

"Restitution and Forgiveness"
Sermon and Worship Service for
The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Wayne County
Wooster, Ohio
March 1, 2020
The Rev. Jennie Barrington, Interim Minister
Worship Associate: Gail Woosley, CLM
Music Director: Sharon Delgadillo
Accompanist: Sue Kandel
Special Music: The Choir

Welcome and Announcements Gail Woosley, CLM

Opening words *from Philippians 4* Rev. Jennie
[Use #699]

Chalice Lighting *by Reinhold Niebuhr* Gail Woosley, CLM
[Responsive Reading #461]

Special Music *Show Us How to Love, by Mark Miller* The Choir

Time for All Ages (9:30 service only) Chelsea Churpek

Singing the Children Out #413 *Go, now, in Peace*

Sharing Joys and Concerns Gail Woosley, CLM

Unison Blessing *Sanctuary* - Scruggs and Thompson
Open my heart, to be a sanctuary
All made holy, loved and true. With thanksgiving,
I'll be a living sanctuary for you.

Spoken Blessing and Moment of Silence Rev. Jennie
This morning we are thinking with loving kindness of all those in our congregation, or known and loved by our congregation, who are in a time of transition, loss, uncertainty, or fear. May their fears be assuaged, their minds be put at ease, and their hearts be comforted. The final stone is for the Joys, Concerns, Milestones, and Remembrances which remain silent in our hearts. Let us join our hearts together in a moment of silence in contemplation on the joys and concerns of the day. Blessed be.

Offering and Offertory [Gail Woosley, CLM]

Welcoming of Guests

Karen Skubik

*Hymn #315 This Old World

First Reading *by the Rev. Rolfe Gerhardt*

Gail Woosley

Let there always be, in the seasons of our lives, a time for forgiveness -- for such is being human that we do unto others, as they do unto us, that which needs to be forgiven.

There is a saying that "It's easier to forgive our enemies after we've gotten even with them." But is that in truth forgiveness?

When we respond to hurt by hurting, to insult by insulting, to indignity by degrading -- when we respond in kind, are we not merely adding hate and darkness to a world that needs love and light? Are we not keeping open the wound in ourselves by inflicting a wound in another?

To heal we must forgive. We must gather strength, and insight, and compassion, and kindness, and love, and forgive.

Let us forgive those who wrong us and do not know any better, and those who wrong us and know well what they do. Let us forgive the insensitive and the angry, the deceitful and the exploitative, the arrogant, and the insecure. Let us forgive all who do not want peace in this world. Let us forgive all who do not wish to be forgiven. And let us forgive ourselves, for it is with ourselves that we are often the most unforgiving.

Let us, in this spirit of forgiveness, gather all that we can of strength, and insight, and compassion, and kindness, and love, and purify our hearts and minds that the spirit of forgiveness may shape the days of our lives beginning with this moment.

Second Reading, from, *The Diary of Anne Frank*: [Rev. Jennie]

"Anyone who claims that the older ones have a more difficult time here certainly doesn't realize to what extent our problems weigh down on us, problems for which we are probably much too young, but which thrust themselves upon us continually, until, after a long time, we think we've found a solution, but the solution doesn't seem able to resist the facts which reduce it to nothing again.

That's the difficulty in these times: ideals, dreams, and cherished hopes rise within us, only to meet the horrible truth and be shattered. It's really a wonder that I haven't dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can't build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery, and death. I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness, I hear the ever approaching thunder, which will destroy us too, I can feel the suffering of millions, and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquility will return again."

Hymn #1 *May Nothing Evil Cross this Door*

Sermon *On Restitution and Forgiveness*

Rev. Jennie

The Jewish Holy Day, Purim, commemorates the saving of the Jewish people from Haman, through the brave and heroic actions of Esther. This year Purim begins at sundown on March 9th. For that Jewish holiday, prayers and blessings are said, to express and petition to God the need to address and make right wrongs and grievances done to Jewish people. And so this is a fitting Sunday for us to reflect on the themes of restitution and forgiveness. Our first thought is often of wrongs and grievances done to us, individually, or to people we love. But I am also mindful that wrongs and grievances are also done to whole communities, peoples, and nations.

