

**March 1, 2020**  
**Forgiveness is Not Forgetting**  
**Rev. Dr. Matthew Johnson**

Who can say if I've been changed for the better?  
But because I knew you, I've been changed  
for good.

Just to clear the air, Elphaba sings,  
I ask forgiveness  
There's blame to share, responds Glinda,  
and they sing together:  
none of it seems to matter anymore.

We've been changed for good.

Each year that I move around on this earth,  
every year that this planet goes round the sun again,  
I notice  
that I am accompanied by more and more ghosts.  
I don't mean real ghosts, whatever that is,  
not Casper or Nearly Headless Nick or Jacob Marley,  
none of them.

No, I mean . . . memories.  
And not just of those who have died, either –  
though they are there too,  
but memories of experiences that have changed me for  
good.  
Memories of encounters, moments, discoveries,  
heartbreaks, betrayals, joys, laughter, beginnings and  
endings.

Do you have this? Do you know what I mean?

You're driving in the car, and a song comes on,  
and you remember.

You see a woman wearing a jacket, and the jacket looks  
just like  
another one and your mind is off to the races . . .

An email arrives in your inbox from someone who you've  
fought with at work  
and your defenses go up

Ghosts.

Ghosts of your childhood, past relationships, past  
friendships,  
ghosts of places you have been, things you have done,  
ghosts of dreams deferred, nightmares survived,  
ghosts of ones you lost, and wish you hadn't,  
and ghosts of ones you lost and were glad you did.

And the dilemma, I think, is what to do with this.  
We are surrounded by these spirits, these feelings and  
responses;  
sometimes these memories are trauma-triggering,  
the memory, the scent, the sound takes us back  
and our body responds with rushes of adrenaline and  
cortisol,  
ready to fight or flee – or freeze.

Let me say that if this happens to you a lot,  
see a therapist who works in this area, because there are  
things you can learn to do,  
and this sermon is not medical treatment – but I hope what  
I say today  
will complement your recovery.

But even if a trauma-triggered response isn't part of your  
story,  
we all, I think, live with these ghosts,

these memories of loss and joy and hurt and learning.

Here's what I'm figuring out,  
and maybe some of you have already figured out,  
and maybe some of you are just discovering:

Denial doesn't work.  
You can't forget.

You've been changed for good.

I love the way Angus Louis puts it:  
You've paid the price, why can't you keep the goods?

Think of all the things you've learned.  
Maybe the lessons were hard!  
Maybe you wished you hadn't had to learn them,  
maybe more than anything you wish you hadn't,  
but you did,  
and they are part of you.

Forgetting doesn't work.

Oh, things fade.  
Feelings get less intense,  
and the sting will lesson.

But forget?  
No.

I don't want to – not in my personal life,  
where those lessons, hard as some were,  
have been invaluable teachers,

and I don't think we should socially, either.

Should we forget slavery?

Should we forget the Holocaust?  
Should we forget the war?

Those who cannot remember their history are doomed to repeat it;  
and god that feels true.

Memory is important –  
it is an act of honor, resilience, and sacred duty.  
Remembering what has happened to us:  
individually, and socially, is how we learn, grow, evolve,  
it is how we honor what we've been through,  
how we know what is true in our bones,  
how we become who we are.

Don't forget.  
It dishonors what you have been through,  
and it doesn't work, anyway,  
those ghosts keep showing up.

Don't forget.  
But don't clutch, either.  
Remembering the wounds  
is different  
than reopening them time and time again.

Remembering what you learned  
is different than lugging around a bag of rocks,  
full of all the grudges  
you have tended  
as if  
they were fragile flowers.

Remembering what you have learned  
is an act of love, love and courage and honor,  
but holding on to grudges  
stuffing your being with the slips of paper

of how you were harmed  
what revenge you seek  
noticing every slight  
cultivating grievance  
that's not so useful.

Sometimes I think we think,  
I can't forgive them,  
because I don't want to forget what I learned.  
I don't want to pretend like it didn't happen.

And we are right to think that.

The popular notion of forgiveness – that we forgive and forget,  
that we forgive so we can “move on”  
is wrong.  
It needs to be challenged.

We don't forgive so we can move on.  
We forgive so we can move through.

Let me say that again, because it is really important,  
and I had to work hard to learn it:  
we don't forgive to move on.  
we forgive to move through.

Forgiving allows us to live:  
to live in community, to love, to befriend,  
we will err, and others will too,  
forgiveness, so we may live,  
so we may live,  
live in the now and in the future, and not be stuck in the past.

But forgiving isn't forgetting.

One requires, the poet reminds us, the lemon balm,  
the calming and releasing,  
the other, the metal edge of memory,  
the sharpness to recall  
what matters and how you become who you are.

I think when folks conflate forgiveness and forgetting,  
it is a way that oppression justifies itself:  
we don't have to change, they forgave us.

Maybe that's social.  
Maybe that's personal.

It doesn't matter that I bullied that kid, he forgave me.  
I don't need to learn anything from breaking their heart,  
they forgave me.  
My lover took be back, everything must be okay.

But it isn't okay.  
And you need to learn something.

