

Yom Kippur

October 9, 2011
Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

Kindling Opening Words

We are here,
after the splendor of golden days,
to worship, to examine who we are,
and what we are becoming together,
and to take seriously both our dreams
and the realities of our shared world.

And so, without guarantees, we lean into joy, and bend toward a just way of life, both for our own sakes, and for the sake of our children and everyone with whom we share the earth. We would engage our mission wholeheartedly, with courage, self-questioning, compassion, vulnerability and honesty.

Story from Bereshit'/Genesis in the Torah

This is a story about a man named Joseph, which has been told and retold for three thousand years. He was the next to the youngest in a family with a whole lot of kids – the 11th out of 12 brothers and we don't know how many sisters. Joseph, as they say, was spoiled, and wasn't very nice.

- ⬆ Joseph would tattletale on his brothers and get them in trouble with their father.
- ⬆ His father made a very special coat for Joseph, and Joseph wore it all the time to make his brothers mad.
- ⬆ Joseph bragged about the wonderful dreams he had and then bossed everyone around.

His brothers were fed up. None of them liked him and they wanted to get rid of him.

One day, Daddy sent Joseph to check on his brothers who were working far out in the field. When he finally found them, they saw him coming and decided now was the time to get rid of him. They grabbed him and imprisoned their brother in a dry well, arguing what to do with him. They saw a slave trader passing by, and decided to sell him for silver. Then they went home and claimed that a wild animal had killed him. His father cried and cried. All of his sons and daughters tried to comfort him, but he could not be comforted. He said, "I will be sad about my son until the day I die."

The slave trader took him to Egypt where he sold him to a very wealthy man. But while he was working in the household, Joseph was blamed for something he had not done, and was thrown into jail. While he was in jail, he got to be well-known as someone who could listen to others tell of their dreams, and make sense of them. Some of the people in jail with Joseph were eventually set free, but no one ever came to set Joseph free.

After Joseph had been in jail for two years, the King of Egypt had two dreams that no one could make any sense of. Suddenly one of the people who had been in jail with Joseph remembered

his ability, and told the King. Within the hour, Joseph was set free, cleaned up, shaved, given a proper set of clothes, and brought to the court where the king awaited him.

Joseph indeed figured out what these dreams meant. And, they were VERY important dreams. According to Joseph, Egypt was going to have seven years when all the crops would be good. There would be much more food than they needed. But that would be followed by seven very bad years, when nothing would grow. Joseph advised the King that he should gather up and store all the extra food during the good years, so they would have something to eat during the bad years. The King was so impressed that he put Joseph in charge of the whole project.

And, everything happened just like Joseph said it would. When the famine came, it hit not only Egypt but the countries next door, including the one where Joseph's family lived. But only Egypt had enough food because of Joseph's project, which had set food aside and saved it. Everyone was coming to Egypt to beg for food, even Joseph's brothers. Everyone who wanted food had to talk with Joseph first.

The brothers had no idea that the man they were begging food from was their hated younger brother, the one they had betrayed. He was dressed as an Egyptian in white. He was wearing a wig, and he no longer had a beard. As they had grown older they had realized that what they did was wrong, but they hadn't done anything about it. Their father still cried every day for Joseph.

Joseph recognized his brothers immediately and pretended that he didn't know who they were. He was very glad to see them. But he wasn't quite ready to forgive them yet. So he pretended he didn't know them. Even so, he had to leave the room at one point so he could cry. But he didn't tell them who he was.

He needed more time. So he arranged for them to go back home and bring their father and the rest of the family, including the youngest brother. He tested them several times, accusing them of theft, and even throwing his older brother, the one who had sold him in the first place, in prison for a while.

But eventually, he couldn't hold himself back. He told his staff to leave: "Leave! Clear out—everyone leave!" They did, but Joseph started crying, and his sobbing was so loud that the Egyptians heard him.

Then Joseph spoke to his brothers: "I am Joseph." But his brothers couldn't say a word. They were speechless—they couldn't believe their eyes or their ears.

"Come closer to me," Joseph said to his brothers. They came closer. "I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. I am a different person now, and I have been able to save many lives. But I am still your brother."

