

*Turning to Peace – A Sermon for Yom Kippur*  
September 20, 2015

An old Dennis the Menace cartoon showed Dennis sitting beside his father in a car. (This is back before the front passenger seat was declared off-limits to children). The car has just gone through an intersection with a traffic light. Dennis says to his father, “How do you know when the yellow light means ‘slow down’ and when it means ‘speed up’?”

This question became pertinent to an acquaintance last week. As she approached an intersection, the light turned yellow. She slowed, and brought the car to a stop as the light changed to red. The driver behind her, who had interpreted yellow as “speed up” rear ended the first driver. I heard this story several days after the incident, and of course I was concerned and asked my acquaintance how she was doing. I was expecting to hear about the damage to her car or possibly about pinched nerves or an aching neck. But the woman whose car had been hit, said, “I’m feeling really bad for the driver of the other car. You could see how upset she was when she got out. I’ve been in her place, and I know how bad she feels. I wish I could tell her I understand and I forgive her. But it would look a little weird for me to track her down to tell her I forgive her, wouldn’t it?”

Would it? My acquaintance isn’t observing the High Holy Days right now – she’s Methodist, not Jewish – but is it ever wrong to offer forgiveness?

With the International Day of Peace tomorrow and Yom Kippur beginning at sundown on Tuesday, this seemed an appropriate time to talk about forgiveness, but I’ve been thinking about the topic since last June, after Dylann Roof murdered nine people at Bible study at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston. Just days later, relatives of the victims addressed him in court and offered forgiveness:

"I forgive you," the daughter of Ethel Lance, one of the victims, said to him. "I will never talk to her ever again, never be able to hold her again. I forgive you and have mercy on your soul. You hurt me, you hurt a lot of people, but I forgive you."

And the granddaughter of Daniel Simmons, another of the victims, said to him: "Hate won't win. My grandfather and the other victims died at the hands of hate. Everyone's plea for your soul is proof that they lived in love and their legacies live in love."

Like many people, I was struck by how quickly they were able to turn to forgiveness. I find myself still seething years after much, much smaller hurts than the violent death of someone I'd loved. Reaction in the media to these family members forgiving Dylann Roof was mixed – some praised their depth of faith; others commentators argued that yet again African Americans were being forced to forgive their persecutors. As the African American writer Roxane Gay put it: “Black people forgive because we need to survive. We have to forgive time and time again while racism or white silence in the face of racism continues to thrive. We

have had to forgive slavery, segregation, Jim Crow laws, lynching, inequity in every realm, mass incarceration, voter disenfranchisement, inadequate representation in popular culture, micro-aggressions and more. We forgive and forgive and forgive and those who trespass against us continue to trespass against us.”

Forgiveness always seems to be controversial. At the time of the shooting of 10 girls in a school in the Amish community of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, in 2006 the families of the girls and other members of the Amish community offered forgiveness to the family of the shooter, who had killed himself after shooting the girls. Again some praised their ability to forgive while others criticized them for accepting violence. Others said that only the girls themselves, five of whom died, could forgive what had been done to them.

So when should we forgive and why?

It does seem that groups who have been persecuted, like the Amish, the Jews, and African Americans, have a stronger theology of forgiveness than cultures and religions who are more used to being in power. Why is that? Perhaps peoples who are used to being attacked need to learn not to let anger and fear define them. Forgiveness is power. Offering forgiveness to someone who has harmed you means that they cannot define you as a victim. Whether you say the words “I forgive you” or silently let the anger go from your heart, the act of forgiving gives you control of your life.

Think of the times you have been hurt and nursed that hurt until it grows bigger and bigger. In the worst case, it can take over your life. In the Harry Potter books, for instance, Severus Snape allows his life to become defined by the slights and bullying he experienced from Harry’s father when they were both students at Hogwarts. Had he been able to let go of the hurt and the anger, he wouldn’t have been as interesting a character, but he would have been a happier one.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, the author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* tells the story of a woman who came to see him. Her husband had deserted her and their three children to run off with another woman. He’d bought a beautiful new house and was about to remarry and move into it, while she struggled to pay the mortgage on the house they’d shared. She asked the rabbi what she should do. Kushner told her: “What your husband has done to you is terrible, but you must forgive him and move on with your life.” She was shocked. “Forgive him? Why should I forgive him after all that he has done to me? He doesn't deserve it.” Rabbi Kushner explained that he wasn't advising her to forgive him for the husband's sake or even for the sake of their children. He was telling her to do it for herself. He said: “The anger you feel towards him is like a hot rock that you are holding in your hand ready to smash him with. But he has moved away, and all you are doing with it is burning your hand.”