We need to disentangle these things.

Here's how it should work:

When you decide to forgive someone, you do it for you.  
You do it because you want to stop carrying that weight.  
You want to stop keeping pages and pages of notes  
of the wrong done,  
you are tired of the anger, the clench.  
You do it for you.  
You forgive so that they do NOT continue to have a hold on  
you,  
In AA, they say a phrase attributed to everyone from Nelson  
Mandela to the Buddha to Carrie Fisher,  
and if a phrase is attributed to both the Buddha and Carrie  
Fisher,

you know it has to be true:

“Holding onto a grudge is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die.”

Forgiveness is a decision, made freely,  
to put the brick down.

It does not require forgetting.

Indeed, forgiveness is stronger when you remember:

you know what it was that happened,

you learned from it,

but you decide to not let it dominate your thoughts and  
imagination.

So, the line in the song,

For You,

after they forgive each other,

when they sing,

I guess it doesn't matter anymore

is both true and false.

It is both true and false.

It is true because when you forgive, you allow the  
relationship

to grow, to not be stuck, you decide that happened  
will not get in the way of your life.

So, in this fundamental sense it doesn't matter anymore,  
especially if we think of “matter” as weight, as stuff,  
to carry around.

It is false because what happened is part of your story,  
and you matter, and your story matters,  
and it shaped you and shapes you.

So, how do you do that?

I mean, maybe this feels all a little abstract.

So let's try some examples.

When Stacy was younger she dated a man, Joey.  
She liked the way he laughed, and his sense of adventure.  
He was an excellent cook, too, which was a delight.  
But there were some signs right away that it wasn't a great match.

He was a night-owl, she was an early riser.  
That wasn't a big deal, but when he took a 3<sup>rd</sup> shift job  
without talking to her about it,  
she realized that he didn't really see a future for them.  
And she was . . . surprisingly okay with that.  
But when she said, I don't think this is going anywhere,  
he was really crushed. He said some not nice things,  
and she did too.  
She was mad at him, and she was mad at herself  
for not realizing, sooner into their relationship,  
that this wasn't the one.

Shortly after that, she said, well, you got to move on.  
Forgive and forget.  
She tried to forgive him, and herself, but then it happened  
again!  
She was dating Phillip, nice guy, sweet, and convenient –  
but there was no spark.  
A few months went by,  
and she finally said, look, this isn't it.  
He was pissed at her, and she felt guilty.

After a little therapy and a long conversation with her sister,  
she realized that she needed to forgive herself,  
because you don't know what you don't know until you  
know it,  
and she's just a regular person trying to figure this out,  
but that it was important to not forget.  
She needed to give some deep thought to what she really  
wanted,  
commitment and spark,

and if it wasn't there, she needed to say so, clearly, fairly, and quickly.

She could forgive herself for what she'd done, but if she didn't remember the lesson, than that forgiveness would be cheapened –

and false, next time.

She resolved there wouldn't be a next time.

Oh, she might learn new lessons!

But this one she wanted to only learn once.

Here's another common story:

a simple one.

Paul was driving his car down state st. when someone cut him off.

Weaving in and out of traffic, and Paul had to slam on the brakes, he hit the steering wheel and cursed.

As his adrenaline recessed, he found he was still mad as could be.

He was distracted, even, by his anger.

And ran right into the car in front of him, stopped at a right light.

The damage was minor, but his day was beyond ruined.

What Paul realized is that he'd been so focused on his anger,

that he forgot to learn the lesson – driving is dangerous and you need high situational awareness.

Pay attention, because you never know what might happen.

It would have been better, he realized,

to let go of the anger, but learn the lesson:

keep your eye out.

And be ready to hit the brakes.

One more.

Jennifer and April have been friends for decades.  
They met in college, their first day,  
they stood up at each other's weddings,  
and April helped pick Jennifer up off the floor  
after her wife died from cancer a few years ago.  
They travel together, finish each other's sentences,  
and talk all the time.

All those years of friendship, they've had to forgive each  
other

more times than they can count.

Jennifer can be strong-willed, sometimes stronger than she  
means.

April is more of an introvert, and sometimes April needs  
some downtime.

Jennifer took this as an insult, the first time,

why doesn't she want to talk more,

but here's what made their friendship work:

April said, I just need a little me-time. That way, I can enjoy  
our time more.

And Jennifer forgave April for not saying that sooner,  
and she asked April to forgive her for not getting the clue,  
and they learned the lesson.

This is just one of them.

They have their quirks, their habits and their issues.

They forgive each other easily – they don't pretend that  
there wasn't an issue, though.

They tried that, Jennifer kept saying, "it's fine, it's fine,  
no big deal."

Silently she was seething and April had done this or that.

Once it all spurted out.

And April said, "well, why didn't you say anything!?"

Jennifer replied, "I was forgiving you!"

April retorted, "You can't forgive me if you don't tell me I  
did something that hurt you.

That's not forgiveness, that's passive aggressive nonsense."

And so that's what they do.

If one does something the other doesn't like,  
they mention it, kindly.

Clear the air.

Forgive, because of how much they value their friendship.

