

“Forgiveness”
A sermon by Rev. Roberta Finkelstein
Sunday September 16, 2018

The idea for sermon started with a favorite quotation of mine, and of lots of Unitarian Universalists. In fact, it is in our hymnal as Reading #461. Let’s read antiphonally.

As I sat down to write the other morning, a wisp of a memory floated into my mind. Something about Reinhold Niebuhr and President Obama. With a little Googling, I found what I was looking for. In 2007, during the Presidential campaign, the New York Times columnist David Brooks interviewed then candidate Barak Obama in a ‘walk and talk’ as Obama was leaving the Senate floor. Brooks says that he was for some reason moved to ask Obama, “Have you ever heard of Reinhold Niebuhr.” Obama replied, “I love him. He’s one of my favorite philosophers.” Brooks then pressed him for his take-aways from Niebuhr’s work. “I take away the compelling idea that there is serious evil in the world, and hardship and pain. And we should be humble and modest in our belief we can eliminate those things. But we shouldn’t use that as an excuse for cynicism and inaction. I take away the sense we have to make those efforts knowing they are hard, and not swinging from naïve idealism to bitter realism.” Brooks then commented that he thought that was a pretty good summary of Niebuhr’s book *The Irony of American History*.

You want to talk about an irony of American history. Imagine asking the current inhabitant of the White House who his favorite philosopher is. But I digress.

So, who was this Reinhold Niebuhr who was not only President Obama’s favorite philosopher, but also President Carter’s? After the Brooks column was published, there was a resurgence of interest in Niebuhr, who was considered one

of the great public intellectuals of the 20th century. The Pew Forum put together a panel of commentators to talk about him. In fact, you're all really lucky there is any sermon at all this morning. Once I started reading the proceedings of that forum, well . . . I could have just gone on and on and never written a word. But I pulled myself back from the brink. Here's a little bit of background about Niebuhr; some that has been rattling around in my brain since seminary and some that I gleaned from one of the Pew Forum speakers, Wilfred McClay.

Niebuhr was the son of a German immigrant pastor. My own bias is that German Protestantism tends towards the conservative side of the religious landscape. At least the German Lutheranism that my grandmother Mimi practiced sure did. But the particular religious tradition that Niebuhr was raised in actually evolved into one of the threads of the United Church of Christ, the most liberal and progressive of our Christian cousins. Niebuhr did most of his writing between 1930 and 1960. What a time of radical change in American culture! He struggled, like many 20th century theologians, to integrate his belief in progressive social reform with the crises caused by a period of rapid industrialization and urbanization followed by two devastating world wars. He was significantly influenced by the Social Gospel; that progressive (or maybe even radical) doctrine that called on Christianity to lead movements for social change based in biblical principles. The Social Gospel had a vision of creating a society that had as its primary focus the betterment of all of humanity; it offered a corrective to the excesses of both totalitarianism and capitalism.

Niebuhr, like other progressives of the time, embraced the advances of science; he welcomed the potential that modernity offered to improve the life experiences of many people. But he was also critical of some aspects of progressivism; particularly the tendency to downplay our capacity to do evil. Niebuhr, according to McClay, believed in original sin and he also believed that

we are capable of nobility. We cannot deny our capacity to do evil, nor can we deny our obligation to do good.

When Niebuhr wrote about the American nation, he asserted that history matters and that the analysis of history matters. McClay said, “Niebuhr . . . did not reject the greatness of America, but he insisted that the American belief that America had turned its back on history and made a new beginning for humankind was naïve and dangerous, laying America open to the sins of spiritual pride. It was a source of strength that turned into a source of weakness. And that is what he meant by the irony of American history, the tendency of American civilization to allow decent motives and noble intentions to blind it to the sins and errors to which it’s prone and thereby let its virtue become the source of its vice.” (I’ll just interject here that one of the great struggles we face in dismantling racism and white supremacy culture is that of pointing too often to our intentions while ignoring the actual impact of our words and deeds. Now I’ll let Professor McClay finish his thought.) “It was an irony because it was unintended, inadvertent, unconscious and a consequence of good intentions, rather than doing evil for the sake of a larger good, which he called tragedy, not irony. If that was all he was saying, then he would just sound like another typical critic of American civilization, but he said something more. He said America had to act in the world and do so effectively. It had no choice but to do so. In the same way that the sinful imperfect Christian is required to act in the world and get his or her hands dirty in working for the cause of good, so a morally imperfect America was obliged to employ its power in the world.”

