

**Forgiveness**  
Rev. Ann Kadlecek  
First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany  
September 21, 2025

**Reading** *After 37 Years My Mother Apologizes for My Childhood* by Sharon Olds<sup>1</sup>

**Sermon**

Who would we be, if we forgave? Not the same as we are now.

Oh, we might still be angry, hurt, disappointed, unreconciled, unrecovered. But forgiveness changes us.

Every major faith tradition I know encourages forgiveness. And it's pretty popular among secular self-help folks and therapists, too, as well as people who have come through hard things and figured out what it takes to keep going.

"Forgiveness liberates the soul," said Nelson Mandela.

"It's one of the greatest gifts you can give yourself, to forgive. Forgive everybody." That's Maya Angelou.

There's a biblical passage from the book of Matthew, quoting Jesus as instructing us to forgive – not 7 times - but at least 77 times.<sup>2</sup>

And there's Anne Lamott's gem of a quote: "Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die."<sup>3</sup>

Forgiveness is a powerful spiritual practice. It can keep us from getting stuck in past wrongs and resentment, and free us to grow toward our best, most loving selves.

But ... I struggle with forgiveness. These days, I don't think I'm the only one who's drinking a little more rat poison than is probably good for me. And that affects us all.

What can we do? It's not like flossing our teeth – forgiveness doesn't just happen because we decide to add it to our routine. Forgiveness emerges out of our compassion for others, our recognition of the humanity and the frailty of the person who hurt us, the parent who failed us, even someone who uses their power to do great evil.

And because it comes from compassion, any practice that builds compassion and connection can help us to forgive. There are plenty of meditative and reflective practices that aren't explicitly about forgiveness, but that build the muscles we need to do this thing that wise people tell us is good for us.

It can help to start small – not with the really big harms that cut deeply. Maybe start with the driver who cuts us off, or the cable company rep who is less than helpful. Anne Lamott says that "the earth is a forgiveness school" – life gives us plenty of opportunities to practice – to build our capacity to forgive. We can seek out the opportunities that we can handle, that stretch us a little, and we can practice.

But when it comes to forgiving the big things, even with practice, it gets more complicated. And what we think of as forgiveness might not always be good for us.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://purpleprosearchive.wordpress.com/2020/09/27/sharon-olds-selected-poems-2005/>

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 18: 21-22 (or 70×7 times, depending upon the translation)

<sup>3</sup> Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, 134.

Sometimes forgiveness is attempted, or sought, or coerced, in ways that end up further harming the person doing the forgiving. I've known people suffering abuse who believed – for various reasons - that they had to forgive their abuser. A little power analysis can be helpful - if someone with less power is being asked to forgive someone with more, we may wish to explore whether we're centering something other than the well-being of the person who was harmed. Especially if the harm is ongoing, or if the forgiveness helps maintain abusive power structures.

And no one has the right to expect anyone else to forgive. No one has a right to be forgiven – you are not entitled to anyone's forgiveness, and no one is entitled to yours. Forgiveness that is good for us is a choice, and a practice.

And not something to rush into. If we find that we're willing ourselves to forgive quickly because of quotes like the ones I shared, or a desire to avoid conflict, the culture around us, or our own belief that good people forgive freely – that's probably not good for us. Trying to move on too quickly can prevent us from actually practicing forgiveness, and – when combined with a lack of accountability - can create bigger problems down the road.

Forgiveness doesn't happen on a schedule. Sometimes, it takes a very long time, or it doesn't happen at all. It might arrive, as in our reading, as a sudden realization that a burden carried for decades is not there anymore. Or it might unfold slowly, over time. It's a practice, not an item to be checked off our to-do list.

It helps me sometimes to think about forgiveness, not as an isolated act that I'm responsible for, but as part of a larger process of healing. Jewish tradition offers us one such process.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenburg wrote a book entitled “On Repentance and Repair.” It was the Unitarian Universalist common read a couple of years ago, and if it hasn't come your way yet, I recommend it. In that book, she says that forgiveness is:

“not a warm, fuzzy embrace but rather the victim's acknowledgement that the perpetrator no longer owes them, that they have done the repair work necessary to settle the situation.” She goes on, “You stole from me? OK, you acknowledged that you did so in a self-aware way, you're in therapy to work on why you stole, you paid me back, and you apologized in a way that I felt reflected an understanding of the impact your actions had on me – it seems you're not going to do this to anyone else. Fine. It doesn't mean we pretend the theft never happened, and it doesn't [necessarily] mean that ... we return to any kind of ongoing relationship. [But] whatever I may feel or not feel about you, I can consider this chapter closed. ... We're done here.”<sup>4</sup>

Ruttenburg is clear that there is no expectation of forgiveness until the person who wronged you has done all these things: naming and owning the harm, doing everything they can to repair it, accepting consequences, beginning to change, and making a real apology (actually multiple apologies if needed, with witnesses to be sure they're good apologies). And if all those steps are taken and you still can't “settle the account,” Jewish tradition holds that the perpetrator is off the hook anyway. Case closed.

Whether we're Jewish or not, this can be a helpful framework. If we've been harmed, there's no call to rush to forgive – we can take our time, see how seriously the other person takes it, and what repair work they are willing to do. And we can separate forgiveness (that sense that we are no longer owed) from resuming a relationship. One does not imply the other.

