

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
Rev. Howard Bell
Sunday, February 21, 2016
Love Your Enemies

In last week's sermon I shared a definition of forgiveness: "Letting go of the hope that the past will get better."¹ I truly believe that this quote is a very empowering message that has, at least, the capacity to shift our thinking and feeling when we have been holding on to unnecessary resentment and estrangement. It is my hope that it might even be useful to some in this congregation who may be holding on to resentment particularly toward those who may have left the church from some of the church conflicts that I lifted up last Sunday; or even with some current members with whom one of us may have had significant disagreement with another one of us.

I am going to share with you now, just one segment of Stephen Levine's Forgiveness Meditation. We cannot take the time to get into a meditative state, but I want you to at least hear some of these powerful and helpful words. Please keep in mind that what is suggested here is something that you do for yourself – privately in meditation - and not necessarily intended to immediately go and speak the suggested words to the person for whom you hold resentment. Also, the first time you practice this meditation you may choose someone for whom you can actually imagine forgiving – like another church member - rather than choosing the person who is most challenging for you such as someone who has abused you or done you great harm. Even experiencing forgiveness in meditation takes practice.

Here are the words from Stephen Levine: *"Begin by slowly bringing into your mind, into your heart, the image of someone for whom you have some resentment. Gently allow a picture, a feeling, a sense of them to gather there. Gently now invite them into your heart just for this moment. Notice whatever fear or anger may arise to limit or deny their entrance and soften gently all about it. No force. Just an experiment in truth which invites this person in. And silently in your heart say to this person, 'I forgive you.' Open to a sense of their presence and say, 'I forgive you for whatever pain you may have caused me in the past, intentionally or unintentionally, through your words, your thoughts, your actions. However you may have caused me pain in the past, I forgive you.'"*² I hope you will consider further use of this meditation if the words resonate with you.

It is important for us to address many other aspects of forgiveness. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting. Remembering the hurt you have experienced helps to protect you from future hurts. For example, if someone has experienced abuse, "letting go of the hope that the past will get better" does not mean allowing a person to continue to abuse you. You can let go of the hurts of the past while also setting boundaries within a current relationship that protects you from future hurt or harm.

¹ http://www.pathwaysminneapolis.org/renewing_life/

² <http://livingdying.org/meditations/forgiveness-meditation/>

The quote: "Letting go of the hope that the past will get better"³ expresses a similar message to a quote from Buddha about holding on to anger that I have shared with you before. Buddha said, "Holding on to anger is like holding on to a hot coal with the intent to throw it at someone. However, it is the person holding on to the hot coal who gets burned."⁴ I do not believe this quote from Buddha advocates throwing the hot coal at the person with whom you are angry, but simply releasing the coal and the accompanying anger, when this is possible. Releasing anger that is harming you, does not mean that anger is always a negative emotion or something that we should not allow ourselves to feel or experience.

We need to look no further than today's Old Testament text to find Biblical examples of verbal expressions of hurt, anger and even revenge. Marjorie J. Thompson says, "*The power of the Psalms lies in the permission they give us to express every conceivable human emotion.*"⁵ The first verse of Psalm 137 reads: "*By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.*" (Psalm 137:1) It is an important part of our Judeo-Christian heritage to remember the grief the Jewish people experienced by being displaced from their homeland. As we learned this past Wednesday in our Lenten Series on Immigration, the experience of the Jewish people being forced into migration helps us to have compassion for those who are forced into migration today.

The psalmist also references anger at their enemies by referring to them as "captors" and "tormentors". This psalm closes with these words of revenge: "*Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!*" (Psalm 137: 8-9). Commentators suggest that we should not assume that the author of this Psalm necessarily approved of such actions of revenge, but rather trusted that God's revenge would come upon the Babylonians as it had been prophesized previously.

There is also an important distinction between the emotion of anger and the actions of anger. The emotion of anger is a normal and sometimes necessary or even useful emotion. Anger is a necessary stage in the grieving process. The emotion of anger can produce helpful energy against evil- hopefully through nonviolent resistance. Righteous anger or righteous indignation provides energy to work toward peaceful resolution of conflicts and resolution of injustices in our world. Actions of anger such as striking out and hurting others are under our control and should be avoided. Often these actions associated with anger only escalate the situation. It is important for the safety of others and of ourselves, that we learn ways to limit the actions of anger so as to not physically harm another person.

This week's Wednesday night's Lenten series will address issues of race in Minnesota. Our speaker, Rev. Demetrius Chester, is representing black clergy from the historic black churches in Minnesota. He will offer his message of "unity in the body of Christ" as he shares his perspectives on the Black Lives Matter movement and other difficult challenges around

³ http://www.pathwaysminneapolis.org/renewing_life/

⁴ http://www.pathwaysminneapolis.org/renewing_life/

⁵ *Forgiveness, A Lenten Study*, by Marjorie J. Thompson; Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY; © 2014 Westminster John Knox Press

issues of race in Minnesota. Hopefully, this will be an opportunity for us to further explore righteous anger that blacks in Minnesota may feel, the methods of giving expression to feelings of injustice, and our emotional responses to the methods employed.

Finally, we turn to our New Testament text where Jesus gives us an even greater challenge than controlling our actions associated with anger. Jesus says, *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of God in heaven...”* (Matthew 5: 43- 45a) He tells us not only to forgive our enemies but also to love our enemies. Biblical Commentator, Jason Byassee, says: *“We are called here to love as God loves. This cannot be done out of our own resources. So this is no admonition to try harder—if it were, it would indeed be a recipe for despair.”*⁶ This message that it is God who loves through us is so important to my understanding of how we might even conceive of loving those who persecute us. 9/11 was a powerful example in recent years of how fear and hatred for the other seemed to prevail throughout our country and continues today. We will be hearing about the experience of Muslims in Minnesota during our Lenten Series on March 9. Addressing these concerns, Biblical Commentator, Barbara Essex, says: *“Some of us are too suspicious of the outcome and may resist living the values of God's realm. We are more intent on making sure no one has a chance to abuse or tyrannize us again.”*⁷

Knowing that we are human, that we are subject to fear, that we carry within our hearts prejudice of others different from ourselves, and that we are not capable of loving our enemies on our own, does not release us from the demands of Jesus in today's text. He continues in verse 48 to say, *“Be perfect, therefore, as God in heaven is perfect.”* (Matthew 5: 48) I proclaim that being driven to perfection in all our actions is not the intention of Jesus in these words. Rather, Jesus is holding out for us even the possibility of God's perfection being realized within us by devoting ourselves to God.

The section of today's text from Chapter 7 of Matthew's Gospel gives us a way that we might begin to pursue a path of devotion to God. Jesus says, *“Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? ..You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.”* (Matthew 7: 1-5)

Rather than judging the other, we are called to self-examination – to examine our own hypocrisies. We are called to a spiritual path that leads us closer to God, that leads us to experiencing God's love, that leads us to allowing God's love to be alive in our world through us, that might even allow us to love our enemies. May it be so. Amen.

⁶ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.

⁷ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.