But they also remember, because of how much they value  
their friendship –

they remember what each other needs to feel valued and  
cared for.

So Jennifer gives April space to relax,

April makes sure that Jennifer knows when she has an  
opinion,

and when she really is okay with whatever Jennifer decides.

Jennifer puts pauses in her conversation,

and April speaks into them.

They forgive, they carry no grudge between them,

but they say "ouch" and "oops" so that they can learn to be  
even better friends to each other.

All these decades in, I got to tell you, it's beautiful.

They have been changed for good.

They all have:

if they forgive themselves and the other,

but learn, remember, sharpen the blade of memory,

but drink the lemon balm of forgiveness,

so they may live,

so they may befriend,

so they may love,

they have been changed for good.

Forgiving and forgiven,

yet learning and growing.

These are personal examples,

but one more, a social one, occurs to me.

About the importance of forgiving,  
so that the cycle of vengeance, of war after war after war,  
need not continue.

And about the importance of remembering,  
that we remember that war is hell, and we should not,  
and remembering too,  
that all people are our siblings,  
that everywhere skies are blue  
and hearts beat  
for peace.

We forgive, and ask forgiveness,  
but we remember, we do not forget,  
that we are bound together,  
and we sing, we sing,  
because singing resides deep in our memory  
and because singing reminds us  
to let go  
and join in  
so that we might live.

**March 8, 2020**  
**Forgiveness is not Repentance**  
**Rev. Dr. Matthew Johnson**

Turn back, turn back,  
forswear thy foolish ways!

Repent! Repent!  
The end is at hand!

Here's a secret.

The end does not have to be at hand  
for someone to repent!

What is repentance?

What does it mean to turn back, turn back and forswear thy foolish way?

Apology.

Sorry.

Oops.

What does it mean to turn back,  
to repent the wrong that you have participated in,  
to say "sorry."

And what's the connection between "I'm sorry" and "forgive me"?

Because that's what we often hear, isn't it,  
and what we often say, isn't it:  
"I'm sorry, please forgive me."

So what does that mean?

Let's try some examples, and see what we think, okay?

Some of these might seem familiar to some of you, perhaps.

I'm just saying.

"I'm sorry that you misunderstood me."

Have you heard this one?

Well, that's not an apology at all!

That's regret, but not repentance.

Regret is a good word –

If I feel bad that something bad has happened to you,  
but I am genuinely sure that I did not play a role in making  
it happen,  
then regret might be a better word than sorry.

“I regret that we had a misunderstanding” communicates  
that you feel bad about it,  
that you wish it didn’t happen,  
but it doesn’t sort of apologize and sort of not apologize.  
Here’s a similar one:  
“I’m sorry that you were offended.”

Oh, you hear this from people all the time.  
The passive voice!

“I’m sorry that you were offended” indicates  
that the responsibility for the injury belongs not with the  
person who said or did something that hurt,  
but with the person who is hurt.

If they weren’t so sensitive.  
If they weren’t so reactive.  
If they weren’t so politically correct.

If they were more forgiving, then I wouldn’t have to  
apologize.

This elocution, “I’m sorry you were offended”  
illustrates so clearly  
the difference between forgiveness and repentance:

when a situation has happened  
where one person caused a harm to another person  
then the person who caused the harm  
needs to repent.  
And, separately, the person who was harmed

can decide if they want to forgive or not;  
if they want to put down the weight or not.

These are separate things.

The person who does the harm can decide to repent,  
to apologize, to say "I'm sorry"  
or not.

The person who has been harmed can decide to forgive the  
other,  
or not.

They can do that if the one who caused the harm repents,  
but they don't have to.

Repentance doesn't require forgiveness,  
and vice versa –

you can decide to forgive, to put down the weight,  
even if they never say they are sorry.

The decision to forgive is independent of the act of  
repentance.

Because you say you're sorry doesn't mean I have to forgive  
you.

Maybe I'm not ready to do that yet,  
and you saying "I said I'm sorry, you have to let it go!"  
does not, in fact, mean I have to let it go.

And you can decide to forgive, to put down the weight,  
even though they never said they were sorry.

But it helps, doesn't it?

I mean, when someone makes a genuine apology,  
when they repent,  
and you see a change in behavior,  
or you see that they really have internalized what they did,  
and really do understand it,  
well, that really does make it easier to forgive them,  
to let it go.

It doesn't mean you are ready to be friends again – we're gonna talk about that next week.

So, what is a genuine apology?  
We'll get there, but we're not there yet.

Let's try some more bad apologies first . . .

"I'm sorry that I did that, I didn't mean it."  
"It was an accident."

Now, accidents are real.  
Sometimes stuff just happens.

But if we were distracted on their phone and didn't watch where they were going then that's not an accident, not really, is it?

If you were careless, you can say  
"I didn't mean to do xyz."  
But you were careless. And so the consequence was predictable.  
So, saying, "I didn't mean it" feels pretty hollow, doesn't it?

This is what we refer to as the difference between intent and impact.

Intent is what we think we meant, or the story we tell ourselves about what we meant, but it isn't what happened.

Impact is what happened.

