

Giving and Forgiving  
Sermon by C. Kirkman  
All Souls Unitarian Church  
January 29, 2017

Let me start with a confession.

This is not a comfortable spot for me.

The arc of my life has been AWAY from the pulpit.

My father was a Presbyterian minister.

My mother was the first woman admitted to Princeton Theological Seminary.

Everyone in my family was a full participant in our church.

As a preacher's kid,

I heard plenty of sermons and got plenty of church

-- and so I headed in the opposite direction.

I majored in math,

became an economist,

and, until now, successfully avoided the pulpit.

But fate and Lay Sunday brought me here

– my parents would be thrilled –

and my intent is to tell a few stories,

talk about giving and forgiving and why that matters today,

and finish fast.

Let's start with a story about God.

And rest assured, it is apocryphal.

God summons three people to a meeting:

Donald Trump,

Vladimir Putin,

and the Chair of a Unitarian church's stewardship committee.

God tells them to spread the news that the world will be destroyed in three days.

Trump tweets:

“Good news and bad news.

Good news: God exists! Beautiful!

Bad news: God will destroy the world in three days! Sad!”

Putin proclaims:

“I have some bad news and some worse news.

The bad news is that the imperialist believers were actually right:

God exists!

The worse news is that she's going to destroy the world in three days!”

Unitarian Stewardship Chair takes a different tack:

“I have some good news and some better news.

The good news is that God considers me

one of the three most persistent communicators on earth.

The better news is that

– in just three short days –  
our church fundraising drive will finally be over!”

So... yes... our church talks a lot about giving money.  
And this year we're talking twice as much  
because of annual giving and our capital campaign.  
Raising money is perhaps the most important responsibility of any non-profit board;  
so I think often about spirituality and generosity.  
And because I grew up on sermons based on biblical stories,  
I'll use my 15 minutes of theological fame  
to reflect one of the Bible stories that puzzled me as a child  
– the story of Joseph and his brothers –  
a story about giving and forgiving.

Here's a brief recap:

Joseph is one of two sons of his father's favorite wife Rachel.  
Joseph's 10 half-brothers are very jealous of Joseph.  
They sell him as a slave to some passing Egyptians and  
tell their father that Joseph has been killed by wild animals.  
They bring Joseph's coat of many colors,  
dipped in goat's blood, as proof.  
Down in Egypt, Joseph,  
due to his prophetic ability to interpret dreams,  
becomes the pharaoh's right hand man.  
Joseph has correctly managed 7 years of bumper crops,  
storing abundant grain for his prophesized 7 years of famine.  
From famine-struck Israel,  
Joseph's family must travel to Egypt to buy grain.  
They have to appeal directly to Joseph,  
but they don't recognize the brother they abused years earlier.  
Joseph, however, immediately recognizes them.  
And – this is the part that mystified me – he is very generous to them.  
If my brother had sold me into slavery, I would not be so nice.  
But there's a catch – Joseph plants a valuable cup in his full-brother Benjamin's bag.

Then when the family is well on their way back to Israel,  
Joseph has his soldiers retrieve the cup as stolen property.  
The Egyptians force the family to return to face Joseph for trial  
and the likely punishment will make Benjamin a slave.

But another brother offers himself as Benjamin's surrogate,  
since he believes their father could not bear the loss of Rachel's second son.  
At this point, Joseph completely breaks down.  
He weeps and reveals who he is,  
and is able to forgive and reconcile with his family.

That's the interesting twist:  
the act of giving preceded the act of forgiving.

It seems backwards.

But the etymology of the words  
giving and forgiving offers a clue.  
In old English, the suffix “for” means “thoroughly” or “completely.”  
To forgo is to pass by completely – to do without.  
To forgive is to give completely.  
Forgiving is a higher, more complete form of giving.  
Forgiving is one of the hardest things to do,  
but also one of the most liberating  
for both the sinner and those sinned against.  
Of course, there are many injustices that we can never forgive,  
but the story suggests that,  
within family, within community,  
if you have been holding back because of some unresolved issues,  
consider taking a first step to be generous  
-- to get some skin in the game first – to make a new beginning.  
Even when there are some disagreements within this church,  
our differences are tiny  
compared to the appalling injustices in the daily news and  
and the frightening divisiveness in daily tweets.  
Now is the time to invest in our common purposes.  
Now is the time to lean in.

We read our principles this morning in the responsive reading,  
and I’ve long found it curious that they don’t even mention generosity or forgiveness.  
Acts of generosity – both financial and spiritual –  
are a key component of a covenantal community.  
Every time I sit in this beautiful, light-filled sanctuary,  
I am overwhelmed by the generosity of those who came here before me.  
I’ve personally made some missteps in this church,  
and I am grateful for the forgiveness I’ve received.  
Giving and forgiving are what make it possible  
for us to move forward together to do the work that needs to be done.

Giving generously is so important right now.  
This is a time when our liberal religion is so desperately needed.  
Our country needs to hear liberal religion’s voice of tolerance,  
of justice for the marginalized,  
of real respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person  
(documented or not, Christian or not).  
Now is the time to nourish what we cherish.

I really believe we can give more generously.  
Even though we missed last year’s annual giving target by a lot,  
we would have hit it if everyone had given an extra amount  
equal to the cost of Starbucks latte a week.  
And I know that some can’t make that sacrifice,  
but others can do more.  
So I believe that, together, our goals are really financially possible.

I believe it's emotionally possible too.

I learned when I was young  
that people lean in when core values are threatened.

My childhood church had a fundraising experience  
that happened under exactly those circumstances.

Our annual pledge drive was scheduled for Sunday, November 24, 1963  
– two days after President Kennedy's assassination  
and the day Lee Harvey Oswald was murdered on live TV.

Our pledge drive went ahead anyway.

Teams of volunteers,  
including kids like me,  
went to the homes to ask for pledges.

Wow! Did we ever get pledges!  
Because on that dark day it was clear that mission requires money.

That's true for us today,  
as our very core values are under siege.  
Unforgivable things are happening right now in our world  
and we must fortify ourselves to fight injustice.

As we sang in our hymn this morning:  
"If you give from deep within you,  
You can change the world with your love."

Amen and may it be so.

C. Kirkman  
January 28, 2017