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April 7, 2014 – *The Salvation of a Second Chance*

When I was first asked to deliver a sermon about second chances, I spent days thinking about the many times in my life when second chances have been given to me. But then I realized that for me – and for many of us – the real work isn't to name the second chances we've *received*. It's to name the second chances we've given to others – because that tends to be a whole lot harder.

I have often described my greatest sin as being my difficulty with forgiveness, and that remains my Achilles heel. I am, to put it mildly, not an easy forgiver. Perhaps you are surprised – “she seems so nice,” you may think – well, I *hope* you think so anyway. And really, I am nice. Until I have been wronged, at which point my dragon self is revealed and often engulfs me in its egoistic flames. It's like a friend of mine described a picture her young daughter drew of her – a monstrous beast with claws and fangs, titled at the top *Mad Mommy*. “I'm not really that bad, am I, sweetheart?” she asked. “Oh yeah, mom, that's exactly what you look like when you're mad. Exactly.” And so I imagine a picture of me might look after someone has done me a major wrong. No, I am not an easy forgiver.

But for anyone to have a second chance, we all have to be willing to give them. I know how much I've needed second chances throughout my life. And I know how it feels to not be granted them – the devastation I feel when I believe that I have done irrevocable harm. It is the pain of perfectionism – something a lot of us know a lot about – the belief that when we fail, we are

failures, the belief that we don't actually deserve a second chance if we have been imperfect – if we have been human.

So let me call a spade a spade. The reason I have trouble forgiving others is that I don't really believe I'm worthy of forgiveness myself. When I first heard the parable of the Prodigal Son, my reaction was, "Are you KIDDING me? They took him back? But he was such a jerk! No way. They totally should not have done that. Uh-uh. He made his bed and now he has to lie in it." I hope you'll be relieved to know that this, my first reaction, was about twenty years ago, and I have grown some since then. (Sort of like the Grinch, how his "heart grew three sizes that day?" Well, that's how I feel – only my heart hasn't grown quite that much. More like a size, size and a half.) Part of that growth is being a parent myself. I know now what unconditional love for a child feels like – just like the farmers felt for their son in Jesus' old parable. So from the perspective of the parents, I get it now. If I met them, I'd say, "okay, I understand. No matter what they do, we still love them and want good things for them."

But from the perspective of the son? No. If I met him, I'd give him a stern talking-to. "Do you have any idea what you put your parents through? Do you know how irresponsible it was to spend that money? Your parents may have forgiven you, but not me!"

But this sermon is about second chances as a means of redemption. Which means that it's about forgiveness. Which means that it's about love. And in Jesus' parable, there was a love that was big enough to redeem the foolish son, even if it wasn't a love I could find within myself. And thank God for unconditional love that lends itself to forgiveness like that. As the great Sufi

mystic Rumi put it, “Even after all this time the sun never says to the earth, ‘You owe me.’ Look what happens with a love like that – it lights the whole world.”

And the thing is that unless we love ourselves like that, we cannot love others like that. Maybe our children, but that’s probably about it. When we deny ourselves sacred forgiveness and second chances, we rob the whole world of such necessary gifts. And so redemption, as I see it, is about loving ourselves enough to believe that we are not damaged goods, so that we can believe that about others as well.

Our Universalist faith is rooted in a belief in a merciful God. A God so good that no one is condemned; everyone is worthy of salvation; everyone is redeemed somewhere along the way. So while we are non-doctrinal, it is part of our religious legacy to believe in redemption. Following that, if we believe in some kind of spark of divinity that exists within every person, then it is a theological imperative for us to be merciful. Does that make sense? If God is merciful, and if God exists inside each of us, then we are called to be merciful as well. And by this, we are all called to be saviors. Because if second chances are a kind of redemption or salvation, then we have the opportunity to become saviors when we offer second chances to others. And that, as I see it, is nothing short of magnificent.

One search for “second chances” online results in a whole lot of evangelism. Stories upon stories of people who were irredeemable until they found Jesus. Now, that’s not my angle. In fact, it’s an angle that frustrates me. Which may sound surprising, after all the references to Jesus in today’s readings – he was at the arraignment in Debra Spencer’s poem, he was of course

the original teller of the parable of the Prodigal Son. Jesus has a lot to say about second chances, and we would do well to listen and learn. But in my mind, placing the responsibility of salvation on Jesus' shoulders alleviates us of the task that is really ours to do – for ourselves and for each other. Lynn Ungar's poem asks, "By what are we saved? And how? Do you believe me when I say you are neither salvaged nor saved, but salved, anointed by gentle hands when you are at your most tender?" And so whose gentle hands do we believe will save us? Whose gentle hands do we *hope* will save us? Whatever each of us may believe about Jesus, I think that our faith-based work in social justice speaks of our belief that the Kingdom of Heaven is to be realized in this lifetime. That our hands *are* the hands of God, or Jesus, or whatever it is we each put our faith in.

A Sufi saying goes like this: "Past the seeker as he prayed came the crippled and the beggar and the beaten. Seeing them, the seeker cried, "Great God, how is it that a loving creator can see such things and yet do nothing about them?" And God replied, "I did do something. I made you." And so it would go that we are to be the merciful, we are to be the saviors, we are to be the redeemers – just as we claim each time we dedicate a new baby.