No wonder Barak Obama loves Niebuhr’s work; his ideas about the place of America in the world are compelling. But what does Niebuhr have to offer those of us not primarily concerned with governing? How can he, with his challenging doctrine of human nature – that is one that both asserted the existence of original

sin and the inherent worth and dignity of all people – how can he inform our exploration of the covenantal practice of forgiveness?

Let's take the quotation we read together at the beginning of the sermon line by line and parse it out. "Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope." He begins with the long view – what Theodore Parker called the moral arc of the universe. That line of Parker's about the moral arc of the universe being long but bending towards justice, made more elegant by Martin Luther King, was one of the quotes that President Obama had woven into a rug in the Oval Office. Hope then, is not an unrealistic or unjustified optimism. It is a spiritual discipline, exercised by those of us who see things clearly and still hold out for something better. Reminds me of that beautiful quote from Oscar Wilde, "We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars."

"Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith." Back to the idea that history has a meaning, an idea that our own UU theologian of the same era, James Luther Adams, wrote about. Adams, as some of you may remember, asserted that one of the core values of liberal religion was that revelation is continuous. Or, as those United Church of Christ cousins of ours are fond of saying, "God is still speaking." If we have faith in that, then we are not crippled by despair or cynicism. We can act nobly even as we take full account of the evils of our civilization. Hope allows us to envision a better world. Faith allows us to work towards it, even knowing that we will not complete the work.

"Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love." Now we get to the crux of the matter for understanding the critical importance of religious community. We simply cannot be fully human in solitude. We need each other to share the work, the disappointments, the joys and

sorrows, the burdens, the pain, and the questions. We need to come together and listen deeply to each other as we identify the values that will define us, and the vision that we will work towards. We need to articulate a mission that captures the essence of who we are and why this beloved community exists. Our mission is our face to the world. And we need a covenant that defines the ways we will be together. Our covenant is what makes us a people of faith instead of just a bunch of people. Our covenant acknowledges our humanity and our imperfections; it is our lifeline in times of conflict and in times of struggle. Our covenant calls us back into right relationship when we have been hurt, and when we have hurt others. Our covenant is the single most powerful tool in our liberal religious toolbox.

“No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.” There it is – to my mind the most powerful idea Niebuhr has to offer us: the understanding that forgiveness is a form of love. Love. To recognize my own missteps is hard, but it is less hard when I am called to account by people who love me. To acknowledge the places where I have fallen short, to hear the pain of those whom I have hurt or disappointed, that would be unbearable did it not happen in the context of right relationship, steeped in love. To apologize, to make amends, for me what makes it possible is the ultimate reward of being back in right relationship. That is what Yom Kippur is about; getting back into right relationship with family, friends, members of your communities, and with God or whatever is of ultimate worth to you.

We are so very human, aren't we? So imperfect. So vulnerable. So deeply yearning to be our best selves, and to build a world in which every single human being can also be their best selves. Will we get there? Not likely. But we will get closer. Hope. Faith. Love. Forgiveness. Here we go beloveds. Another church year begins; a year filled with unknowns and possibilities. A new minister. A vastly

improved physical facility. Ambitious new social justice programs. Music and Religious Growth and Learning reimagined. I invite you to walk together in sacred covenant. Filled with hope, Powered by faith. Bathed in love. Practicing forgiveness.