

Self-Forgiveness ~ Shedding Guilt & Shame
‘A Feast of Forgiveness’ Lenten Sermon Series
Psalm 25:1-7, 11 & Psalm 51:1-10
Sunday March 15, 2009
Trinity United Ottawa
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I selected two psalms offered in the Lenten lectionary, to read this morning for this second of my Lenten series on forgiveness. Before you listen, I remind you that the ancient psalms show us one side of a person’s prayer-conversation with God. As a body, the Book of Psalms models for us real, open sharing of all our thoughts and feelings with God in honest prayer. But they don’t show God’s side of the conversation. Psalms are human outpourings, illustrative of human understanding - and misunderstandings - of their relationship with the Creator. As you listen to these psalms, discern for yourself what phrases are helpful and healing to you on your spiritual journey. Be also aware of any words from the psalmist that you find hurtful or unhelpful, so that you do not give them Godly weight.

*“Do not let me be put to shame...let them be ashamed...
pardon my guilt for it is great.” Ps 25*

*“I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me...
I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.” Ps. 51*

Ouch!! The Psalms are sometimes such a comfort, but they can also be a psychological minefield. If we are told to voice these words of shame and guilt, individually or collectively, they can deepen some people’s feelings that they are altogether unworthy of God’s love. They can make people want to hide in shame from the Divine.

For me personally, the word ‘sin’ is like a speedbump. When I encounter it I fly off the page reacting to the categorical judgement I hear in that word.

I regret that for some of us, words in our Hebrew psalm book and traditional Christian hymnody cross the line between healthy, self-reflective humility and self-

destructive humiliation. I thank God that today, our progressive, emerging Christianity rejects the too easy leverage of guilt and shame, as agents to force religious compliance.

In 'Broken Open: How Difficult Times Can Help Us Grow' author Elizabeth Lesser quotes Sister Wendy Beckett: "I don't think being human has any place for guilt. Contrition, yes. Guilt, no. Contrition means you tell God you're sorry and you're not going to do it again and you start off afresh...Guilt means you go on and on...having emotions and...being ego fixated. Guilt is a trap. People love guilt because they feel if they suffer through enough guilt, they'll make up for what they've done. Whereas, in fact, you're just sitting in a puddle and splashing."

Guilt is the weighty self blame we carry for doing a bad thing. Shame is the even greater weight of believing we are bad people - sinners. A sinking stone that disempowers us - the opposite of self esteem. In our pilgrimage of the heart toward forgiveness this Lent, it seem that for many people, the first refugio - the first stop or station this Lent - must be self-forgiveness. The shedding of guilt and the healing of shame. Because, as the author of 'How To Forgive' says: "to forgive yourself is the condition of all forgiveness."

The Sufi sage Hasdai Ben Ha-Melekh asked: "How can we expect anyone who is cruel to himself to have compassion for others?" But the 19th century French author Bernanos points out: "Anyone who is forced to look at themself without 'the gentle mercy of God' cannot help but fall into self-hatred and self loathing."

Jesus, in his one Great Commandment, asks us to love our neighbour *'as our self.'* The implication is that we cannot love the other without self-esteem and self-love. Forgiveness is a particular form of loving compassion that reaches across mistakes, wrongdoing, imperfections and bad choices to bridge broken relationships of the past, with God, our self and others, so we can journey forward, whole and together.

Think for a moment of one instance of forgiveness in your life. Perhaps a recent

reconciliation with a family member? Or a long ago “I’m sorry” moment with a childhood friend? Or the time when you just let go of a simmering resentment or grudge against a colleague. Recall how it happened, what was said, if anything? How long did it take to get there? Remember how good you felt after that incident of forgiveness? How much closer did you feel with the person who you forgave or were forgiven by? Did you feel a release of weight? A sense of freedom? Perhaps that person felt close and dear again? That is how close and dear we are meant to feel with our Self. And with our Creator.

Alas, often our family upbringing or our social environment or our religion has trained us to be least forgiving of our self. Anyone who has experienced physical or emotional or religious abuse is vulnerable to the psychological reaction of ‘internalizing the abuser.’ An overactive conscience, or, in psychological terms, the superego, the ‘inner critic’ or ‘critical parent’ is the loudest voice in their head.

Like that poor psalmist, we keep replaying the mistakes of our past, guiltily remembering “the sins of my youth” and shamefully judging our self “born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.” (I think even Catholicism is downplaying ‘original sin’ these days. Thank God! We sure don’t want to load that on our children’s impressionable psyches!)

Lent is the Christian season for self reflection. Forty days for metaphorically going out into the desert alone with Jesus. Time to courageously face our demons and stand up to them. Look at our shadow long enough to see the tiny gleam of light that will grow there. But bringing our darkness out into the light does not mean self flagellation. On the contrary, it must be a compassionate project. Its product is freedom and joy and restored relationship, so how could its process be cruel?

Kindness is required for all forgiveness - a measure of godly compassion that we can learn to dish out for our Self, with gentle prayer. We can invite the Christ light that surrounds us and shines within us to shine into our dark places and show us the stones of guilt and shame, along with those weighty grudges and the rocks of blame

we'd like to throw. We can invite the strength of the God - in - us to help us lift up those stones into clear view. Look at them our self, with understanding. Show them to God in confidential prayer. Notice that perhaps our heaviest stones have a surprisingly shiny side to them. Maybe they were ballast that we once needed to keep us on course in heavy seas in our life. Ballast that we are now perhaps ready to offload at the Cross...the crossroads of resurrection for our own relationships and self esteem.

Forgiveness, in all its forms of give and take, is not something we can will ourselves to do. It is not a single choice but a growing ability, fed by our intentions and the steadying winds of God's Spirit. Forgiveness is a journey that we embark on prayerfully, one day at a time. But we cannot leave our Self behind. And we do need God at our side.

Perhaps some of the Psalms will feed your courage for forgiveness and self forgiveness? Perhaps some prayers that suggest the God-side of the conversation, will serve you on your journey too.

If they are the soul food you hunger for to help you love yourself better, please close your eyes and let them into your beautiful heart. I offer you these words, From Julia Cameron's 'Answered Prayers: Love Letters from the Divine' as from your Creator: "You pray only those prayers you think will please me. Your heart's secrets you keep to yourself, afraid I will disapprove. Why do you fear my disapproval? I made you. I know your nature. I know your secret heart. It is my great desire to be your closest friend, your secret sharer. I long to partner you in all things. It is safe to bring your secrets to me. My nature is compassionate. I can hear your dreams without judgment. I can share your enthusiasms and your joys.

You doubt my presence. You see yourself as a vexatious child gnawing at my nerves. You don't want to bother me. You fear my temper and my judgment. But it is you who are impatient. You are the judge who judges you. I have boundless patience. I carved the Grand Canyon one drop of water at a time. What matters to me is that you do come to me, that we begin our work together. I do not see you as

a vexatious child. Rather, I see you as a beloved child.

Your past overwhelms you. You have made so many mistakes, you doubt your life can ever be straightened out. You face the future with despair. Stop and listen to me. I am not overwhelmed by your past. Your mistakes do not discourage me. To me, your future is bright with promise.