Then Joseph kissed all the members of his family, and cried more tears.

When the King heard about it, he told Joseph that he was giving them the best land in Egypt. Joseph's whole family, including his now very old father, immigrated to Egypt and lived there for many generations. When Joseph died, he was buried there, not in his own birthplace.

Sequence

As far as I can tell at this time of atonement,
of at-one-ment, I am already “at one”
with the whole universe. All of it.
I cannot pry myself loose from it. I cannot live outside of it.
I cannot deny that this communion with all that is, is a permanent state,
even if I don’t always feel it,
even if I am terrified that this is so.
And, as far as I can tell, I am at one with the whole flow of time, too.
The “now” experienced by the people of ancient Egypt is the same “now” I experience in present day Ohio.
That they are in my past, and I am in their future
is true, but the deeper truth
is that when I look upon this beautiful building,
and they looked upon their beautiful buildings reflecting in the Nile, the experience and immediacy of “now” was and is exactly the same.
As far as I can tell, my body, including my heart, my eyes and my gray matter is made up of the same star stuff as yours, as well as same stuff that makes up koalas and artichokes and roses, and even the flesh and bones and gray matter of individuals I find it hard to forgive, let alone love or even like.
As far as I can tell, the hurts and injuries I’ve caused, known or unknown, or have felt myself, are all part of that real universe of common star-stuff, yes, but no more than the power to let go, to recognize commonalities, to stop clutching so tight, to breathe in peace. Let the silence teach us so....

silence

As far as I can tell, we’re all in this together.
Were bound to each other by both love and uncertainty, fear and openness, memory and hope.
On this day, may we name those to whom we feel most bound, most deeply connected, however we name that. Whispered aloud, or echoing within...
we claim our communion with those we know by naming them as we remember them in the silence.

naming

As far as I can tell, music is a mystery, a form of magical communion no one has yet fully explained. Star-stuff joining with star-stuff in an embrace of beauty beyond our power to name. How wonderful!

Choir Anthems

The First Reading comes from the book *Walking Toward Morning* by Victoria Safford, minister of the White Bear Lake Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Mahtomedi, Minnesota. The meditation is titled “At One.”

Imagine this.

On the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, every fall, every year, the people make their peace with anyone they have wronged, or slighted, or injured, or in any way neglected in

the past twelve months. The task is not to patch things up, smooth things over, reach a compromise, or sweep mistakes and uneasy memories under the rug; the task is not to feel better. The task is ownership. The goal is truth, for its own redemptive sake. *I did this. I said this to you, and it was wrong. I neglected this. I botched this. I betrayed you thusly. I demeaned you, whether you ever knew it or not. This is the truth in which both of us are living. I ask you to forgive me.*

The task is not about comfort; awkward is irrelevant. It is about truth, about wholeness and restoration. Imagine this.

Imagine. Something yearns in us to come round right. Something creaky, rusty, heavy, almost calcified within us, tries – in spite of us and of all our fears and self-deceptions – to turn and turn and creak and turn again and come round a little truer. Something in us stretches. Imagine healing, wholly, from within.

The Second Reading is from John Patton's book *Is Human Forgiveness Possible?* 2003. The Rev. Mr. Patton is a Pastoral Counselor in Atlanta.

Forgiveness is not doing something, but discovering something – that I am more like those who have hurt me than different from them. I am able to forgive when I discover that I am in no position to forgive. Human forgiveness is overcoming shame, and rediscovering who one is beyond the experience of injury or brokenness. Forgiveness is something that is discovered to be in the midst of us, as part of our neighborhood with one another.

Sermon

When I wake up in the morning, I, for one, am very groggy. I'm slow to wake up. Always have been, since I was a child. I *need* a bit of coffee. For an hour or so, I do not so much walk as stumble around my loft. I think about what day it is. Is it Tuesday already? What happened to Monday? Sometimes I sit down for a bit at my computer to check the news on line, and get an overview of the world's present condition. Now and then, I am stopped in my tracks, like this week, when I saw that Steve Jobs died, or when I read the Declaration of the Occupation of New York. Other days, not much grabs me. So, still groggy, I put in a load of laundry. I try to remember where I left my calendar to check on my day plan: let's see; two appointments in my office, a phone call to a colleague who wants help solving a parish problem, a hospital call, requisite emails, composing a letter to help get someone into the Air Force Academy, scheduling conversations with Eric or Jolinda or Brian; answering phone messages, revising a pamphlet, calling my sister about our mother's deepening health problems, a Worship Committee meeting at night, and then a late dinner with a friend. By then, at least, I'm not groggy.