And if we harm someone else? We can take responsibility, repair the harm as best we can, accept consequences, apologize in a meaningful way, and do the work of personal transformation so we choose differently next time. Then, if we wish, we might ask for forgiveness. And whether it comes or not, perhaps we can forgive ourselves.

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<sup>4</sup> Danya Ruttenburg, *On Repentance and Repair*, 171-2

So that's one approach – forgiveness as part of a healing process that includes both parties and some accountability. In the world we're in today, with so much harm being done that I cannot find my way to forgive right now, this process has some appeal.

And ... there's another approach to forgiveness.

Valerie Kaur is an activist, lawyer, and author. Kaur, her family, and her religious community are Sikh. The first of the 19 people killed in hate crimes immediately following 9/11 was a close family friend of Kaur's, who she called Uncle, Balbir Uncle. Balbir was shot and killed while planting flowers in front of his gas station. His killer had boasted that morning that he was going to (and – with apologies for the language - I quote) “go out and shoot some towelheads.”

15 years later, Kaur and Balbir's brother talked with the man who killed Balbir. He said he was sorry, and then went on to talk about the terrorist attacks of 9/11 as though they were some kind of excuse. Eventually, he said that when he died and went to heaven, he would ask to see Balbir, and hug him, and ask his forgiveness.

Balbir's brother said, “We already forgave you.”

There's a lot going on here – this is forgiving an overt racist who killed a beloved family member, before getting even that pretty minimal apology. And there's a member of a marginalized community within an unjust power structure forgiving someone who has more power, and where the threat is ongoing. Definitely some red flags here. But Kaur makes clear what this does for her:

“Forgiveness is not forgetting,” she says. “Forgiveness is freedom from hate.”<sup>5</sup>

Sometimes the spiritual groundwork – that compassion and connection – allows us to get to freedom from hate without a whole lot of movement on the other side. Whether or not this feels right to you, forgiveness is a personal spiritual practice – none of us can judge what makes sense for someone else.

But our response to examples like this is another matter.

There's a tendency in our society to hold up and celebrate this kind of apparently undemanding forgiveness. One striking example that still sticks in my mind is from ten years ago – the terrorist shooting at the Emmanuel AME church in Charleston, South Carolina. The killer - with explicitly racist motivation - murdered 9 people. The news was full of reports admiring the victim's families for almost immediately saying they forgave the killer.

I can't speak to how these families understood their forgiveness. But I can offer some of what I've learned about where it might come from, and the appeal of this kind of forgiveness for white people, like me.

Some of my learnings come from womanist theologians. The term “womanist” is claimed by certain Christian theologians to highlight the influence that being a Black woman has on their theology.

Womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas speaks to the fact that in these widely publicized and celebrated expressions of forgiveness, it is so often Black people who are doing the forgiving. This tends to have a good feel, for white people, as Black forgiveness seems to displace the Black anger that is so uncomfortable. The celebration becomes, says Douglas, “all about the feelings of white people and their need to be delivered from Black rage.”<sup>6</sup>

But this kind of forgiveness has a real purpose for the community doing the forgiving. Douglas writes:

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/valerie\\_kaur\\_3\\_lessons\\_of\\_revolutionary\\_love\\_in\\_a\\_time\\_of\\_rage?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/valerie_kaur_3_lessons_of_revolutionary_love_in_a_time_of_rage?language=en)

<sup>6</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, *Resurrection Hope*, Kindle, 124.

The act of forgiveness, as often displayed in the Black faith tradition, is grounded in the assumption that no human justice can adequately make amends for the grave injustices of white supremacy. ...The act of forgiveness serves as a liberating act as it frees those, such as the families of Emanuel, from the anguish of waiting for the proper justice to be enacted. At the same time, Black forgiveness recognizes that the love of God is more powerful than white racist hatred. ... She continues, [T]he act of forgiveness frees Black people from the hate of white supremacy that can distort their own sense of self and thus prevent them from moving forward in their own living toward freedom.<sup>7</sup>

This forgiveness – this freedom from getting sucked into the hate - is not about displacing anger, it's about refusing to lose one's self in an unjust system. It's an act of self-preservation. There's still plenty of room for the rage that demands change. The God of which Douglas writes is forgiving and angry and infinitely loving and affirming of everyone's inherent worth and dignity, and we can be, too. Those of us who are white might do well to notice – not just the forgiveness, but also the injustice that makes it so necessary.

And. Those of us who have had the privilege of not having to practice this kind of forgiveness before, might have something to learn from those who have. For our own self-preservation. So that we don't get stuck in the hate.

Ultimately, forgiveness is about our well-being and breaking the cycles of hate and violence that threaten to trap us all. Forgiveness can hold rage. And a fierce love that affirms, and demands change. Forgiveness is powerful. And it is good for us.

So however we choose to engage with a spiritual practice of forgiveness, may it guide each of us to new discoveries about who we will be. May we work on forgiveness in ourselves, and be a little careful in our encouraging or judging forgiveness in others. And may we all know the gift of a forgiveness that frees us from hate, and ... is unrelenting in its demand for change.

May it be so.

Amen

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 124.