

Rev. Linda Simmons
Suffering and Forgiveness
July 16, 2017

Each Wednesday I sit at my desk and check last month's newsletter the Weathervane to see what I said I will be speaking about on the coming Sunday so that I can begin the journey of reading, writing and opening my heart, mind and soul to this exploration. This past Wednesday my heart sank. Suffering and forgiveness?! How could I begin to speak on something that? Even when I say those two words aloud private paths of memory and reflection open up that swallow me whole. Oy vey, I'm in for it now!

But the Weathervane oracle had spoken and I began the journey. The first question that offered itself to me on this road called suffering and forgiveness was: Is there anything more common than suffering and the need to be forgiven among us? It is a human common denominator. And though when I began I considered both these topics too privately clutched to our breasts to be spoken about from a pulpit in any useful way, I revised my thinking as I worked my way from one end of this journey to the other.

Though we do not often share our suffering and our laborious treks toward self forgiveness and imagine ourselves alone in these echoing caverns, we live together in our aloneness, our backs turned to each other, imagining that the rustling we hear is the wind and the echoes of our own footsteps rather than the breath and labor of our fellow humans. In these chambers of suffering we occupy together, where we think we alone are beyond redemption and forgiveness, we are well accompanied.

This sermon is not about the little stuff. We err in so many ways. That is easily sloughed off. It has to be or we get so gummed up we can't function.

And besides, we all do it, we are all guilty of the little slights due to impatience, or hunger or annoyance or distraction due to the hurt that no one else can see, or that we think they cannot see. We are rude or dismissive or too sharp or too quick with our tongues. We let this go and move on, most of the time, because we can see this humanity, this frailty, in each other.

But the rest of it, that is harder.

In the middle of this sermon writing, I dreamed one night that I was standing in a pool of water. It was a pond really but the water was intensely clear. When I looked into it, I could see myself perfectly, vividly, and not just the outside of myself, my mirror reflection, but I could see my insides too, my veins and organs and blood flowing.

I turned away with horror at first. I don't want to know how all that works, I cried. I could see my heart beating and it looked so terribly fragile, so impossibly tender that the knowledge of the fragility of life and mortality could not be pretended or pushed away.

In that pool, I could not turn away. There was only seeing. Slowly, I was able to stop running my hand over the water wildly to disturb the reflection. I was able to stand still and just watch the image of life- my life- pulse around me.

I think forgiveness is what ultimately happened in that dream as it calls us first toward recognition, to look clearly and see who we are, how we have lived, how we show up, how our blood flows and our hearts pump and that we have arrived here at this moment.

What I wanted to hide from in that pool was not only myself, but the recognition that I come from a people and a place and a time, that these veins and heart and blood and skin and bones and my very gaze are built from genes and DNA and history and the place I was given to occupy on this earth. I did not create myself and I do not go on alone but I am part of a story that my life replicates and that can be hard to occupy at times.

Ann Primavesi in her book, *Gaia's Gift* writes about "living *as if* we understand and give priority to the complex range of interdependent relationships on which all life here depends and in which we are totally involved."¹ Primavesi suggests that it is when we look back through our species history and see ourselves as belonging to a longer and older ancestry that we then can "live as if we are what we have always been-members of the community of life on earth."²

Doing so, really living into our membership on this earth, requires not only love but accountability and forgiveness doesn't it? We must learn to stand inside our skin, and privilege, and story, with the gifts that good food and doctors and clean water have allowed us and both take responsibility for that and forgive ourselves the toll that our privilege extracts from others and the ignorance it breeds in us too. And I know we have not all grown up the same but if we have grown up white we have grown up with privileges so many others have never known.

That's a whole lot of work and time and effort and humility and may we live long enough to open that shame and hope and love and make some strides here. May we live long enough to do the work of reparation and love.

And then there's the other kind of forgiveness that is just as tender, just as hard, just as merciless seeming when we face it at first. The kind we must offer ourselves for things we believe we have done wrong, in ways no others have ever done wrong to another, in what we see as our unforgivable lack of compassion. And in our search for mercy, and mercy feels the right word here for what we seek and sometimes cannot find because the suffering is so deep and wide and bottomless, and in our search for mercy we reach out and that membership to something we belong to and that is us, that we claim and that claims us-reaches out to us too. A membership to a community of life on earth.