I know very well that some people rise bushy tailed from their morning beds, and are more likely to fall asleep at 9 PM. And others nap in the afternoon, and feel alert at both ends of the day. Most of us, whether groggy or alert, spend time thinking about our day in the morning, and all the things we have to do. Or, reflecting on it in the evening. Or not reflecting on it, but wishing we had.

But as far as I can tell, no one on this whole wide earth, no one, wakes up every morning, whether groggy or alert, and says, “I am going to hurt and harm as many people as I can today by word and deed. I am the very embodiment of deliberate evil, mayhem, cruelty.” If there was anyone on earth who woke up to say such things, I’d have to believe that they were entirely deranged, with a brokenness in the brain as severe as the most aggressive cancer.

But, as far as I can tell, no one decides on being especially good either. “Ah, today I will be a saint. I will spend every minute alleviating the conditions of the down and out, the ill, the destitute and the angry. I will give away half of what I make to golden charities, and offer cots to three homeless people at my house. I will cook 40 gallons of bean soup for a shelter, and serve it myself. And I’ll take the bus to get there; no gas guzzling cars for me.” I’m not sure if someone exists who thinks that way, nor could I say that that their brain is out of whack like the first person I mentioned; but I’d be sure to worry some about their grandiose energy, frantic perfectionism, and lack of self-care.

The thing is, few, if any of us on earth, decide each morning to be either total devils or perfect angels. Either to act entirely out of our brokenness, shame or anger, or to be better than the most revered saint, hero or humble champion.

The thing is, most of us are living our lives as best we can. We falter, make mistakes, hurt each other unintentionally, offer help and solace, gum up the works, embrace denial even as we aim for the good, or at least, the better. We are neither perfect nor worthless. We live our lives mostly in-between.

That’s why, I think, it’s *in-between* two days, namely Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the Jewish High Holidays, as my colleague Victoria Safford writes, that “the people make their peace with anyone they have wronged or slighted or injured or in any way neglected in the past twelve months. The task, she reminds us, *is not to patch things up, smooth things over, reach a compromise, or sweep mistakes and uneasy memories under the rug; the task is not to feel better. The task is ownership. The goal is truth, for its own redemptive sake. I did this. I said this to you, and it was wrong. I neglected this. I botched this. I betrayed you thusly. I demeaned you, whether you ever knew it or not. This is the truth in which both of us are living. I ask you to forgive me.*

What she is saying I think is that Yom Kippur is a time of waking up, an opportunity to become reflective, and to be more conscious. Conscious of ourselves. Conscious of the situation of others. Conscious of the larger pattern of which we are a part. Conscious of our humanity. Conscious of the reality that there are always two sides to any story, even if those two are not “equal” in any ordinary meaning of that word. This is a time of year when Jews, many Unitarian Universalists, and yes, many liberal Christians as well, set the alarm clock of self-reflection to wake us up to the larger realities that contain us all. To jar us into an accountable consciousness which helps us to discover the role of mutual forgiveness in our lives. Our completely human in-between lives.

Forgiveness, I’ve said in previous years, is a process, not a pardon. It’s an engagement, not a gift or a pronouncement. It’s neither easy, nor finally, if we are awake at all, escapable, especially if we have any loyalty to our children’s future.

John Patton puts what I have been saying over the years this way: *Forgiveness is not **doing** something (i.e. pardoning someone), but discovering something... that I am more like those who have hurt me than different from them. I am able to forgive when I discover that I am in no position to forgive. Human forgiveness is overcoming shame, and rediscovering who one is beyond the experience of injury or brokenness. Forgiveness is something that is discovered to be in the midst of us, as part of our neighborhood with one another.*

In other words, the world isn't neatly divided between angels and devils, perfect saints and satanic sinners. We're all simply human, with differing hopes and differing mistakes, but at least we all have hopes, and make mistakes. We are all in the same boat whether we find it comforting to think so, or not.