Intent centers the person who did the harm,

it says that the key question is what they meant,  
what was in their heart.

Impact centers the person who was harmed,  
it says that they know what happened to them  
better, actually, than the person who did it.

Racism is a classic example.

Andrea says that Donny treated her like a second class  
citizen person,  
because she's Puerto Rican, that he demeaned her,  
made assumptions about her,  
and was generally awful.

And what do we wonder?  
Well, what was in Donny's heart?  
Other people of color say "well, he was okay to me."  
People say, "In his heart, he's not a racist."

But that all centered the person who did it,  
and ignores the testimony of the person who experienced it.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean it"  
is not repentance.  
It's avoidance, it minimizes.  
It centers the person who did the harm,  
and not the person who experienced it.

Here's another apology that centers the wrong person:

"I'm sorry that I did that . . . it's because of how I was  
treated in my childhood,  
and what happened last week,  
and this horrible thing that happened to me earlier today,  
and I and I and I and I"

And the center of that story is the person who is supposedly repenting  
and not the person who was harmed  
again.

Which is another kind of trauma, another kind of harm.

I will confess that in my worst moment,  
this has been the so-called repentance.  
It explains, it contextualizes,  
and it denies that what the harmed person experienced  
is as important as what they person who did the harm  
experienced – let alone more important.

And I repent from this fake apology.  
I resolve not to do this.

To stay, instead, this:

I'm sorry that I did something which hurt you.  
I recognize that it was wrong.  
I care about you, and regret what I did.  
What can I do to repair or make amends for this?

That's it.

That's the good apology.  
That's the beginning of repentance.  
Repentance continues after apology:  
it continues through changed behavior,  
but it begins with the uncomplicated apology,  
with the simple, I'm sorry,  
without adding things to take that away . . .

It took us a long time to find a good children's book this  
week.  
So many of them were "there was a misunderstanding,

and then they said sorry and it was all better.”  
Finding one where someone did something wrong,  
and then apologized, without qualification,  
took a while.

And I love that Ruthie was scared to apologize,  
to walk up that long aisle,  
because that is real, isn't it?

And Martin does not have to forgive her.

He chooses to do so, but he could chose not to.

That's his choice: and the teacher doesn't make him do it,  
which I also like.

If you are a parent or teacher, do not make people forgive.

It's their decision, not yours.

It's also not your role to repent for someone else.

“I'm sorry they did xyz . . .”

The apology needs to come from the person who did it.

Repentance is the work of the person who did the harm.

Repentance does not require forgiveness.

Forgiveness does not require repentance.

Nor does the act of forgiveness  
remove the need for repentance;  
it doesn't let the one who did wrong  
off the hook.

Forgiveness is not repentance.

Repentance is not forgiveness.

Thinking about this sermon this week,  
mulling over what I wanted to say to you today,  
I have been deeply informed by how I spent Wednesday  
and how I spent Friday.

I spent Wednesday on the 8<sup>th</sup> floor of the courthouse,  
serving my third session of my six-month sting  
as a member of the Grand Jury.

We heard case after case,  
and I'm not allowed to talk about the details,  
but over and over again,  
I wanted to see  
if the person we were about to indict –  
who is not present in the courtroom, remember,  
it isn't like a regular jury trial,  
we heard 40 cases in one day,  
just the basic facts,  
should it go to trial or no,  
I kept thinking about repentance.  
The person accused of this crime,  
are they sorry for what they did?  
Do they even know they did something that hurt someone?  
When they stole that car?  
Or hit their girlfriend?  
Or rammed the cop car when trying to drive off?  
Or drove drunk for the fourth time, the fifth time, or more?  
Do they even know they did something worthy of regret?  
And if they do, what do they think about it?

Do they think, "I'm sorry but I didn't mean it?"  
Or, "I'm sorry you were offended."  
Or can they say "I'm sorry." Full stop.

Is this a wake-up call that what they are doing,  
the way they are living isn't working?

What we know about the criminal justice system,  
and I am feeling the weight of this fact every other  
Wednesday like a ton of bricks,  
is that in all likelihood,  
their encounter with the justice system  
will not lead to any repentance at all.  
No hearts will change, no behavior will change,  
and the wheel will just churn  
out more and more victims and criminals.

So what are we even doing?  
I want to shout this in that courtroom –  
what are we even doing?!

And how can there be forgiveness –  
how can those harmed let go of the brick of their anger  
and let the clean air of hope heal their wounds  
if no repentance has happened?

If repentance and forgiveness happens,  
it doesn't happen in that room.

That's Wednesday.

Friday, I spent most of the day  
in a training on domestic violence and sexual assault  
for clergy and other religious leaders.  
This training was offered by the family peace center,  
as they ramp up to provide survivor-centered one-stop care  
in the wake of domestic violence.  
They taught clergy how important it is to speak out against  
domestic violence,  
to say clearly,  
it is not okay. Violence is not okay. Violence is not love.

They talked about the patterns of abuse,  
about how charming abusers can be,  
and how we need to start with saying  
I believe you.

I believe you.

There were a lot of clergy in that room,  
and it gave me hope.