But for all our hope for our children – and for ourselves – we certainly send a lot of mixed messages. From a young age, most of us learn something about redemption and second chances through fairy tales. And what do fairy tales teach? They teach us that there are evil beings and there are good beings, and only the good ones are worthy of redemption. There are ferocious wolves and there are innocent little girls; greedy old witches and selfless young maidens; cruel stepsisters and tender-hearted orphans. There's no gray area, it's all black or white. Even in

*Beauty and the Beast*, which is the most hopeful one I can think of – as the hideous, ill-tempered beast is still worthy of Belle’s love. But then what happens? He becomes a beautiful, flawless Prince, and we learn that an evil witch had turned him into a Beast. And only then can we really celebrate their love – only then do we fully rejoice in their union. My question is, why couldn’t the beast have stayed a beast? Why couldn’t he be ugly and flawed and still worthy of love?

“If you have made mistakes, even serious mistakes, there is always another chance for you,” says Mary Pickford. “And supposing you have tried and failed again and again, you may have a fresh start any moment you choose, for this thing that we call failure is not the falling down but the staying down.” Pickford’s words are inspiring and encouraging – the kind of thing I might post on my refrigerator as a cheerful reminder to press on. But listening to Ray’s reflection, I wonder if they really are true. Perhaps they are true for me, as I lead quite a privileged life. When I fall down, I really do have the capacity to get back up, because no one’s boot is on my neck, holding me down. I think the cold, harsh reality is that many people in our society are being held down by their past failures, and it’s not completely within their control whether or not they can have a fresh start. It is certainly true that without trying, there is no hope for a second chance, but it’s also true that we can do everything within our control to begin again in love, and we might still fail because some doors have been permanently closed to us. And if we as individuals feel that we are not worthy of re-entry, then we cannot work to open the doors for others who have, in very real ways, been locked out by our society. It must begin with us.

When I preached here in October, I told a story that was pivotal in my life. And as much as I hate to repeat myself, it would almost be a sin to not share this story again in light of second

chances. Because the whole point of the story is that the ending was completely permanent and irreversible, leaving no room for a second chance – or so I thought. So permit me to tell again, briefly, what happened:

I grew up knowing what it was like to be picked on, left out, and made fun of. And then a day came when I was no longer the target of such cruelty. At the age of thirteen, I was suddenly popular, and I relished the feeling. But there was a new target, a boy named David who was also thirteen. Now he was the one who was picked on, left out, and made fun of. And I didn't dare touch this untouchable. Of course I knew I should be kind to him. I knew how rotten it felt to be in his shoes, and truthfully, he was an incredibly nice kid. But I was too afraid of falling back down into the pit of unpopularity myself, and so I just kept my mouth shut. I didn't tease him, but I ruthlessly ignored him – to the extent that one day when we were alone together and he tried to speak to me from two feet away, I pretended I couldn't even hear him. And the devastating irreversible end of the story is that a few hours later, David was hit by a car and killed. And I never had a chance to make it right.

So, second chances, huh? For a long, long time after David died, I didn't believe in them. I believed that without a chance to make things right with David, I could never get back up from my moral failure. I would surely remain there forever, languishing in the low and terrible place where I had become an unkind hypocrite. What a painful feeling, to know that there won't be a tomorrow in which to make things right – to feel that the mean girl upon whom the sun had set that night would never be bathed in a new, forgiving sunset.

But then there was another time, about three years later. I was in high school then, and still pretty well-liked. And the kid who was the target then was named Chenil. Chenil was an orthodox Jew who had never cut his hair, because his religious beliefs told him he couldn't until he reached a certain milestone in his life. This means that Chenil was a sixteen-year-old boy in public school with thick black hair that fell past his waist, and a full beard. Also, he wore thick-soled black boots every day and walked with a slight limp, one of his legs being longer than the other. He had no friends, including me.

I was walking with two of my friends one day, and we were just a couple of feet behind Chenil – the same proximity I had been to David on the last day of his life. And my friends were making fun of Chenil, who no longer bothered to pay any outward attention to the insults. And suddenly, I thought, “What the hell am I doing? Didn't I make this same mistake three years ago? Do I really have to be the same person I was then? Did the sun really set on my ability to change?” And I hurried up to walk alongside Chenil, and for just a few minutes, we talked. He was skeptical, and I couldn't blame him for that. We never became good friends, but from that point on, I always greeted him, and when the opportunity presented itself, we talked. And by the end of high school, he was actually nodding to me in the hallway. And that's probably the first time I knew what redemption felt like. Not because I confused David and Chenil, not because I would ever have another chance with David, and not because I suddenly thought I was some great humanitarian for saying hi to a lonely kid. But because I knew I didn't have to stay the same. Just because I had made an irreversible mistake, it didn't mean that I had to keep making it. Just because I didn't have a second chance with David, it didn't mean that second chances

didn't exist. Sometimes no one offers us a second chance – we have to be on the lookout for it and know that it might be cleverly disguised.

Before Chenil, I believed that old rhyme about Humpty Dumpty. I believed that all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty together again, that what was broken was broken. But I've since decided that there must be another line to the rhyme, one that got lost somewhere through the ages. Something like,

*Humpty exclaimed, "Get some better glue! And for Pete's sake, call a repairman – why on earth is a horse trying to put me back together? Horses don't even have opposable thumbs!"*

We have to believe that we are worth fighting for if we are going to fight for others. If we stay shattered and broken after we fall – and we *will* fall – then what good can we do in the world?

Whatever wrongs any of us have done, I believe we all have the capacity to bring goodness to the world. Yes, even myself. Please, I beg of you, believe it with me. Let's forgive ourselves so that we may forgive others, because only then can we begin again in love.

Amen.