And the point is, we can't live each other's lives, but only our own. Patton states this with his wonderful paradox: *We can only forgive when we realize we are in no position to forgive.* When we wake up, that is when we discover that we're all completely human in the neighborhood called the earth, we begin to discover forgiveness *between* us. It's not something poured down from some superior, angelic and righteous position. Forgiveness means first and foremost beginning to feel accountable for *our* part of the story. If the person who has injured us does not see his or her part of the truth we share, it doesn't make any final difference, although I certainly admit that it makes discovering forgiveness somewhat more difficult. Still, we have to live our own lives, not live in constant reaction to someone else's mistakes, or someone else's sins, to use the more common religious word. Living that way would be *our* mistake, our sin.

Back in the early 90s, someone, whose name has not been recorded, uttered these words at a 12 step group: *To refuse to forgive is to drink poison yourself, thinking that the person you refuse to forgive will die from the poison.* Since it was first spoken, it's traveled everywhere. There are many variations to this phrase now, but after my research this week, this is as close as I can come to what was first said. The statement from the Jerusalem Talmud at the top of your orders is a lot older than 12 step groups, but it says pretty much the same thing, even if with a different metaphor. Both statements stress that, when you are not about discovering where the forgiveness can exist between you and someone else, you really only end up hurting yourself. Even if you took the course of vengeance against the one who injured you (which, I well realize, is a perfectly natural human feeling), you are the one who would finally suffer the consequences.

Steve Jobs, who, as you know, died this week, stresses how we are accountable to ourselves first, and have to live our own lives. He warns us not react to other lives, (even the lives of those who have injured us) unconsciously, for the rest of our days. He put it this way in his famous 2005 address at Stanford University: *Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma — which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary.*

The Joseph story in the Hebrew text of the Bible, which Jolinda told this morning, is justly considered by critics to be one of the truly great works of literature in the whole ancient world. Significant modern archeologists are convinced it's even a story, at its core, if not in its detail, rooted in the history of the 12th Dynasty at the time of Sesostri II. Regardless of its historicity, it's a story about how long it takes to live one's own life without being trapped in resentment; in

short, how long it takes to discover forgiveness. The discovery is so beautifully exemplified in the depictions of Joseph sobbing loudly. But it's also a story about a context, about a whole family and all the generations that followed them. Injury, in this case, is not just done to Joseph, but Joseph's father, his younger brother, and even the brothers who sold him into slavery. Joseph toys with revenge, another form of injury, by putting one of his brothers in prison. But eventually his heart opens, and, together with his whole family, discovers in Victoria Safford's words: *something yearned in them to come round right. Something creaky, rusty, heavy, almost calcified within them, tries – in spite of them and of all their fears and self-deceptions – to turn and turn and creak and turn again and come round a little truer. Something in them stretched. And they found wholeness.*