The Rev. Violet Johnicker, at Brooke Rd United Methodist  
and I led part of that training,  
we engaged our colleagues in a conversation  
about violence and repair,  
about their own theology of suffering,  
about what they would say  
when someone came to them and said  
I guess God must be punishing me for something  
to give me this man.

What do you say?

How do you respond to a congregant who values marriage  
and loyalty but is being abused?

These are theological questions of the highest order,  
and it was a powerful conversation,  
where folks of very different theologies engaged it with  
seriousness.

I didn't tell them that I was also doing research for Sunday's  
sermon.

In all seriousness,  
these are the essential religious questions:  
about evil, and suffering, and healing.

And the training makes clear that abusers are really good at  
fake apologies.

They repent every day, sometimes many times a day.

I'm sorry baby, I won't do it again.

.... if you don't make me mad.

That is not an apology.

That's just more abuse.

That is not real repentance.

Real repentance changes behavior on an ongoing basis.

And.

And. Repentance does not require forgiveness.  
They can repent and you can say:  
I do not forgive you.  
Not now, and maybe not ever.

The power to forgive lies in the hands  
of the one who is harmed,  
and it is their decision, and theirs alone,  
to give or withhold, and when.

The two events, Wednesday in the Grand Jury  
and Friday in the domestic violence training,  
were deeply connected.  
About ½ the cases we see in the Grand Jury  
are relationship violence of some kind.  
So knowing that good people are working upstream,  
working to prevent and heal survivors,  
is life-giving.

The take-away, for me, from both my time with the Grand  
Jury  
and with the clergy doing domestic violence training  
is this:  
cheap repentance, fake apologies, the failure to take  
responsibility for your actions:  
this kills.  
It literally kills people.  
Likewise, cheap forgiveness, forced forgiveness,  
forgiveness, weaponized to perpetuate harm,  
kills.  
It literally kills.

And yet there is hope.  
Hope in the conversations we were having,  
and recounting,  
hope in the work:

because real repentance, real change,  
it saves lives.  
Literally saves them.  
People can change.  
Not if we don't insist, and not if they think it's easy,  
but when repentance is real, it saves lives.  
Saves the person who repents, sure,  
but even more importantly to me: it saves others.  
Center them.  
Save them.

And real forgiveness saves lives too.  
It might not lead to a renewal of the connection – that's  
next week, remember –  
but it saves lives in this way:  
it closes the open wound.  
it puts down the brick.  
it says, regardless of whether a real apology has been  
offered or not,  
regardless of that,  
it says,  
I am done being your emotional hostage.  
It puts down the brick.

We all have ways that we are broken things,  
and ways we have broken others,  
and yet,  
sometimes,  
we choose to keep broken things.  
We all have regrets and sorrows.  
Things we have done and things done to us.  
Things we need to apologize for  
and things we need to forgive.

In the Jewish tradition,  
they make clear that these acts are separate:  
seeking forgiveness, and offering it.

One does not require or command the other.  
I appreciate that spiritual wisdom,  
and the sentiment that healing  
is hard, not easy,  
but when it is real,  
when it is real,  
it allows us to part in peace, friends,  
until we meet again.

That is the meaning of the song we now sing,  
a traditional Jewish song of parting:  
peace friends, peace friends, peace, peace  
until we meet again, until we meet again,  
peace, peace.

When repentance is real,  
peace is possible.  
When forgiveness is real,  
peace is possible.  
When we remember that these are different things,  
then friendship is possible.

**March 15, 2020**  
**Forgiveness is Not Reconciliation**  
**Rev. Dr. Matthew Johnson**

If you were not with us the last two Sundays,  
let me take a moment to catch you up.  
Our theme for March is forgiveness.  
And we have been exploring the question of forgiveness  
by drawing distinctions.  
By saying what forgiveness is not.

It is not forgetting.  
That was two weeks ago –  
that forgiving doesn't mean you forget what happened.  
But that you learn from it.

No gaslighting! Don't do it!

This is one of the key things that the folks in south Africa realized.

You cannot ask people to forget.  
That is another kind of crime, really.  
To just sweep it under the rug.

That was two weeks ago,  
and then last week,  
we talked about how forgiveness is not repentance.

Forgiveness is what the person who was harmed does –  
when they decide that they want to put down the weight,  
when they don't want to be held hostage by the weight  
anymore.

Repentance is what the person who did the harm needs to  
do –

to apologize and show evidence of changed behavior.  
We talked about fake apologies,  
like "I'm sorry you were offended" and so forth.

And how forgiveness and repentance are different steps –  
that you can forgive even if they didn't repent,  
and the fact that they repented  
doesn't mean you have to forgive.

This was another key insight that Desmond Tutu  
had in South Africa –

that if there was going to be forgiveness,  
there had to be a full and honest confession  
by those who did wrong.

Full and honest.  
bygones are not bygones

Many didn't do it.  
But some did.

They told the truth,  
and that is what many – not all – but many of the victims  
wanted most of all –  
the truth.

So this week, we're doing the third and last of the set:  
that forgiveness is not reconciliation.

