

An Invitation to Forgiveness and Peace
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Let me start with a story this morning,
a universal story.

Two children.

In the backseat of the car, or sitting on the couch, playing
outside,
wherever.

And there's a howl.

"Dad!!!!"

"What?"

"She hit me!"

"He hit me first!"

Like I said, a universal story.

"He hit me first!"

I want to talk this morning about violence and peace,
forgiveness and revenge,
justice and mercy.

I offer to us an invitation to forgiveness, an invitation to peace.

There is no season of the year when this is a bad topic,
but today seemed like a particularly good day to offer this
message.

Tomorrow, the 21st of September, is the International Day of
Peace.

It's a 33 year old tradition, this day,
timed to be near the opening day of the new session of the
United Nations General Assembly,

when world leaders gather in New York and talk about our broken and beautiful world.

Thanks mostly to the commitment of Jim and Pam Keeling, the International Day of Peace is a real thing here in Rockford, with events and programs to mark the occasion.

Tomorrow, the 21st of September, is also Arev Yom Kippur, and the next day, at Sundown, begins the Jewish holy day — Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

Last week was Rosh Hashanah, the new year.

On Rosh Hashanah the book of life for the new year is opened, and you resolve yourself to live well and justly, in harmony with the ways of the Lord;

but before you can do that,

you have to make atonement, make amends and ask for forgiveness -

on Arev Yom Kippur, from other people whom, over the year, you may have harmed,

and on Yom Kippur, from the holy for those mistakes and errors which all people sometimes make.

Peace.

Atonement.

Forgiveness.

New beginnings.

“She hit me!”

“He hit me first!”

The cycle of violence is ingrained in us.

It’s natural, actually - we strike back.

Evolutionarily, it isn’t hard to see how this response is encoded into our genes:

those who can’t fight for themselves -

or persuade someone else to do it for them -
are vulnerable to the greedy and the mad;
to protect one's body, children, home, and safety,
we are hardwired to hit back.

We're hard wired to do this.
But there's a problem, of course —
that the cycle of violence, the hitting back,
war over and over again,
leads to disaster.

"An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind," as Ghandi said.

The ancient Jewish rule, an eye for eye,
was actually an improvement -
you could take an eye for an eye,
but you couldn't take a head for a finger;
it was about making the response proportional,
so that the cycle could end.

Otherwise, right, the violence just escalates and goes on
forever,

until both groups are wiped out.

The Hatfields and the McCoys, right?

Did you know - I looked this up - that the Hatfield and McCoy
feud may have begun when one of the McCoy's, who had
fought in the union army, in the civil war,
was murdered by a Hatfield for his disloyalty?

The Hatfields were supporters of the Confederacy,
as were most of the McCoys, actually, it was just this one guy
who'd fought on the other side -

he'd married a woman whose family were Union supporters,
see,

but that was how it started.

Violence leads to violence.

And it goes on and on,
unless something intervenes -
forgiveness,
reconciliation,
a decision to let the past go and move forward.

Our ancestors learned this genetic lesson:
if you don't fight back at all, your genes will be wiped out.
If you fight back forever without stopping, your genes will be
wiped out.

Truth be told,
the Hatfield - McCoy story is kind of weird.
I don't know enough to understand it,
but the legend seems to be that the Union soldier, Asa Harmon
McCoy,
tried to hide in a cave in those Kentucky hills,
but the Confederate militia tracked him down
by following the footprints in the snow of Pete, an enslaved
African -
Asa Harmon McCoy's slave.
Yes, Harmon McCoy, a Union soldier, owned a slave.
Something weird about this story, like I said.

What I couldn't find out in my amateur research
was what happened to Pete, the enslaved African.
Was he killed, too?
Was he taken by the Hatfields?
What happened to him five months later, when the
Confederacy lost the war?
Did he go north,
or try to find his family,

or become a sharecropper, still enslaved in all but name?
What happened to Pete?

See, this is the catch about forgiveness and peace.
Whose story doesn't get told?
Who atones to whom?

After the Civil War,
leaders in the north decided to treat the south pretty gently -
oh, the radical republicans wanted to stick it to the south,
and they got the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments through -
you know, the ones that say you are a citizen with rights if you
were born here,
no matter what - no matter what - no matter what -
but 12 years after the war, the north had enough.
The war was over, let's move on.
Do business.
Get cheap cotton again.
Forgive and forget.

What happened to Pete?
Not good, I'll tell you.
Millions of Pete's, formerly enslaved Africans,
as soon as reconstruction was over,
were treated again like property instead of people.
Denied the right to vote, be educated, or move freely.
Jim Crow, lynching, the Klan.

The northern capitalists forgave the south for the war,
but neither the south, nor the north, both of who profited from
the cheap labor
of both slavery and Jim Crow,

have ever made real atonement, or sought genuine forgiveness,
for these crimes.

Who gets to forgive?

What atonement is required, first?

There is false peace, and there is real peace.

Peace is more than the absence of tension.

It is safe havens for all.

You've heard the chant, maybe;

maybe you've chanted it:

"No Justice, No Peace."

You can spell it "n.o." or "k.n.o.w.", it works either way.

No justice, no peace.

Know justice, know peace.

Without atonement - saying, I, we, have committed a grave error,

and we will make amends in this way - without that,

there can be no real forgiveness,

and there can be no real peace.

