice it that is at once demanding and hopeful. For atonement is basically an act of hope. The following reading is taken from *Jewish Renewal: A Path to Healing and Transformation*, by Michael Lerner.

Built into the [Jewish] High Holy Days is a deep psychological wisdom that can and should be reclaimed. In the ten days of repentance that extend from the first day of the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, through the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, we may engage in a mass psychological process, as we participate in an individual and collective reassessment of our lives.

Remembering is step one—looking at what we have done and what we have become during the past year. Rosh Hashanah is called the Day of Remembrance.

The second step is to measure what we have done and what we have become against our own highest visions of who we should and could be. This step is facilitated when we collectively, through prayer, reaffirm the vision of our possibilities (what we could be individually and together).

The third step is called teshuvah or repentance. This does not mean merely a recommitment to "good values" that are so abstract that they function only to

make us feel good when we espouse them. Real teshuvah means determining in considerable detail exactly what we are going to do differently in our lives, taking into account the things that will likely throw us off or undermine our resolve. This requires more than making just an inner resolve about our intentions—it requires figuring out concretely how the things that tend to undermine our resolve or deflect us from carrying out the changes we want to make can be handled... This time period is really about ... a fundamental transformation of self and community. This is also the time to straighten up unfinished emotional business with other people, to seek to rectify whatever misunderstandings or pain that you may have caused others.

Self-scrutiny is not meant for individuals only. The religious community as a whole needs to meet during the ten days of repentance and to discuss its own functioning and direction. [as we did, incidentally, in this weekend's start-up workshop.] Has the community really embodied its highest values? Has it really been sensitive to the pains of its members, and to the pain and suffering that continue in the larger world? Has the community used [religion] merely as a way to "feel good," ...or are the nice sentiments matched with serious action?

Today we will draw on the wisdom of the Jewish tradition in a ritual of atonement and hope. For despite the connotations of the word, atonement is a positive and hopeful enterprise. It is founded on the faith that we can change, that we can heal and assist in the healing of others. On the faith that moral missteps are not fatal to the spirit, but that we can become the people we want to be.

Ritual of Atonement: Part 1

The first nine Days of Awe are devoted to making amends to others. Sometimes, we seek reconciliation with others in order that they may realize how they have wronged us. If I apologize to you, maybe you will apologize to me. But to humbly ask another to forgive with no other motive than to make amends – this is something else. How much harder it is to see how we personally contributed to the estrangement or hurt. When we can take a step back and truly see our own responsibility in creating pain between ourselves and other, healing can finally happen.

The offense need not be large. A phone call or a smile unreturned; a sharp or sarcastic word spoken in a moment of fatigue or stress. It might be greater: a blow or verbal attack; abandonment; betrayal, deliberate humiliation. Or somewhere in between: the unkind remark spoken behind someone's back; a broken promise, a lie, psychological manipulation. All the things, petty or grave, that we do to make ourselves feel important or safe at someone else's expense.

In order to make amends, it is not enough to apologize. It is easy to say, I'm sorry. But to truly atone, to examine where we went wrong and resolve to not repeat the hurtful act requires that we learn from our error. The hope of this heals and is the source

of new life-giving energy and joy. The joy not only of healed relations, but the joy of knowing we can become more loving and compassionate.

I invite you now, if you wish, to think of an offense you have committed against someone – an offense large or small. This may be another person in this room, but it doesn't have to be.

Come to the front of the sanctuary and take a flower. If you're very brave and if you wish, you can give it to someone here to whom you want to make amends. Do this in silence. If at a later time, you want to explain your gesture or apologize, you may, of course. But for now, let your gesture alone symbolize your acknowledgement of wrong and your commitment to not repeat the error. If the person you have wronged is not in this room, take a flower if you wish and make confession and state your resolve to the other silently, in your mind. When you get home, if you feel able, you can share this moment with the person you have hurt.

Part 2

Yesterday, Yom Kippur, was the day on which Jews make amends, not to other people, but to God. For those who do not believe in God, this can still be understood, and healing and hope be found, if we think of this as making amends to our best selves, to the ideals we love, to that in us that enhances and sustains and honors life – which are all other words for the transcendent or for god within us.

Whether we consider ourselves religious or not, we can share in this healing. All can know the comfort of getting right with our better selves, the joy of second, or third, or infinite chances to be the person we want to be. We can ask forgiveness of ourselves or of God and commit to doing better. If acknowledging our faults leads us to despair and we remain in despair, we will not be truly honoring the divine. We make amends to ourselves and to that which is holy within us, by hope. And by forgiveness. We will forgive ourselves and begin again in hope.

Let us now reflect in silence on our failures to honor our best selves and let us resolve to forgive ourselves in the knowledge that that best self calls us to try again, to keep trying, and forgiving, and trying again, because life tells us we must.

And now, let us celebrate the power of forgiveness and the power of community to restore hope. Let us wish each other a good and sweet new year by sharing the apples and honey – nourishing, tart, and sweet -- that are traditionally served on Rosh Hashanah. The ushers will move down the aisles and pass bowls of sliced apples and honey. Please pass the dish to the person beside you, who will hold it for you as you dip a slice of apple into the honey and eat it. That person will then pass the bowl to the person on their other side, who will hold them for them while they help themselves in turn. In this way, we symbolically acknowledge that we are never alone in our failures, that forgiveness is possible and that it is through kindness, faithfulness and service to others that we make amends for our failures. If you want to, you can wish each other a "Sweet New Year."