

Divine Forgiveness

Rev. Bill Neely

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Princeton

Sunday, February 4, 2018

The story is of an ancient mariner who shoots a peaceful, good-natured bird for no good reason at all. In fact, many sailors aboard the ship believed that the bird had just led them out of the dangerous waters of the far north, where ice and fog threatened them. Safely headed toward a kinder ocean for an old sailing ship, the mariner nonetheless shot the bird dead with a crossbow.

However, in the way that truth can shift and take new form right before our eyes, the sailors soon begin to think that perhaps it was the bird itself that had led them to the dangerous north. Perhaps the bird had led them to danger, not safety, and it was the killing of the bird that secured their southerly turn that would save them. The mariner goes from goat to hero in the blink of an eye.

However, soon after the ship becomes mired in the warmer waters, with no wind to move it anywhere. The boat begins to rot as it sits idle in an ocean that becomes a gross, stagnant, stew-like abyss with slick and slimy animals swarming about on the surface of the water. A sense of dread fills the boat, as well as a sense of desperation, for there is no rain. They have nothing to drink, which leads the poet who tells this story to convey these timeless lines:

Water, water everywhere,
Nor, any drop to drink.

And again in the way that truth can shift and take new form right before our eyes, the sailors return to feeling angry at the mariner. They return to the feeling that they first felt; that it was wrong to kill the bird, and so in a gruesomely inventive way, they hang its body around the neck of the mariner. Apparently the bird's body has been with them this whole time, and it becomes a mark of his sin, his own scarlet pendant of penance.

This sounds like a plot out of a modern movie house; some kind of horror movie that might go straight to video. But it's an old story, a poem of 1798 that you may have read in school somewhere along the line. The bird is an albatross, and it's hung around the neck of a mariner in Coleridge's, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. It's why we use the common phrase an "albatross around your neck," to describe something that weighs us down as we move through life; something we can't shake off; something that keeps inhibiting us. In the poem, the bird, the albatross, is a self-chosen weight, for the mariner kills the bird himself. And it's also a weight put on the mariner by others, for sailors adorn his body with the dead bird. It's a mark of sin, and a weight of oppression, brought on by self and others; a mark and a weight from which he struggles to cleanse and free himself. And the same is true of us, and the albatrosses in our lives.

Our albatrosses are many and varied. Pride, personality, perfectionism may be that which weighs us down; weights we choose and to which others may add. The need to be busy may be our downfall, or the need to be the best, or the need to be needed. The power in the poem is in the many different ways that we can identify with the mariner; the many different weights that we can name hanging upon us that we and others have placed there. The albatross can symbolize anything, including forgiveness, which was my first and lingering association with the bird. Decades ago, I thought that this was a bird of forgiveness. Today, I think so even more.

Like each of you, I feel I've been wronged in life. I know I've been wronged in life. I recall a college teacher who made life particularly difficult for me, who graded me harshly and openly mocked my contributions to class discussions. He was a political science teacher who disliked my politics, and the visibility of my politics, and thus antagonized me in class every chance he got. It was a miserable semester stuck in a required course for my major, and resulting in a great deal of work to achieve a grade lower than I deserved. I remember, after finishing the final and not at all being sure that he would pass me, thinking, "I am done with him. If he fails me, I'm changing majors."

Now to be honest, that's not as extreme as it may sound – I changed majors probably 4-5 times in college. But my thinking was, I was done with him. Over. I had put up with enough. I don't care if he teaches a course in the history of the Pittsburgh Steelers, as told through the music of Broadway, or some other perfect conglomeration of my life's interests, I was over him. We were done. I remember going out that night with friends and celebrating the end of our relationship.

Except that it wasn't the end of the relationship. I found myself replaying our interactions in class again and again. I would find myself, when driving, thinking about what I could have said to him that would have been sharper, more intelligent. As I would try and fall asleep at night, I would imagine new interactions with him in which I would have the upper hand, in which I would have control, and be able to determine something about his future. And I was not kind in those imaginations. I was not merciful, or forgiving, or understanding, or the kind of person I wanted to be. I would see the faces of others in the class who witnessed the antagonism and wish to turn those faces of pity or humor or whatever toward him, so that he would be the focus, not me. I went to a great, big giant state school – it was easy to avoid him in person, and physically I did just that. But in many ways, after the class, he was more in my head than ever.

And it was because instead of moving beyond that relationship, I stewed in it, like that ship stuck in the sea. And the slimy animals that surfaced around that ship of despair were my replayed and imagined moments of resentful victory over an antagonist. I lived in the resentment; fed it and fed off of it, way after the relationship ended, and thus continued his influence over my life; over my wholeness and happiness. What a regretful way to live, even for a moment. And I did it for months.

It was an example of the old saying attributed to innumerable people from Carrie Fisher to Nelson Mandela, so let's just call it "one for the ages," that goes, "Resentment is like drinking poison, and hoping someone else dies." It harms us, but we hope it will harm someone else. It makes us less whole but we imagine it taking something important away from someone else. We spend time sending all sorts of bad energy to someone else, meanwhile there's a decent chance they're living a happy life, blissfully unaware of the inner angst and stress we've chosen to imbibe. We put the albatross of resentment around our neck, and others, too, may help us lift and place that weight and then once it's there, it affects every movement we make.