The book that I have often turned to when reflecting on restitution of grievances is by Simon Wiesenthal; it's called, *The Sunflower – On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*. Mr. Wiesenthal was a Holocaust Survivor. The book begins with a biographical essay by him in which a dying SS man asks Mr. Wiesenthal to forgive the atrocities he has done to other Jews. What follows in the book is a collection of short essays in which forty-six respondents discern what they might have done had they been in Mr. Wiesenthal's shoes. The respondents are theologians, political leaders, writers, jurists, psychiatrists, human rights activists, and some people who were survivors of extreme trauma. Their answers reflect beliefs that are Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, secular, and agnostic. The responses vary greatly, yet they all reflect deep aforethought. As such, the whole book, *The Sunflower* can help each of us discern what we believe about the possibilities and limits of forgiveness.

Mr. Wiesenthal's essay is beautifully written and compelling. In his quietly understated way, he keeps questioning whether or not he did the right thing, and respectfully asks us what we would have done. What he did do was act with great compassion, courage, and restraint. When the SS man told Mr. Wiesenthal he was dying, Mr. Wiesenthal immediately ran to find a doctor. But the doctor only said that many, many people were dying, and there was nothing he could do to be of help. So Mr. Wiesenthal listened to the SS man's confession, which was long, detailed, and horrific. The SS man was sincerely repentant for the murders and suffering he had caused. His guilt was tormenting him. He asked for forgiveness so he could die in peace. What Mr. Wiesenthal did was listen in silence, then walk away in silence. Mr. Wiesenthal was eventually liberated and joined a commission that located Nazi criminals, investigated them, and brought them to trial so they were publicly accountable for their crimes. Many nations have thanked him for his restorative work in that arena. And many people have said that he showed enormous compassion and restraint in not spewing hateful language at the SS man, a man he probably could even have killed with a pillow.

One of the essays in the book is by the Dalai Lama. His Holiness begins by stating that while forgiveness is important, "one should be aware and remember these experiences so that efforts can be made to check the reoccurrence of such atrocities in the future." He then tells of a Tibetan monk who had been imprisoned in a Chinese prison for eighteen years, but had escaped to India. The Dalai Lama asked the monk "what he felt was the biggest threat or danger while he was in prison. [He] was amazed by [the monk's] answer. It was extraordinary and inspiring. [The Dalai Lama] was expecting him to say something else; instead he said that what he most feared was losing his compassion for the Chinese."

A religious scholar named Eva Fleischner states that her interpretation of the Christian scripture "turn the other cheek" is that we are to try to forgive transgressions against ourselves, but that Christian scripture does not tell us to forgive wrongs done to others. Her interpretation of Jewish teachings is that forgiveness isn't possible to receive unless there has also been restitution or atonement. When someone asks for forgiveness, they also have to try to "make up for it in some way." So she poses the question: could the SS man have done something to save even some of the Jewish people around him? And "would such an act perhaps have constituted atonement?"

The Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, writes, in his essay:

"I am not sure there is such a thing as forgiving another person, though I know there is such a thing as being forgiven. To be forgiven is to feel the weight of the

past lift from our shoulders, to feel the stain of past wrongdoing washed away. To be forgiven is to feel free to step into the future unburdened by the precedent of who we have been and what we have done in previous times... Unfortunately, by summoning one Jew to absolve him of what he had done to other Jews, [the SS man] leaves us doubting whether he has in fact transcended the Nazi view of seeing Jews as less than human, interchangeable entities rather than unique human beings, even as a person sins by hating all blacks, [or] whites, [or] Christians, [or] Jews, [or] Germans because of what some other blacks, whites, etc., may have done to him."

To me, restitution means some kind of way –a real and valuable and true and public and lasting way– that injustice of the past is balanced out with justice in the present that will permeate into the future– justice that will significantly change the future for the better.

