

We Begin Again in Love
A Sermon Preached by the Reverend Lee Bluemel
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At the North Parish of North Andover

There are times when the news about Iraq or Afghanistan reminds me of some words from the famous W.B. Yeats poem, "Slouching Toward Bethlehem": "*Turning and turning in the widening gyre, the falcon can not hear the falconer; Things fall apart; the centre can not hold; and mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere The ceremony of innocence is drowned; The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.*" He wrote it in 1919, in the aftermath of World War I. How sad to be reminded of his words in the current age.

When things get out of joint, when they fall apart, how do we return to some sort of proper, right relationship with each other, with a spouse, a parent, with strangers, with the earth, with that which we consider sacred, with our values, with God?

Last week I spoke about apology and how we humans can fail at it—the ways we avoid it by blaming others, the ways we can be insincere, whether by our choice of words or by neglecting to change our actions. I spoke of the possibilities of *real* apology--identified by repentance— by mending our ways, as individuals and as a larger community or nation.

Today, I want to talk-- not about offering apologies-- but the *other* side of the coin: offering forgiveness. I said last week that three of the hardest words to speak in the English language are "I am sorry." Well, it's *almost* as hard to say "I forgive you". Forgiveness can be hard to do.

It has been said that if you can overlook when people take things out on you when, through no fault of yours, something goes wrong; If you can take criticism and blame without resentment; If you can understand when loved ones are too busy to give you time; If you can be cheerful, ignoring slights and hurts...well, then you are probably the family dog.

For us humans, forgiveness can be challenging. True, sometimes it's challenging because an apology was insincere. But sometimes—even after a *real* apology—we still stumble. Sometimes we're just *bad* at forgiving. We'd rather hold tight to the slights that somehow prove our superiority, keep our self-righteousness intact, remind us to protect ourselves, or give us some sort of edge in the score-keeping of marriage or family. How *do* we learn to forgive?

This is an important question because, as many of us know from personal experience, without forgiveness it can be hard sometimes to move on in our lives. When part of our minds, our hearts, our guts are tied up in knots over some past wrong or disappointment or hurt, that part of us is not free to live in an open, expansive, trusting way. Some of the energy we need to move forward is tied up in the past. This makes it harder to focus on the question, "Where do we go from *here*?" Where do *I* go from here-- as an individual, as a family member, as a partner? Where do *we* go from here—as a congregation, a community, a religion, a nation?

This week, several of us attended a talk by James Carroll, a Globe newspaper columnist and religion writer. He spoke at Merrimack College at the invitation of the Center for Study of Jewish-Christian Relations.

Carroll's subject was "God, Country and the War in Iraq." The hall was full—standing room only—full of your usual assortment of folks who have time for such things. There was a good amount of grey hair among the audience members, and towards the back, a good number of students, no doubt there to fulfill a class requirement.

Carroll began his talk by asking who among the audience had relatives, friends or acquaintances in Iraq. A number in the audience raised their hands—and I noted from my seat in the back row that a majority of the hands raised were those of very young looking

college students. They may have been there because of a class requirement, or maybe not, but you can bet they had cause to listen to a talk about the causes of this war.

Carroll then framed his remarks with a warning. He is known for his stance against the war and his criticism of the powers that be. But he warned those present who might have been looking forward to a speech that laid all the blame on the government. Carroll was not going to let us off the hook so easily. Instead, he said something like this: “Ours is a government *of* the people, *by* the people, *for* the people. So this is not just about the Bush administration... *It’s about us—you and me.*”

It was an interesting and somewhat arresting assertion. Certainly, the Bush administration has more power and responsibility than your average citizen for the course of the war. Certainly, if I marched- at least once- and voted, and gave money, and protested the war from the start, I was not to blame for the loss of soldiers and civilians over there? What was this business about sharing responsibility for how things have gone?

Then again, maybe I was hearing Carroll’s words a little bit defensively, a little bit wrong. He went on to speak of the human condition-- about some basic human tendencies and temptations that we are all prone to, particularly the tendency to fear the other, to tribalism and “us/them” dichotomies. He spoke about the human tendency to sanctify such dichotomies in the salvation paradigms of religion— for religion to talk about the saved and unsaved. And he spoke of the human temptation to merge state power and religion—and the always disastrous consequences when this occurs.

I don’t think his objective was to blame or instill guilt after all, but to try to understand ourselves and our fellow humans better. His speech was an invitation to take some time to reflect on our humanity, and to see our current situation as evidence of our *collective* failure as a people, an American people... not as Democrats, Republicans, Green Party members,

neo-conservatives or liberals, but as a nation...so we might stop blaming each other and decide as a *nation* where to go from here.

I, for one, found myself squirming in my seat a bit, wondering, “Have I really done *all* I can to influence my government regarding this war?” No, I decided. There must be more I could do—but what? This is what his talk left me with, a *question*... that, and his closing words, which were, quite simply, “*End this war!*” (Little did I know that two opportunities would surface this week—thanks to the UUA and MoveOn.org-- to take some small steps of collective action with others who want to do just that.)

Today we take note of the Jewish tradition of Yom Kippur—the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, a tradition thousands of years old. It is interesting to note that this High Holy day is all about forgiving ourselves and one another, so we can move on. I suspect there is some wisdom there.

Now, for many of us, the Jewish High Holy Days are somewhat foreign—not part of the tradition we were raised in, not part of our usual religious habits. For others of us, they are familiar, something you know a lot about—certainly more than *I* do, not having been raised in a Jewish home... so you’ll have to correct me if I’m wrong.