Forgiveness isn't about us and them, suggests John Patton. It's just about us. Us. At least those of us who haven't deluded ourselves that we're superhuman, not mere mortals. This is true in Columbus OH, yes, but also, I have to say, in New York NY. You see, when I read the Declaration of the Occupation of New York, the platform statement issued by the people occupying the Wall Street area of Manhattan, I was thrilled. Excited. Moved. Great, elegant and remarkably clear English, clearly patterned on the kind of precision our founding forebears used in their documents. The document's critique of our economic way of making decisions about people's lives is rich, covering corporate greed, foreclosure, oil profits, monopolization, working conditions, healthcare, privacy, graft, media, capital punishment and colonialism. You can read it afterward...it's out in the gallery in a basket as you leave, on one sheet. But what yanked at my heart while I read it is that the authors say it's not *us* who are involved with the way America is going. It's *Them*. *They did it*. They stole, they cheated, they lied, they oppressed. And what? *We* are pure, righteous, holy, perfect and totally separated out from the systems that hold us in place? And one day, when these wicked corporations all repent, and start to revere people, not profits, *we* will offer them our forgiveness, from our lofty, angelic height? Please understand what I am saying: this document is a *great document* in my opinion. Brilliant. I agree with their well-described grievances all the way. But I wish there was a way to rephrase it in such a way that we are not falling back into the notion that there are angels and there are devils, and you're either one or the other and that's that. Send the angels to cushions in heaven, throw the devils screaming into hell, and we're done. There are people with power and people with less power, sure. I know that. There are people who are different from each other in many ways...in feelings, looks, intellect, education and accessibility. But all of us, all of us who are human at least, Yom Kippur reminds me every year, are not at our best when we're just sleepwalking, thinking that the world out there has nothing to do with us. That unconsciousness may feel good. But forgiveness is not, Victoria rightly says, about feeling good. It's about telling the truth to ourselves first as well as speaking the truth we have experienced to others. Her perfect words: *This is the truth in which **both** of us are living*. You and me. Them and Us. We share this nation, and gladly, the marchers in New York are claiming just that. *I salute them. Every one of them*. My excitement about what they are doing there, and what will be happening here in Columbus this week, has not abated, even with my questions about the word "They." The themes of Yom Kippur, however, demand more. Yom Kippur invites all of us to wake up and live our own lives out with accountability. The process of forgiveness clocks no time, cares little whether its Them or Us, and is unimpressed whether we're groggy or alert in the morning. Yom Kippur just rings. Time to wake up....

Offering

The sun draws up life from the earth. In like manner, when we give, our giving calls forth life within the congregation and within our own hearts. There are many other ways and times we give, for we don't follow a strict schedule. But this time is important to many as *their* time. Let the ushers come forward.

A Contemporary Kol Nidrei for 2011

Mark: All vows we have made to live
the unexamined life are now cancelled.
Wake up! Wake up!
Gone are the unconscious promises we made
because of pressure or praise.
Wake up! Wake up

Eric: Gone are the promises we made
because we felt ashamed not to do so.
Gone are all the promises and vows we made
out of thoughtless habit or custom, or
even because we may have felt confused.
Gone they are, vanished! I see them no longer,
like water that flows past the horizon.
Gone the excuses I make for why I can't live within my own truth,
insisting on orbiting some other truth instead. Gone the vows I made to confirm myself
by jumping through someone else's hoops.
Gone, my vow to forgo my dreams, so I won't disturb anyone else. Gone, vanished, just
like that! Gone, this seductive habit of refusing to live in the freedom of redemptive
honesty.

Wake up! Wake up!
Lisa: The paper is blank, the field is empty,
the map has not been made.
The pretend guarantees are far away now.
And thus now I no longer have to hide
in the shelter of guilt, or the cave of shame,
but I can show up,
and be present to myself and to others.
Now I will no longer define myself only
by my failings and the strains of my life,
but also by my joys and strengths,
and my willingness to be accountable.

Mark: *Nishmat hayay tevarykh v'kherev libi yahshir: Kol od neshamah bekirbi.*
The breath of my life will bless, the cells of my Being will sing in gratitude, awakening!
(Marcia Falk)

Sung Portion

For all the promises we spoke in good faith but were not finally really willing to fulfill:
We forgive ourselves, and each other, we begin again in love.

For the times when a sense of guilt or a muffling shame kept us rigid, righteous, raw and resentful.

We forgive ourselves, and each other, we begin again in love.

For each time we have moved impatiently toward bristling anger and procrastinated the often very slow intrusion of the larger picture.

We forgive ourselves, and each other, we begin again in love.

For any time our comfort with our own lives
has kept us from seeing the real lives of others

We forgive ourselves, and each other, we begin again in love.

For the times we have been surprised or disappointed that other people do not think or feel exactly like us:

We forgive ourselves, and each other, we begin again in love.

For trying to earn the love of others by working to be perfect and always in control,
instead of risking vulnerability...

We forgive ourselves, and each other, we begin again in love.

For the times when we have spoken intemperately, irresponsibly or unaware of our impact

We forgive ourselves, and each other, we begin again in love.

For these, and for so many attitudes and acts, both obvious and not so obvious, which
have fostered the illusion that we are truly separate from each other and completely self-derived.

We forgive ourselves, and each other, we begin again in love.

Blessing (*reprise*)

Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma — which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary.

Go in peace...