This is important.

If someone tells you to forgive your abuser,

but the abuser has made no change in their action,

if they keep hitting you -

don't forgive them.

Get out, get help, and get safe.

Come to me, we'll call the police together and get you safe.

The concept of forgiveness, the concept of peace, can be used as a kind of weapon.

When Civil Rights leaders sat at lunch counters, or marched, or tried to register voters, they were charged with disturbing the peace.

And they were.

Some folks have told the #BlackLivesMatter activists to behave more like Dr. King,

which is tragically hilarious,

since King was considered a dangerous criminal by most

Americans while he was alive,

was wiretapped by the FBI,

and accused, constantly, of being an outside agitator.

We must have peace, we think,

so therefore, we say, the aggrieved must forgive those who have done them harm.

Otherwise the violence will just continue, we think.

Forgive them, for they know not what they do.

But what about when they do know what they're doing?

And they keep doing it?

No justice, no peace.

On Arev Yom Kippur, you go to the people you have harmed and ask forgiveness.

You can't come to Yom Kippur, and ask God for forgiveness, until you've gone to the people.

There's no shortcut around atonement, no shortcut to justice.

Almost every conflict in the world today is the consequence of some injustice

for which there was no remedy. No atonement. No repair.

In 1953, the British and American governments overthrew the democratically elected government of Iran, and installed a military government, so we'd have access to their oil. That repressive military government tortured its citizens until it was overthrown in a religious revolution in 1979. No amends, no atonement, have ever been made. Today, US Senators and Presidential Candidates speak of fomenting another regime change. There's a reason they don't trust us. Real peace requires seeing another person's point of view.

We are called to real peace, which requires atonement, not just forgiveness, not just apology, but justice.

Now, we all also know folks who carry a grudge even when genuine atonement has been made, and justice has been served, and yet they remain bitter, ready to strike again, unwilling to give up the injury and move on. This is not spiritually recommended.

Holding onto pain for pain's sake is not helpful. It can give us a sense of identity - we are the wounded, we are the betrayed! But it is not good for the soul. There is a difference between bitterness on one hand and a longing for justice on the other. These are not the same things.

And there is a kind of forgiveness that is needed: to let go of the illusion that we can change the past,

to let go of our carefully nurtured resentment,
so that we can actually do the work of building a world with
both peace and justice.

The invitation to forgiveness and peace
is not an invitation to lay down and take it,
but an invitation to rise up and get to work,
to cross borders and make connections.

There is a kind of forgiveness that is about deciding
that the person who harmed you
doesn't get to stay in your soul space,
in your heart and mind, anymore;
a kind of forgiveness that is about evicting the unwelcome
tenant in your memory.

But forgiveness cannot be coerced;
it can only be freely given.
Peace cannot be imposed by the stifling of dissent,
but only created and sustained
by ongoing justice and mutuality.

The invitation to forgiveness and peace that I offer today,
then, is an invitation to justice and atonement.
If you have participated in systems of injustice -
and since you live in this country, you have, we all have -
in what way will you try to make amends and make justice?
If you have been harmed by others -
and chances are pretty good you have -
will you insist on atonement, or at least on your safety, then
let go of the past for a better future?

Atonement, peace, forgiveness, and justice
are hard things to make happen.

Yom Kippur comes every year,
not just once.
We need regular reminders
to let a healing voice be heard,
to hear and answer the invitation to a better life and a better
world.
And we need atonement and justice and forgiveness,
so that we will have peace.

Some would carry a grudge forever,
and live in a world of perpetual war.
How can we make peace with the Iranians?
It's outrageous, some say -
but how many bodies must bleed out in the desert
before we turn away from war,
I wonder.
As Salaam Alaikum.
May Peace Be Upon You.
Shalom.
Peace.

Of course, the words for peace in Arabic and in Hebrew are so
close:
Salaam, Shalom.
The languages and the people share a common history.
And, I pray, a common future.

Peace, atonement, forgiveness, justice,
are necessary to prevent further bloodshed,
are wise for the safety of the world
and for the promotion of human flourishing.

But for we who ground ourselves in the spiritual life,

there is a deeper reason why we are called to answer the
invitation to atonement,
the life of peace.
A deeper feeling, a stronger truth.

Love.

Because we love one another.
Because under all our differences, we are kin.
Because we make the choice, based on our faith, our
confidence,
in the deep dignity of each person,
no matter what, no matter what,
to love them.
We might insist on them changing behavior,
we might establish life-saving boundaries,
but we make the choice to love them,
to love each and every person.
That is why we seek peace and justice,
that is why we atone for our mistakes
and why we forgive others for theirs.
Because we love them.
"No, David, no, no, stop, time out."
But, in the end,
"Yes, yes, yes, I do love you."

That love isn't just for our children or our tribe.
The work of our Universalist faith
is to expand the circle,
to remember that our children means every child,
that our tribe includes every person in every land.
Love.
Kinship.

Other hearts in other lands are beating
with hopes and dreams as high and true as mine.
Love.

It is the reason we atone, and forgive,
and it is the reward, too;
it is what we get.

More than peace or safety or even justice,
love is what comes from deciding to fix the wrongs
and let go of the pain
and live together in beauty, in hope, and in harmony.
May it be so.

Let us sing.