Forgiveness is not reconciliation.

I can express this in a single sentence:  
just because I forgive you doesn't mean I want to be your  
friend.

Just because there is forgiveness  
doesn't mean there is relationship.

Just because someone decides to put down the brick of a  
grudge,  
doesn't mean  
that you're gonna be best buddies.

And it doesn't mean that further repair isn't needed.  
It doesn't mean that you don't have to try to heal the  
wounds.

Forgiveness sets up the possibility of reconciliation.  
But it doesn't finish that process, and it doesn't require it.

South Africa is a good example, and that's why I focused  
here.

Mandela and Tutu accomplished the most important goal  
of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission:

they stopped a brutal civil war.

That would have happened, they knew it,  
and the commission was able to prevent that,  
which is

AMAZING.

It is one of the few examples in history of this happening!  
Let us give credit where credit is due –  
the commission saved thousands and thousands of lives,  
it gave south Africa a chance to thrive  
for former enemies to learn to live together.

And, Bishop Tutu himself has said that the remedy  
was too individualistic – and the social reconciliation,  
the social justice, the investment and repair of  
neighborhoods,  
that didn't happen.  
Not in the way it needed too.

they did not forget,  
there was repentance,  
there was forgiveness,  
but reconciliation? only somewhat.

It's still a journey, it's not over.  
They are doing the slow precision work  
of healing wounds,  
of repairing,  
of caring for each other,  
and, really, of changing the way folks think of each other:  
to grasp the fullness of the claim:  
there are no other people's children,  
that we are beloved to each other,  
that we have an obligation to care for each other.

We are really seeing that now, aren't we?  
That we need to care for each other?  
We're reframing from the question of "what keeps me safe"  
to the question of "what keeps us safe."  
To community care.

Empty seats, cancelled schools, postponed gatherings:  
all these things are a sign that we care for each other,  
that there are no other people's children,  
and no other people's lungs.  
That we belong to each other.

But we do make mistakes.  
And so "forgive we must"  
so that we can begin repair and reconciliation:  
if we wish to live in community with each other,  
we need to be courageous in our neighborliness.

We're gonna make mistakes in this crisis –  
and I hope we can all learn to be less perfect and more  
loving.  
And we're gonna need to do some forgiving.

Though let me say: forgiveness, for me, comes after  
responsibility is taken,  
and reconciliation, for me, comes when justice is done.  
When folks in power are trying to care for others, and don't  
get it 100% right,  
that's okay. I love you for trying, and we are figuring this  
out.  
When folks in power are protecting their own reputation,  
their own profit,  
when they act with malice, when they ignore science,  
when they know better but they don't do better,  
then we have a problem.  
And reconciliation won't happen, not for me,  
until there is justice.

I'm talking about national politics, of course,  
but I could just as easily be talking about the relationships  
between people.  
People any two or more people.

Folks are anxious right now –  
and just wait until your kids are home for ANOTHER week.  
And siblings are on each other's nerves . . .  
we're gonna need to do some forgiving,  
so we can stay in community.  
And that's because we care about each other,  
and we care about community.  
That's true for the church –  
if our anxiety plays out in a way that hurts someone,  
unintentionally, then we can apologize,  
and try to reconcile.  
Show each other grace.

And it shows up in our family and friendships, too.

One thing I want to say, clearly,  
before I get to the joy of reconciliation,  
when it comes to this interpersonal  
reconciliation is the thesis statement:  
you don't have to be friends, even if you forgive them.  
It is not required.

One of my dear friends has been struggling with this:  
she got dumped a while back.  
It happens.  
Then the girl who dumped her started dating another  
mutual friend of theirs.  
That stung!  
And so my friend, she went to therapy, and talked it out.  
And after a while, she forgave the dumper.  
She put down the brick and let it go.  
But she also doesn't want to hang out with them.  
She doesn't want to talk to them,  
or see them.  
She's not bitter, she's not stuck emotionally,  
she just doesn't want to be their friend.  
And she doesn't have to.

You're not required to do that.

There are, of course, much more difficult examples:  
I've been careful, every week where we've been talking  
about forgiveness,  
to make clear that domestic abuse  
and intimate partner violence is wrong,  
that if you are a victim or survivor, I believe you,  
and you are NOT required to reconcile, or even to forgive.

I want to be clear about this in general:  
you don't have to reconcile.  
It might not be good or healthy for you to do so.

And – this is important, too –  
sometimes, if you do want to reconcile, but the other person  
doesn't,  
you need to drop it.  
This is a rule in A.A.  
You make amends when doing so would not cause further  
harm.  
When doing so would not cause further harm.

If someone asks you to leave them alone, honor that  
request.

Consent and mutuality are required for reconciliation to be  
real.

That's what south Africa learned – they could move towards  
it,  
but getting there will take generations, because of the harm  
done.

Here in this country, we haven't stopped the harm,  
let alone told the truth about what happened and is  
happening,

let alone take responsibility –  
so how could we have real reconciliation?

Until we see that there are no other people's children,  
how can we get there?

That's the work.