¹ Ann Primavesi, *Gaia's Gift*, quoted in *Ecotheology and the Practice of Hope*, (New York, State University of New York Press, 2010), 105.

² Ibid.

I looked up mercy in the dictionary and found this: Mercy: forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm. Is this not so true, do we not punish ourselves so well, better than anyone ever could? And is forgiveness not the balm needed to end that self harm? From where do we find it when it seems out of sight in the depths of despair?

I do not wish to offer a simple answer, a cheap grace, a recipe that offers up a food that cannot nourish.

Rev. John Buerhens in his sermon, "Failure to Forgive" writes, "Yet how, in retrospect, are we to forgive ourselves....? Or forgive ourselves our failures to forgive? Perhaps by realizing, first of all, that if and when forgiveness does come, it will come by grace. Not by our effort or by any exhortation. For if there is an "ought" in forgiveness at all, it's no "ought" of obligation; it's an ought of opportunity. We "ought" to forgive in the way that we ought to lay down a heavy burden. In the way we ought to allow ourselves to accept a hug when we're lonely, a cool glass of water when we're thirsty.

"It comes like a miracle. Like manna in the desert. Like an angel in the empty tomb of the heart. By surprise. Raising new life from death. Breaking through the normal calculus of evenhandedness and justice. There may be things we can do to make the miracle possible.... Like turning, not away, but back. Back in anger. Back in sadness. Back toward the tomb in the heart. Back toward relationship instead of away. Back toward the depths within our own souls."³

Grace, a complex concept, a concept that when we open ourselves to receive love, it comes to us whether we know it or not, whether we deserve it or not, whether we are ready for it or not. It comes to us because we have opened ourselves to receive it. It comes to us because we are loved beyond belief.

Grace and forgiveness. Forgiveness comes to us not through our willing it so, not through our forcing it to be but by setting the conditions for it to take place: by resting, by loving, by allowing, by putting ourselves beside those who love us enough, by remembering, by holding out long enough for the goodness to find us.

In the book *Spiritual Ecology, the Cry of the Earth* Joanna Macy writes about John Seed, director of the Rainforest Information Center in Australia. Seed said to Macy while walking through the rainforest in New South Wales, "I try to remember that it's not me, John Seed, trying to protect the rain forest. Rather, I am part of the rain forest protecting itself. I am that part of the rain forest recently emerged into human thinking."⁴

I think forgiveness is like this...a part of us that can see ourselves standing in the pool, all of ourselves, our hearts beating, our cells working, our blood moving...and can reach out to

³ Rev. John Buerhens, "Failure to Forgive," <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/sermon/183791.shtml>.

⁴ Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, ed, *Spiritual Ecology, The Cry of the Earth* (California, The Golden Sufi Center, 2014), 147.

protect our vulnerability with the emerging part of ourselves that understands vulnerability, accountability and forgiveness and with compassion can take our hand and lead us whole, all of ourselves, connected to all that we come from and all that we might yet become, into what's next.

In my dream, I think that's what allowed the stillness, slowly the fear of seeing turned to a capacity to be with and then, a deep, abiding compassion overtook me. Yes, we are complicit. Yes we have failed. Yes we are part of stories and actions and memories that we would rather tear ourselves away from and yet, we are so exquisitely fragile, tender, naked before our own gaze, connected, present, alive, yet, alive.

I finished this sermon late last night. So unlike me. My sermons are always done by Friday morning for a first draft for Gary to look over. I usually get one or two comments in red ink, I really love this sermon hon but have no idea what this sentence means. Can you say this another way?

This time, grace had to find me too, to promise me that I could speak these words, stand here before you with love and remind you all that there is enough, that you are enough, that together we have enough heart and soul to go on and this world is still worthy of loving and we of being loved in it. Let this day find you where you are and love you as you are and the next and the next too. May it be enough to wake up each day and know that you are a sacred member of the human family.

Amen.