



Forgiveness

Each month worship, religious education, covenant groups and Wellspring Wednesday programs will offer opportunities to contemplate, consider, contend with and discuss an intergenerational curriculum based on monthly themes. Our hope is that this approach will bind us more closely together and inform our lives in effective and positive ways. October's theme is...Forgiveness.

Holding a grudge can make you sick. It's said that forgiveness is good for the soul. But forgiveness isn't simple. All too easily forgiveness can become a mask for denial. When one forgives or is forgiven too easily, with no process in place for confrontation and reparations, what Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the 20th century German theologian and martyr called "cheap grace" comes into the equation. "Cheap grace," he wrote, "is preaching forgiveness without requiring repentance...."

Forgiveness has both personal and public dimensions. Personal forgiveness begins with insight. It begins when one becomes aware of the way one's wounds or one's wounding of others has done damage. In the 12-step process steps eight and nine are both concerned with acknowledging the harm one has done to others and with making amends. Every effective spiritual practice in some way helps the practitioner to become aware of the ways he or she has done harm to others and where possible to ask forgiveness.

The Unitarian Universalist hymnal *Singing the Living Tradition* includes a "Litany of Atonement" (#637) written by Rob Eller-Isaacs. Some years ago it was used during a service attended by more than 500 Unitarian Universalist ministers at a gathering of the Ministers Association.

Participants were asked to pair off, hold hands if they were comfortable doing so, look into each others eyes and respond to each line read from the chancel

by saying, "I forgive myself. I forgive you. We begin again in love." For many it was an intimate, powerful moment. Following the service the great Baptist preacher William Sloan Coffin who was keynote speaker at the convocation cornered Rob in an elevator. "Brother Isaacs" he growled, "just what makes you think you can forgive yourself."

His question points to one of the key differences between Calvinist and Unitarian Universalist theology. What makes us think we can forgive ourselves is that we consider everyone to be a child of God and that as such God works through each of us. Instead of a distant all-powerful God we have embraced a more intimate and, if you will, more humanist understanding. Instead of a God who condones or condemns we hold that everyone is already saved regardless of their sins and that heaven and hell are states of mind not destinations. In Unitarian Universalist theology forgiveness becomes a very intimate, very personal process.

Forgiveness has a public face as well. Think about the restorative justice circles we've convened to help us and others to work toward reconciliation. They are instruments for collective forgiveness. A particularly inspiring example of public opportunities for forgiveness is found in the work of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission which showed the world a new way to move beyond horrific injustice and move toward a new day. Some who suffer from systemic racism and other oppressions growing out of colonialism and other abuses of power testify that when present

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Worship Theme Resources

Books

No Future Without Forgiveness
Desmond Tutu, Image Books 1999

A Little Book of Forgiveness: Challenges and Meditations for Anyone with Something to Forgive by D. Patrick Miller

How Good Do We Have to Be? A New Understanding of Guilt and Forgiveness by Harold Kushner

Saint Maybe by Ann Tyler

Between Vengeance and Forgiveness by Martha Minow

Biblical Stories

Jacob and Esau – Genesis: chapters 25 and 27

Abraham and Isaac — "The Akedda," the traditional text for Rosh Hashanah
Genesis: 22

Matthew 18:21-22

Films

The Straight Story 1999 (PG13)
A lovely story of a man who drives 300 hundred miles on a ride-on mower in order to reconcile with the brother from whom he is estranged.

Crash 2004 (R)
Don Cheadle, Sandra Bullock and Matt Dillon are among a marvelous ensemble cast caught up in interweaving stories involving racial tensions, murder, intrigue and twists of fate.

A Long Nights Journey Into Day 2000
A brilliant documentary about the truth and reconciliation process in South Africa.

PARENTS!
Check out the family activities around forgiveness on page 13.

FAMILY ACTIVITIES AROUND FORGIVENESS

Learning about Yom Kippur

Share with your children the practice of atonement by learning from our Jewish neighbors and family members.

Yom Kippur is a day to apologize to ourselves and one another for the ways in which we have fallen short of being the people we want to be. Jewish teachings tell us that we can atone ritually for the sins of practice (not eating as we should, not praying as much as we might, wasting the blessings of food and wealth), but we cannot atone ritually for sins that we commit against each other – that atonement we must do in person. If we've hurt someone's feelings, lied to someone or otherwise done wrong by them, we must apologize to them directly and obtain their forgiveness. Jewish religious law says that even if a person doesn't forgive us the first time, we must try three times to offer our heartfelt regret and apology.

As a family, consider having each member - child and adult - write a letter to themselves around October 1, the end of Rosh Hashanah (marking the start of the Days of Awe, a period of introspecting and self-evaluation). In these letters, name the ways in which you have disappointed yourself and wronged others. Describe how you might make amends. Name the people whom you forgive for things they've done. Remind yourself of how you might make choices that help you to be more loving and forgiving. Put the letters in the the mail so that they might arrive around Yom Kippur, (sundown October 8 to sundown October 9).

Family Role-play

The arts of apology and forgiveness are learned skills. Stage a little 'dinner theatre' in your home with prompts like the following:

- Let's pretend one of us is a neighbor and another one of us has just broken that neighbor's window with a baseball. What would it look and sound like if we could watch the "I'm sorry" conversation between them?
- What would you do if you knew someone had broken something of yours, but every time you saw that person, they didn't confess or apologize.
- What are all the different ways you can say the phrase, "I'm sorry" (flat, snotty, flip, sobbing, robot-like, sincerely, desperately). Which way sounds like it's coming from your heart? Are there other words to use for "I'm sorry."
- What are all the different ways you can say the words "I forgive you"?

Word Search

When his friends asked him the question, "How many times should we forgive someone who hurts us? Seven, maybe?", the teacher Jesus of Nazareth had an interesting answer. He said, "More than seven times. Seventy times seven?" How many times is that? Talk about this idea as a family. How is it helpful advice? Are there times when that advice isn't the best for us?

Can you find the words "I Forgive You" seven times in this puzzle?

D S D A X W K Z O O Q P T A W U
I N O N D I F O R G I V E Y O U
O K E P G S S F D L R X T Y B Z
E M Q L E I W N E I S E E G K X
H F I R L I F O R G I V E Y O U
Z J R H R S A E E S I C I S L U
O B F J R R E L I G H M H J O N
M H A B E F B S R T T H N Y R M
T Q M X P O P O R E R A E I W G
I G A T I P F S A H G V M H I M
R E S O F I F O R G I V E Y O U
P T D F H Y S P L G L D E H B H
O T P N E X J R R R L L E B A F
B O G M S G X O G K A R G A F B
U E N M C E F X P G P E W M M W
T N L N B I Z N B N N A D P E X

Forgiveness

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day leaders apologize for past wrongs they help them to move toward forgiveness.

Forgiveness then is both an imperative and lifelong challenge. Each of us has been wronged. Each of us has done wrong. At our best we embrace forgiveness and discipline. We learn to include it as part of our regular spiritual practice. Ask yourself, whom do I need to forgive? Whom do I hope will forgive me? Then make a plan, and make amends, leave vengeance to the Lord, you and I have better work to do.