That's the work we need to do now,  
and that's the work that we will need to do when this is over  
–  
after we mourn our losses, and comfort each other,  
we need to work on rebuilding a society  
where we do see each other's children as ours,  
where we see our neighbor everywhere,  
where we tell the truth  
and live courageously.

Because, here is the kicker:  
when all the people involved want to be reconciled,  
and treat each other with respect,  
omg.  
It's beautiful.  
It is absolutely beautiful.

Right?

The strongest marriage I know almost fell apart,  
but they got honest, they made changes, they forgave,  
and to see them care for each other – it is beautiful.

Some of the most real friendships I've ever had,  
we grew distant, something got in the way for a while,  
but then we reconnected.  
We told some truth about what happened,  
and instead of letting the friendship live or die by chance,  
we got intentional about making time for each other.

I've seen it between parents and children,  
between siblings,  
and I've seen it in congregations, too –  
when after a conflict, when folks get into the habit of saying  
my turn, my turn,  
they finally come to see that it takes both of them  
to make the teeter-totter go up and down.

With all of our voices and all of our visions  
friends, we could make such sweet harmony.

We have to value each other and we have to decide to live  
that out;

in this moment of crisis, more than ever:  
we have to decide to be intentional about connecting –  
not holding hands – give that a rest –  
but making the call, sending the note,  
when both parties want to connect, to reconnect,  
do it.

Now is the time.  
It can be beautiful.  
It can be liberating.  
It can be joyous.  
It can be life.

We can live for each other,  
and build for tomorrow  
a nobler world.  
That is our calling,  
in freedom, in justice, in love,  
to learn to reconcile,  
to be one.

**March 29, 2020**  
**Religious Truths and Spiritual Truth**  
**Rev. Dr. Matthew Johnson**

All along your heart knew.  
The horrifying blessing.  
the cracked heart of our salvation.  
there is no them.  
everything that happens  
happens to us all.

The cracked heart of our salvation.

When I read this poem, a few days ago,  
by my colleague Lynn Ungar,  
I was laid low. Laid out. Laid bare,  
by heart cracked open.

The cracked heart of our salvation.

There is no them.

Right now, right now, this moment:  
we are feeling the full stretch,  
the full polarity  
isolation and connection  
community and individualism  
unity and freedom

We are feeling the full thing,  
and it seems to me that we have to get down deep  
get down  
before language  
under concepts  
before we name what it is,  
let alone explain it away,  
get down  
to the root of the matter

our longing, our fear, our fragile beautiful tender bodies,  
get down  
to the root.

where there is no them.  
the cracked heart of our salvation,  
the real truth:  
we belong to each other.

The real truth.

But we're feeling the stretch, aren't we?

Because some of us, in some states, we are physically  
isolating,  
trying to flatten the curve,  
we are doing what needs to be done  
kids bored on day 2, let alone day 6,  
technology not working very well,  
by ourselves, maybe, in our home, and aching  
aching for our friends,  
for our favorite pub,  
for our workout class,  
for another person, enfleshed.  
But we are doing our part, and our leaders are doing their  
part.

And in other states,  
nothing.

No stay-at-home order.  
Beeches open,  
parties happening.  
People still saying "it's not a big deal"  
The Lt. Gov. of Texas, on TV, with a straight face,

I'm sure, he says, that grandparents are willing to die so their grandchildren will have a better economy.

He hasn't met my grandmother, obviously.

And I think some of us wonder:  
how can someone think such a thing is true?

How can they think it is true?

This pandemic is revealing things that were visible, but making them more clear.

Revealing the tenuous nature of our health care system, our economy,  
our family finances, our social infrastructure.

It is also making starkly clear what a lot of us have been noticing  
for a long time:  
widely divergent ideas of truth.

If you feel like this polarization of truth has gotten worse,  
you're not alone.

Erza Klien, in his new book, *Why We're Polarized*, notes the way in which  
we have created mega-identities:  
if you are conservative, you go to an evangelical church,  
you're white, own a gun,  
like country music and drive a pickup.  
if you're liberal, you are an atheist, or maybe an  
Episcopalian, you listen to NPR, drive a Prius, and love  
farmer's market's.

We have our own tribal media, our own bubble, our warped  
sense of the world.

And yet these shorthand stereotypes about our divisions aren't fully true:  
a lot of liberals are missionary Baptists who listen to R&B, actually,  
and our idea of a more unified past isn't true either. We were divided then too.  
Walter Cronkite did not, in fact, tell the whole truth – the supposed unanimity of the 1950's hid deep divisions over race, gender, sexuality, and economics. We are not served by literally white-washing history.

Klein himself argues that these kinds of group divisions and group identities have always been with us. They are exacerbated in our media environment, but it is part of our DNA to be part of a group – we need the group to survive, and we trust the group to define what is true for us.

We've always had this issue of divergent truths: of tribal understandings of facts, and what they mean.

In our interconnected world, in our pandemic world, in the nuclear world, in the world of climate change, those divisions are deadly.  
But the divisions have always been with us.

The Romans didn't understand why the Jews insisted there was only one god.  
The Indians could not fathom the English diet.  
Buddhists don't understand why you'd want to live forever when the goal is to stop the cycle of rebirth over and over again.  
And Packers fans honestly do not get Bears fans. And vice versa.