I was fortunate, for I had a friend who one night, after I griped about that professor again, said, "You know you still talk about that class a lot. Like you're still in it. Like he's still teaching you. You know that class is over, right?" And then, because this was a close friend, is a close friend, he could away with saying, "You can move on whenever you want, and everyone you know is ready for that." It was a healthy wake-up call that it was time to move on, to forgive and not really forget, but get over. And that was little more than a gradual process of becoming aware of when I was

replaying that relationship, or imagining its continuation, and instead of filling my mind with resentful replays, just wishing him well and moving on. I had to forgive what I could forgive, and get over what I couldn't, and move on, giving him no more real estate in my life's journey.

It's in this way that forgiveness is a process. It's a process more than an act, which pushes against how I think religion often, perhaps unintentionally, presents it, which is: forgiveness as a rite. There's an act of confession, for which one is forgiven, as long as one makes certain amends of words and deeds. There are prayers of confession, which in classic forms are followed by an assurance of pardon, or forgiveness, where the slate is wiped clean. Forgiveness is something sought and granted in the moment, in a prayerful or even sacramental form.

But that sort of forgiveness is of the divine sort; the kind that comes from God for actions that may have harmed humans but are confessed in the context of affronting the Holy. On the human level, practicing forgiveness isn't anywhere close to being that simple and easy. It's not transactional or creedal; it's relational. In a way, forgiveness is more spiritual when we're talking about people than it is when we're talking about the Holy because forgiveness among people is a process, sometimes a very tender process, about pain, release, confession, and growth, all in the context of our relationships with others.

And we have all held onto resentment, poisoning ourselves, when forgiveness would make us healthier. And we have all resented asking for forgiveness and thus not confessed and sought wholeness, for it is easy to fear our own imperfections. Even the ask for forgiveness admits that we are less than perfect, and if we feel slighted to begin with, that ask or admission can seem like a particularly bitter pill to swallow. And forgiveness can be a bitter pill, but it's still medicine that can make us healthier. And it gets less bitter with time.

Because when we forgive someone in our hearts, we become lighter in spirit and energy. We regain the sweetness of life and our relationships. We release the albatross of resentment and negativity from around our necks and are able to lift our shoulders and face more fully the sun. And when we ask for forgiveness, we are able to do the same, whether forgiveness is offered or not. Because in truth, the only part of forgiveness over which we have any control at all is that which we request, and that which we offer. We cannot grant it to ourselves when we seek it from someone else. We can only ask.

And I think that reality: that the request might not be granted, can keep us from embracing more fully the healthy power of forgiveness. There are three things that do this: one that forgiveness makes us realize we're not perfect and we don't always like that. Two is that we may need to offer or receive forgiveness from someone who has wronged us and that is complicated, personal, and can be a really tough pill to swallow. And the third is that we may ask for forgiveness and not receive it, which is another kind of wound. And there are times in which it seems someone from whom forgiveness is sought withholds offering that balm because they've become attached to the pain they can inflict, unaware that it is really continuing their own pain.

And so when forgiveness is sought, is asked for, is requested, from another person, that request has to be seen as the balm itself. That's all one can do, and then it's up to the other person to work through their own relationship with forgiveness and find their place of comfort. That may take a while; it may take a lifetime, but the person asking for forgiveness doesn't have any control over that. All that we who need forgiveness can do is admit fault, and ask with sincere heart, and know

that the other person is working through their own life and vision of who they wish to be. They may not be able to forgive in the moment, but even when that's the case, the asking itself is healthy for the person who needs forgiven.

For just as offering forgiveness lightens the load of resentment, asking for it lightens the load of guilt, and both acts make us healthier and more whole. When the Holy is the other party, it's easy. When the other party is any other human on earth, it gets messier. And so that best practice is to be forgiving as much we can, and to forgive as much we can, and to do that again and again, throughout life. Not to forgive and forget, but to forgive, and remember, and move on in the spirit of wholeness, with lightened burdens and freer spirits.

In Coleridge's poem, the weight is lifted. The mariner, stuck on his boat, is confronted with a ghost boat that ends up causing the death of the sailors. Hundreds. Their corpses surround him, staring at him with open eyes. I told you this like a horror movie. The mariner tries to pray but can't because his mouth is too parched and he waits to die for seven days and seven nights. He waits the length of creation for his own destruction.

But he isn't destroyed. An evening light of the moon shines on the waters, on the slithering animals and the corpses and the deck of the rotting boat and the mariner see only beauty in the light. Wearing the weight of his sin, of his error, of that which caused so much misery, he nonetheless praises life and the wonders of the sea, and says a prayer, and the albatross slides from his neck, and he is freed. The corpses come back to life with spirits who take ship to within sight of the mainland, where they ship gets sucked into the sea but not before the mariner is rescued by a guy with a little boat.

His penance for killing the albatross is to go all over the place telling this story, which he does at a wedding that is the setting for the poem. And the holy lesson that he teaches is summed in the stanza:

He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.

But he had to see beauty to reach that conclusion. He had to see life and light and shiny things where he previously saw slimy beings. With reason to ashamed and resentful, he had to move beyond those weights to live in the lightness of forgiveness and that began, with him, with the reclamation of beauty, a vision that would lead prayers of gratitude and love.

May we too move beyond that which weighs us down, releasing resentment and guilt into the world so that we may be free. May we forgive and seek forgiveness, knowing that both impulses make us kinder, more compassionate, and more whole people. And may know that in forgiving others, we are lightning our bodies and spirits for journeys that can be beautiful, and loving, and free, and shared in all of our beautiful, faulty, human glory.

May it be so, and Amen.