

Forgiveness

Today I wish to talk about forgiveness: if we adopted an attitude of forgiveness what would that mean for our lives? If we were to retell the story of our lives, with us as the main character, I should imagine that there would be points we will talk about the times that we have been the forgiven ... and also the forgiver.

Forgiveness, throughout the world religions, is paramount. Often in the Abrahamic traditions the people of faith ask God for forgiveness. As the model of spirituality that is set out by Jesus in 'his' prayer states, 'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those that have trespassed against us'. So at the heart of these faiths it is already assumed that it is part and parcel of the human condition that we are likely to make mistakes when we act contrary to our highest aspirations and in turn need to seek forgiveness.

Could anybody here tell me what the golden rule of religion is? It is the call to 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' Although we have aspects of our personality to which we ultimately aspire (to accepting, open-hearted and open-minded), we find that in life we are dealt a particular hand where it is clear that people don't subscribe to the 'golden rule' – not everyone interacts with us with this precept in mind, which may leave us feeling hurt and uncared for. When we feel such an injustice has been inflicted upon us one of the most difficult things that we can do is forgive. Maybe on this day we find ourselves in a position holding resentment or animosity towards others. Maybe on this day we feel angry towards life or God for the situations that we find ourselves in, or maybe we treat and judge ourselves too harshly.

In all these situations, if we want to have a happy, peaceful life we must learn to forgive others, life and ourselves. Now this may not come naturally, and more often than not it takes effort and

dedication ... but if we want to be truly free we must forgive, because the alternative is to stay where we currently stand and never really taste true freedom.

When I lived in West Dorset I had a friend named Brother ... let's say Peter. I had known him for a couple of years and established a relationship which was based on our mutual love of spirituality. One day Peter said to me that an old friend of his was going to visit and he warned me how volatile his friend could be, especially when he had a few drinks inside him. So the evening came, and we met in a pub named 'The Bottle Inn', and sure enough Peter was there with his friend. Fairly early on in the evening there was a conversation about how I was going to train to become a Unitarian minister. Peter's friend seemed to get angry with me from that point until eventually he jumped up from the table with his fists clenched and shouted, 'My stepfather abused me whilst I was growing up, so tell what would you about that!' I replied, 'Well, you have to forgive him.' His face turned an even brighter red, and before the inevitable happened, I said to him, 'You have to forgive your stepfather for yourself, not for him. You're the one carrying the burden, and he is walking around unaware of the distress he has caused you.' He immediately started to calm down, and we finished our evening peacefully.

We can tell from this anecdote that the object of our hate or animosity is often blissfully unaware of our feelings, especially if we have not had the chance for resolution. I have heard a saying that resentment or hatred is like drinking poison and waiting for it to kill your enemy!

It is my opinion that we need to be reminded regularly of forgiveness – not as a moral religious requirement, as in we'd better forgive or we might go to hell, but as a spiritual practice that releases us from the heavy burden that we carry in life. It is always better to travel light.

I'm sure that many of you know that we are approaching the Muslim month of fasting known as Ramadan. In order for Muslims to get the most of fasting, they align themselves with the poor and remove obstacles that stand between them and their creator. To this end they mark a period before Ramadan that is known as *shab e barat*, the night of forgiveness. In this practice adherents are encouraged to recite certain prayers with the specific intention of letting go of resentments and ill will toward others and themselves in attempt to have a clearer heart or mind for the fast.

Although there be many aspects of such a vigil that we would find difficult, I think that the heart of the idea is good in that it brings forgiveness into focus.

Have you ever heard of the phrase 'heaping coals on people's heads'? It is a biblical quote from Proverbs and is expanded and repeated in Romans in the New Testament, when it talks about forgiving enemies: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this you heap burning coals on his head.' Quite a gruesome line, but its meaning is valuable, as often it is better to return love for anger.

An example of this occurred shortly after I moved to Birmingham following my ministerial training. I was driving into the church to finish off some work. Suddenly a car overtook me and swerved in front of the car in front, preventing it from continuing its journey. Immediately the man in the car that overtook jumped out with a spanner and made his way shouting to the car in front of me. The man in the car in front of me jumped out of the car and kept a safe distance from the angry spanner man, who at this stage was ranting and gesticulating in anger towards him. His anger was responded to with gentle, calm words, at a safe distance, and soon the ranting died down, the gesticulations diminished, and the man with the spanner returned to his car. This was a very explicit example of how anger can often lead to anger, and two angry people will not sort anything out until the anger has died down and dialogue begins.

I have, throughout my life, had to forgive others and at other times had to be forgiven. When I look back at the times when I have had anger or resentment in my heart towards someone, more often than not it has been a veiled anger towards myself and a projection I have placed upon the situation. It seems strange to look back and to briefly remember the feelings that I felt, as now those situations are in my 'rear view mirror', and I feel a little stupid for letting my emotions run away with me.

Resentment and anger are ways to hold on to perceived injustice, and there is an appropriate time for this. But there is a tipping point. How long do we hold on to these things? How long will we let a circumstance dictate the quality of the life that we are living? A refusal to forgive is maybe an indicator that we refuse to accept that people may perceive a situation differently. Perhaps, more profoundly, it is a sign that *we* don't see reality as it is, which Echart Tolle states 'is an exercise in futility'. Reality is reality is reality, and no amount of wishing, lamenting or anger can change that. Sometimes we need to draw a line and find ways that we can move on ... not for the benefit of others but to benefit ourselves.

Forgiving others does not mean forgetting what it was that hurt us. It means acknowledging the circumstances that led to the behaviour. Forgiveness also means letting go of the anger we may hold against ourselves for having been vulnerable, or a victim of another's rage, selfishness or fear. Forgiveness allows us to have a deeper relationship with ourselves and others.

When Jesus speaks of forgiveness he uses is the word *shbag*, which means literally to untie. So to forgive means to release ourselves from the bonds that keep us held back. We heard in the Aesop fable earlier that the father of the sons told them to untie the sticks, which they were then able to break easily. By working together, by not accepting their separateness from one another, they

became stronger. So too with life. Our anger and resentment separates us from the life within and the lives outside of ourselves, and an inability to forgive can further deepen that separation.

Forgiveness may not come immediately; often it will take some time, as Psalm 103 in Nan C.

Merrills *Praying the Psalms* states:

As spring and summer follow autumn and winter so our lives have their seasons. Help us to live in this moment, awaiting your perfect timing in things. May we be patient with ourselves and others. May the people break the bonds of fear-filled oppression, may they bless one another with forgiveness.

The fear-filled oppression in this sense is the burden that we place upon ourselves to keep up resentment and anger with the notion that, if we firmly hold on to those feelings, somehow we are bringing balance and justice into the world and at the same time protecting ourselves from any future negative experience. Friends, at the heart of the theme of forgiveness is the issue of freedom. Let me remind you of the poem from the work of Hafiz that we heard in our spoken meditation:

*Forgiveness is part of the treasure you need
To craft your falcon wings
And return
To your true realm of
Divine freedom.*

As seekers after truth, what is it that you won't forgive in the journey toward ultimate freedom?

Life can be wonderful but not if we insist on carrying the baggage of the past with us. In my mind there is a better way to be, and it is we all need to be reminded of it often: forgive life, others and ourselves so we may be free to follow our bliss.