But my understanding is that Yom Kippur is a day that begins with an acknowledgment of human frailty... all the ways in which we human beings can fall short. In fact, in Jewish congregations on Yom Kippur, just about *all* of these frailties are named- just about every sort of sin you could think of is named in a long, communal litany of confession. It’s a pretty big list.

One of you once sent me a list of suggestions for the Rosh Hashanah tradition of tashlich—throwing bread crumbs into moving water. It suggested different sorts of bread for different sins: white bread for ordinary sins, multi-grain for complex sins, waffles for sins of indecision, sourdough for ill-temperedness, Kaiser rolls for war-mongering, tarts for immodest

dressing, hot buns for promiscuity, dumplings for trashing the environment, and corn bread for telling corny jokes... like this one.

O.K., so Jews don't use different kinds of bread crumbs on Rosh Hashanah. But they do name all sorts of sins on Yom Kippur. A Jewish congregation wants to cover all the bases— to cover anyone who might have shown up that day.

This is not a confession that says, “*I have lied, I have stolen, I have hurt others...*” No. This is a *group* confession—a confession of the *entire community*. So if I *personally* haven't lied, or stolen, or hurt others-- no matter! It is possible that someone sitting near me has done so. It is part of my job as a member of the community to ask for forgiveness as a member of that community, as part of that unity.

And if I happen to be someone who is guilty of doing something rather, well, *unsavory*, I am given a gift on Yom Kippur. As a member of the worshipping community, I am given the *gift of anonymity* as we confess all together. Not only that, but I am given the *gift of being honest* about my failings, the gift of being among people who recognize that we are *all* human, and humans falter and fail and can be unskillful in our dealings with one another.

If not in religious community, then *where else* can we be honest enough to admit this? *Where else* can we be humble enough to admit that we are humans who are imperfect? *Where else* can we be hopeful enough to affirm that despite all this, we have the capacity to mend our ways? If not in religious community, then *where else* might we find the support to do so?

And so, following the wisdom of the Jewish tradition, we, too, will have the chance to do this today: to admit our humanity, to name some of our “sins”, and to say in the words of our responsive litany, “We forgive ourselves and one another; we begin again in love.” But before we get to that part of the service, I just want to clarify this a little bit, because most of

what I've been saying this morning has been about forgiveness. What of that second part-- "We begin again in love"—what is that about?

Is it about romantic love, puppy love, blind love, a naïve love? Or is this more like the love of a long term relationship—the kind of love where we make a commitment to working out our disagreements and disappointments, the kind of love where we try to listen quietly to one another's truth without jumping in too quickly with our own, the kind of love where we take responsibility for ourselves and our actions, and accept lots of give and take, as well. The kind of love where we know each others' strengths and weaknesses and quirks, and grow in love *despite-* and even *because of-* them. The kind of love that is expressed in the daily round of mundane chores, in small kindnesses, and once in a while in great gestures of generosity and affection. The kind of love that accepts loss and disappointment as part of the package, the kind of love that knows the importance of remembering good times together. The kind of love that is a miracle—in its steadfastness, its longevity, its flexibility, its perseverance through all that life may throw at us. The kind of long-haul love where we are still, occasionally, surprised by the other, where our curiosity is rewarded, and we know once again that every human being is a mystery.

Religious people—or at least Unitarian Universalists—have a term for living out of this kind of love. We call it “being in right relationship”— which is a fancy way of saying we abide by certain agreements of how we'll be together.

Such agreements are important because as I've said before, in a congregation that honors and welcomes diversity, a sign of health is that *no one* --- not even the ministers --- fully approves of everything that happens there (did you know that?) Each of us should be slightly uncomfortable with *something*—or we're probably not drawing from a broad enough UU population.

Yes, in a diverse UU congregation, there will inevitably be differences of opinion in politics, theology and pragmatic matters. In a congregation that affirms freedom of belief, personal integrity and conviction, it is inevitable that we will be comfortable with different kinds of religious language and have to become proficient in theological translation. In a congregation that, like most, that relies heavily on the goodness of volunteer efforts in a culture defined by time scarcity, it is inevitable that things will fall through from time to time. In a congregation that, like many, relies on voluntary financial support in a culture defined by consumerism and selfishness and economic fear, it is inevitable that we will struggle with our feelings about money, pledging, and whether or not we are all pulling our own weight. And in a congregation full of people to whom life happens- jobs are lost, parents die, children get ill, babies are born, mental health wavers, cancer hits, relationships fall apart--it is inevitable that any *one* of us may, at some point, be in need of extra care and attention, or space and time to ourselves...even those we've come to rely on.

As was discussed the other night at an open church meeting, what matters most is not that these things happen, but that we agree how to respond to one another when they do. Now that our building is right, maybe this is a time for us to consider and converse about what constitutes "right relationships" among ourselves.

As a congregation, do we agree to assume the positive intent of one another?

Do we agree to listen quietly, and speak directly, to one another?

Do we agree to trust church leaders, our co-parishioners,
and when leading, do we agree to act in ways that earn that trust?

Do we agree to ask questions instead of make assumptions?

Do we agree to consider the good of the whole, the sense of our Meeting,
even if it means our personal perspective does not prevail?

Do we agree to each do what we can, when we can, to strengthen our community in word, in deed, and in financial support?

Do we agree to participate in the sort of long-haul love that is intended to last through the years?

If we are to be a light unto the world, it *will* take *this* kind of love, because ours is a democratic congregation- a congregation *of* the people, *by* the people, *for* the people.

Whether we shine brightly or whether we falter will be not up to a hierarchy somewhere, or the church leaders, or somebody else. It will be up to *us*- to *you and me*.

So today, let us reaffirm how we want to be together as an oh-so-human community. Let us forgive ourselves and one another, and begin again in love. Amen.