What the SS man did was unfair and irresponsible– He was asking for forgiveness from the wrong person in a wrong way at the wrong time. The scenario the SS man created is parallel to two people on the platform beside a train that's about to depart– One person says something burdensome and violating to the other, then jumps onto the train that speeds away, leaving the other person on the platform without any opportunity to have a conversation– a conversation that seeks to arrive at truth, accountability, and fairness. One of the main things I, as a minister, do is to provide opportunities for individuals, groups, families, and whole congregations to have conversations that seek to arrive at truth, accountability, and fairness. Timing is important. Helping people to name things for themselves, in their own way, and in their own words is important. But what's perhaps most important is for none of us to avoid helping those conversations to happen due to lack of courage.

Forgiveness can only result from a conversation in which two parties have somehow started on the same page. If I were Mr. Wiesenthal, the SS man would not have been enough on the same page as me for me to forgive him. However, Mr. Wiesenthal does not say, "I could never in my whole life forgive you." It was gracious that he did not say that. Very gracious indeed, under the circumstances of such an imbalance of power and justice.

There are things the SS man could have done to use the power he had to make things right– to change the system which was cruel. And he didn't– his motivation came from the fact that he could not sleep, and that he was dying. He should have gone to people who had the power to change things– And he didn't. There are times when restitution is necessary, and this was one of those times. But he didn't go the route of providing restitution– Instead he went to someone

who had no power to help the victims of the cruel system— And he expected that person to forgive him. He was trying to skip a necessary step. The SS man was going for cheap grace— quick and private and, in a manner of speaking, brushing the cruelty under the rug. What was needed was for the system itself to change. And in order for that to happen, there needed to be a public acknowledgment of the cruelty and the SS man's part in it. Real justice is making things right in the big picture, and in lasting ways. A quick and secret verbal forgiveness is not real justice.

Restitution is the balancing out of negative destructive energy with constructive creative energy— Anne Frank was killed by the Nazis. But she wrote a testament of her life and death that became regarded as a work of art the world over. Though she was killed, that diary became her immortality. To this day, it continues to wash over the world with intelligence, soulfulness, and love of humankind.

In these alarming political times, when injustices and imbalances of power exist between so many peoples, we must find examples of people coming together and gifting to the world energy that is creative and restorative. I'll close this morning with a true story of restitution and forgiveness, which is both international, and close to home-- as close as the College of Wooster. This story is both tragic and inspiring. A few weeks ago, Denise Bostdorff shared it with me and our Racial Justice team. It's the story of Norman Morrison. I had not known who he was, but many of you may remember him from the protests against the Vietnam War in the 1960s. Denise teaches a class on the rhetoric and history of the Vietnam War. She said that when she taught the class in 2015, it was also the fiftieth anniversary of Norman Morrison's death. In 1965, Norman Morrison, feeling called to do so by his faith as a Quaker, went to the Pentagon and, under the window of the office of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, he immolated himself. He did so in protest of the killing of so many innocent Vietnamese children and families. Denise said:

"What you may not know is that he was a graduate of The College of Wooster. On the anniversary of his death, his widow Anne (now remarried) came to campus with Quaker friends for a commemoration at Westminster. Morrison was a hero in Vietnam, and one of my teaching apprentices was from Hanoi, where a street was named after him and a stamp bears his image. The poet laureate of Vietnam wrote a poem in his honor. [The poem is called, "Emily, My Child." Khue, my student, recited the poem, which was very moving. Then we all participated in a Buddhist water ceremony on campus and planted a tree in Norman's memory there. Afterwards, Anne and her Quaker friends met with my students to look at

a display the students had made in Lowry Center about the Vietnam War, and to talk about their own protests during Vietnam and parallels of that conflict with Iraq. When Norman killed himself in the way he did, my understanding is that it caused a huge controversy on campus. Many people were angry with him, some because he took his life with his [baby daughter] nearby, and others because of his stance on the war. And no one really talked about him or what he did for years. That weekend and the ceremony were special, too, because it was as if the campus were coming to peace with Norman at long last."

[Let us sing.]

*Closing Hymn #121 *We'll Build a Land*
Parting Words *by Rodger Kamenetz*

Rev Jennie

[poet Rodger Kamenetz; his imagined letter to Simon Wiesenthal]:

"Dear Simon Wiesenthal... You yourself saw [the SS man] as a particular person, a human being. That is to your credit. If he had also reached the same point, then the conversation about forgiveness could begin."

Extinguishing the Chalice
Postlude

Sharon Delgadillo