Our sense of group identity gives us a sense of belonging, a sense of meaning. That's a good thing. It gives us rituals, habits, totems, joy and purpose. That's all fine.

But when groups have wildly different ideas about what's true, and they need to live together in one community, in one nation, or in one world, well, then that's hard. Indeed, often, it's deadly.

That's when we need to find a common truth, underneath all the different truths, that can draw people together, a common table around which we can gather – we don't all have to eat the same food, but we need to be able to order from the same menu, and sit at the same table.

When Spitty Tata chose this topic – how we could have common truth in this world of so many different truths – we could have no idea how relevant this question would be for our current moment.

Because common truth – and common practice based on this truth – is vital for our survival right now. It doesn't work if only some of us practice physical distancing. It doesn't work if people hoard what they need, and don't think about what others need. It doesn't work if we can't work together.

Nothing reveals the moral bankruptcy of excessive individualism like a pandemic.

And yet, there are those among us who cling to their own, unscientific and irrational truth.

In ways that have already been, and will be, deadly.

We need to have some common wisdom, some common truth –

without erasing difference, without white-washing the beauty that can be variety.

These are essential human questions, and I won't solve it in 20 minutes.

And before I want to even offer some tentative ideas about the way forward,

I want to know that Unitarian Universalists are not immune from this habit,

of endorsing our own particular truth, and confusing what feels right with what is right.

We do it in our own community, when we think we all share the same cultural touchstones –

NPR, prius's, and so on.

There are Unitarians who like country music and pick up trucks, too.

At our best, our commitments to reason and science are a guard against hubris,

and thinking we know the answers for everyone else;

at our worst, our commitments to reason and science delude us into thinking

we are more scientific and rational than everyone else.

Which isn't true.

We have to get out of our bubble, whatever bubble we are in.

This is the first thing, the first suggested solution, to the problem of divergent truth.

We need to get more perspectives, listen more –

and I don't mean with folks that you disagree with actually –  
I don't think that's as useful.

I mean listening to folks you don't even know  
who are having a conversation that you're not part of.

Listen more.  
Talk . . . less.

That's one.

And at the same time – and this qualifies as one of those  
religious paradoxes where two things are true at one –  
at the same time, we need more plain speaking about when  
people lie.

We need to use the word "lie" – not exaggerate, not spin,  
not obfuscate –  
the word obfuscate obfuscates itself, it's so unclear what it  
means –  
we mean, they "lied."  
that's a lie.

Say so.

Upper elementary kids learn the distinction between "fact"  
and "opinion."

Adults need a refresher. If you state a fact, it should be  
true.

I really do think, politically and socially, those two things:  
get out of our bubble and call a lie a lie  
would make a big difference.

But the real solution to this issue is much deeper than this.  
It's . . . surprise . . . theological. It is a spiritual question.

Our truth is just a pinprick  
in mystery's velvet curtain.

We cling to these truths, these particular and tribal truths,  
and yet the universe cries out, with the light of trillions of  
stars,  
sings with the vibrations of electrons,  
the universe cries out,  
"be humble!"

The truth sings at every moment, in every soul,  
along the ages,  
it sings in Sinai and Athens and Concord,  
and in hospital rooms and gardens,  
it wails in grief and shouts in laughter,  
the truth, the real truth, prowls like a lion in a cage,  
never holding still, always moving.

Our cracked heart of salvation.

if we think our stories about reality are reality,  
then we have misled ourselves.  
the map is not the territory,  
and the finger pointing at the moon is not the moon itself.

If we want to move underneath the tribal versions of truth  
which threaten our very survival,  
we must recognize that we are interwoven,  
and truth is interwoven,  
our past, our future, our present is interwoven,  
that single garment of destiny,  
and that this doesn't work  
if we don't work together.

It begins when we recognize that there was never a them.  
There was never a them.

It is ironic, of course, that in this time of physical distancing,  
we are experiencing our interdependence more than ever.

You don't always know what you have until it's missing.

Let us live in peace: Daoona Nayeesh.

Make the circle wider still until it embraces all the living.

The story of the great mosque in cordova is a true story,  
and the mosque still stands to this day,  
and the beauty of the grounds,  
and seasons of life, the shouts of children,  
of whatever race and station, remind us that we are made  
for each other.

This moment has made so very clear:  
we are in this together.  
start there. end there.  
The most important spiritual truth?  
The most important religious truth?

We belong to each other.

All the rest is style. Taste and preference.  
Those things matter, they give us our identity.  
And as long as we cling to the deep truth,  
the one under all the words,  
then no differences of opinion  
need sunder us from each other.

Do you hear?

Through the roar and rush, and all the noise of the world,  
listen more deeply,  
to the sound of souls,  
the dreams, the dare, the tears, the heart beat,  
do you hear?

That's what's true.  
That our hearts beat, that we long for love, belonging,  
peace,  
and hope.  
Listen for that song.  
Return the song.  
Listen.  
Sing.

And may the sound of our dreams  
**resound in our living.**