

“Spoken Mercy”

A Sermon by
The Reverend Bill Clark

Mercy: Compassionate treatment of an offender, an enemy; a disposition to be kind and forgiving. Mercy.

Mercy is not a word we Unitarian Universalist **hear** very often. Mercy is not a word we Unitarian Universalist **use** very often. It’s not a word that surfaces in our liturgy. We do not find it written into our hymnbook. We don’t find it easily flowing from our lips. Mercy. And yet this is one of the central themes found in all Judeo-Christian religious denominations. Mercy.

This Wednesday evening at sunset begins the Jewish holy day of Rosh Hashanah. Rosh Hashanah begins a ten-day period of reflection and repentance during which Jewish people examine their lives, pray for forgiveness and ask God’s blessing for the coming year. It is a time for mercy. These days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are called ‘The Days of Awe.’ The theme of these ten days is reconciliation between people as a necessary prelude to reconciliation with God. The climax of these ten days is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the holiest day in the Jewish year. On this day, it is said God opens the book of life and after examining people’s lives and their repentance of the previous ten days, writes a final decision on their future. The saying to one another; is to have a good signature.

I love the deliberateness and determination of these ten Days of Awe. For they are days deliberately set aside for intense self-examination. They are days set apart from the everyday when determined people of faith can turn their lives around. Rabbi’s often call the intervening days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur as being characterized by the **obligation** to do the work of turning one’s life around. There is intense introspection and attempts to reconcile one’s failings in the past with one’s desire to be a better human being in the New Year.”

“Turn us around O God, and bring us back toward you.”

To be a better human being in the New Year. This is the simple yet profound spirit of the High Holy Days. It is a time for going inward for self-examination of one’s life. Whether you are a Jew and worship Yahweh, a Christian and worship Jesus, a Buddhist and walking the path of Dhamma, a humanist and believe in the power of reason and science, a pagan and follow the earth centered

traditions, a Muslim and pray to Allah, or a Unitarian Universalist and live by a set of principles, the goal of all of these traditions are to make us better human beings. I love the tradition that comes every September with the days of awe when we are given time and permission for the difficult and risky task of repentance, forgiveness and spoken mercy.

Now I understand/realize much of this talk of turning ourselves around and bringing us back to god – may seem a bit too high in theology for some. But please remember that our UU faith and tradition has its roots – it's deep roots in the Christian-Judeo traditions. If necessary, I invite you to translate or re-interpret the god phrases to turning back to an ethical and moral life – returning us to live out our principles – simply put to be a better human being! As Thomas Jefferson said; “It is in our lives and not our words where our religion must be read.” And Jefferson closely aligned himself with the Unitarians of his time.

So how do we Unitarian-Universalist understand the high holy days of our Jewish brothers and sisters? How can we incorporate the ideal of turning ourselves around – turning us back to an ethical and moral way of living – “Turn us around to god”

First and foremost we must accept the probability and perhaps the fact that yes, we too, as UU's may – just may have strayed away from all that we hold up as ethical, moral or sacred. We are not a perfect denomination. Lacking a theology of sin or evil – we UU's are often accused of being a tad Pollyanna'ish in our thinking when it comes to evil, sin and suffering. There is the old tale when comparing Unitarians and Universalist. The Universalist believed god was too good and benevolent to condemn anyone to eternal damnation. The Unitarians believe THEY were too good and benevolent to be condemn.

Yet we can see some of our straying, if you will, and our continued challenges as we finally faced the discriminatory practices within our hiring at the highest levels within the UUA. Much of this was addressed at the General Assembly of this past June. However, in one pledge card collected at one of **our** worship services at our General Assembly, the pledge was filled out as the following: Name: “Cheap White Person; Address; “White Healing Space; City: Racism; Email: I hate black people@gmail.com The pledge for \$.70

“Turn us around O God, and bring us back toward you.”

How do we as liberal religious thinkers respond to such blind hatred and bigotry? Do we brush it aside as one amongst so many of us – so what does it matter? Is there any room for mercy – spoken mercy – in such circumstances?

“And yet pardon is the instrument placed into our fragile hands to attain serenity of heart,” states Pope Francis. To let go of anger, wrath, violence, and revenge are necessary conditions to living joyfully.” These words from Pope Francis point us back to a kind of failure—a dispossession of the world that we expected, of who we thought we were, as we move towards the unknown future after forgiveness.

When we receive mercy, he continues, we are put on a path to disruption because we let go of our confidence about the direction we’ve been going; we give up on the certainty of the itineraries that map our lives. When we receive mercy, we find ourselves on an unpredictable path. That’s what it means to be at the mercy of another—for your life to be exposed to their life. Mercy means vulnerability, and vulnerability is the soil in which the seed of joy grows.