How often have you burned your hand with that hot rock? Twenty years after my trust was betrayed by a mentor, I still find myself on occasion nursing the hurt and anger. For a long time I thought I would forgive when the words “I’m sorry” had been said, but since at this point it’s not likely I’ll ever hear those words, it’s time to stop waiting. So how do I, how do you, move to forgiveness?

Everett Worthington, a professor of psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University, who has studied forgiveness, has come up with a five-step process which he himself has used to forgive some severe hurts. He uses the acronym REACH:

- Recall
- Empathize
- Altruistic
- Commit
- Hold

First, you “recall” the incident with all the emotions it brought – hurt, grief, fear, anger.

Then you “empathize” with the person who wronged you – you imagine their circumstances, what led them to the words or the action that wounded you, how they might be feeling now, even though for a variety of reasons they may not be able to say they are sorry.

Then, you give them the “altruistic gift” of forgiveness, remembering yourself how good it felt to be forgiven by someone you wronged.

Next, you “commit” yourself to forgive by telling another person that you’re doing it. You might tell the person who hurt you, or your minister, a counselor, or a friend.

Finally, “hold” onto forgiveness. Even when feelings of anger surface, keep reminding yourself that you’ve already forgiven.

Studies have shown that forgiveness isn’t just good for our spirits. It relieves stress, lowers blood pressure, and can even help you jump higher! In one recent study 46 participants were divided into two groups: One set were asked to write about a time when someone wronged them and they forgave the person, and the other group was asked about a time when they did not forgive the offender. Afterward, all of the subjects were led outside and asked to jump up and down. On average, the forgiving group jumped seven centimeters higher.

Before you start thinking about offering forgiveness, though, a few words on what forgiveness is not:

Forgiveness is not pardon: offering forgiveness does not mean that what was done to you was okay or that you should let it happen to you again. Forgiveness is not absolution.

Second, only the person hurt can offer forgiveness. When Roxane Gay wrote that she couldn’t forgive Dylann Roof, that was true, though not for the reasons she gave. Dylann Roof didn’t harm her directly. Only the victims could forgive him for shooting them. Their relatives, as they did, could only forgive him for the grief he caused them, for the loss of the mother never able to be held again.

Nor can you forgive a societal wrong – you can't forgive slavery, racism, classism, or sexism. You can only forgive the person who enslaved you or who used one of these attitudes to treat you wrong. And offering that forgiveness should actually free you (and perhaps the person who wronged you) to work together to change the system which allowed this harm to happen.

People raised in the Christian tradition especially can have difficulty seeing the difference between forgiving an individual and condoning the offense. Sometimes they feel they are supposed to pardon all and forgive all, following Jesus' example of forgiving those who crucified him as "knowing not what they" did. But Jesus didn't forgive those who crucified others or say that the policies on crucifixion should be allowed to continue: he just cleared his own heart of anger and offered the space for his executioners even in his last moment to see him as a human being still with moral power even as he hung on the cross.

Some of the Gospel accounts do indicate that Jesus' forgiveness did bear fruit and that one of the Roman officers and others in the crowd did regret the part they had played in Jesus' death. In Nickel Mines today, the mother of the shooter is now caring for one of the girls injured by her son, instead of moving away from the community as she originally thought she would have to do. She says it was the forgiveness and compassion offered her by the families of the girls which allowed her to stay in the community and grapple with her own shame and anger. So perhaps it wouldn't be weird for my acquaintance to track down the driver of the other car and let her know that she forgives her – maybe that's just what the other driver needs to hear.

Forgiveness gives us power to transform ourselves and our world. How might your forgiving someone who has hurt you open you to larger life? How might it open the heart of the other person? As Martin Buber wrote, "Forgiveness is the great Yes." How will you say "yes" to life? Will you join me over these next few days before the Book of Life closes on Yom Kippur in moving to forgiveness?