There is a certainty to what is on the other side of vengeance, of victory and triumph. Those possibilities are thinkable. But mercy is an invitation to a mystery, to a way of life beyond the limits of what we thought possible. Mercy means riskiness because we’re never in a position to control what will happen to our lives. Mercy is a mystery because we are being led into a world we didn’t create, into a life we didn’t imagine, down a path we hadn’t seen before.

It was a cold night in February 2007 when the car holding Chris Williams and his family was hit by a 17-year-old drunk driver. Immediately, Chris checked on his children in the back seat as he quickly realized his 11-year-old son and 9-year-old daughter had died. Then he watched, his pregnant wife sitting next to him exhale for the last time. Meanwhile, Williams was in so much pain he could barely move his arm to turn off his car’s engine.

However, before he had even been rescued from his car, Williams said he had this thought: “Whoever has done this to us, I forgive them. I don’t care what the circumstances were; I forgive them.” He proved as good as his word, going on to publicly forgive his family’s killer and developing a relationship with him and his family. Today, Williams is a motivational speaker, sharing his incredible story of healing and forgiveness and inspiring others to extend mercy and forgiveness as well.”

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Rabbi Kedar writes; “Forgiveness is an act of kindness toward the person who has wronged you. (pause) Forgiveness is an act of kindness toward your self. It is not about what your offender deserves; **it is about what you deserve.**”

For me forgiveness and mercy are acts of self-care and self-love. It is releasing the hold that anger, hatred, ill will and animosity may have on you. It is releasing it, first out of self-care and self-love, and then showing mercy and releasing it out of compassion for those who may have hurt or harmed.

“Blessed are the man and woman who have put an end to their hatred and keep their hearts open.” Can we grant this to the author of a wretched pledge card?

To be truthful, how many of us have said things we later regretted? How many of us have done things we know were hurtful or harmful, but our anger got in our way? I shouldn’t have done that. I should not have said those things. I should not have hurt you, I am sorry. We are not monsters. We too, are human beings, struggling at times with life’s many emotions. Spoken Mercy turns us toward the right path and leads us on to forgiveness.

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Mercy is the action that results from the integrity of repentance and the courage of forgiveness. Spoken mercy is the results of this action moving from our minds to our hearts to our words. Yes, I forgive you. Yes, I accept your apology. Yes, I see your life turning around and am ready to give you another chance.

The action of granting mercy, showing mercy or spoken mercy maybe the most difficult action of all. We may, after a period of time hear repentance. We may, after a long struggle grant forgiveness. And yet to show mercy, to speak mercy, is to ask for a compassionate response to those who have offended. To show mercy is to ask for kindness and compassion to our enemies.

In the most recent World Magazine, a publication out of the UUA, a article by Rachel Walden spoke of a small group of UU’s advocating mercy for the men who attack the UUA employees in New Orleans. She writes: “During a bond hearing the four men accused of the violent mugging of two UUA employees in New Orleans for our GA filled a front row in the court, several of them wearing “Black Lives Matter” T-shirts. “We wanted to show up for restorative justice said Jolanda Walters. We wanted to advocate for a reasonable bond for all four men. We don’t want these four men thrown away. The families of the victimes were

consulted before they attended the hearing. However, despite the UU's presence, prosecutors sought a high bail; the main attacker, Dejuan Paul is being held on a total bail of \$255,000.

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These struggles of repentance, forgiveness and mercy are not easy ones. They are not easy ones especially when they involve people we may know or groups of people we may identify so closely with. Yet when is it time for spoken mercy? When is it time to say enough sacrificing one life for another? When is repentance accepted, forgiveness granted and mercy shown?

The answer to these questions are not easy ones. Oh, how I wish they were. Yet they are essential ones to confront if we wish to be a more loving, compassionate and merciful person. And they are essential ones if we are to be a more loving, compassionate and merciful world. An eye for an eye only makes the whole world blind.

In the Bhagavad Gita it is written; "if you want to see the heroic, look at those who can love (2X) in the face of hatred. If you want to see the brave look for those who can forgive." Let us all in examine our minds, hearts and souls and be the true brave heroes that this faith asks us to be.

My friends, in this season of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, as the world around us seems to be spinning out of control with war, violence and hatred, may we seize the opportunity to turn our lives around. To turn our lives from the pains of the past to the hopes for the future. May we mindfully and prayerfully replace our ignorance with repentance, replace our anger with forgiveness and release our need for revenge with words of spoken mercy. In this way we become truly free, free my brothers and sisters to let love and compassion, good will and harmony guide our lives.