

October 26, 2008

I want to thank you all for being here. I wasn't sure if I would be the only person interested in public apologies or not. Perhaps my interest stems from the fact that my first act as minister of Unity Church was to write a public letter of apology for including a swear word in my acceptance speech. Those of you who are now laughing obviously weren't there! But for whatever reason, I've always been interested in public apologies.

Forgiveness is a blessing and a gift. It is a balm to a parched and world-weary soul. As Civil Rights activist, John Lewis wrote, "Forgiveness is something you do for yourself. It releases you from a prison of your own making." This is true; we all know what it feels like to be released from that prison. We can put *it* down and let *it* go. What is *it*? It is our broken relationships, our secretly nurtured resentments and bitterness, our obsessive and repetitive thoughts of anger and vengeance. We know that prison. Spending time there is a part of the human condition. Learning what can cause our own release from the confinement of our own self imposed prison is also an aspect of the human journey.

But what role does forgiveness play in the face of horrific violence and terror? Are there things that simply can't be forgiven? When we think about global disasters and large scale violence, how do we forgive? How do we forgive people who have perpetrated unthinkable and egregious acts of violence? I agree with C.S. Lewis, "If we really want to learn how to forgive, perhaps we had better start with something easier than the Gestapo."

But I have seen the results of this kind of forgiveness. I have seen Muslim widows held in the arms of Hindu widows, women whose husbands, fathers and sons were killed by mob violence, women whose husbands were killed possibly by the husbands of the very women whose hands they held? How is this kind of liberating love and compassion possible? I know it is possible and it exists all over the world. I have seen it with my own eyes.

Archbishop Tutu has been a champion of truth and reconciliation all over the world and has been at the forefront of global efforts at reconciliation and forgiveness. He has created what I call a forgiveness movement and spawned remarkable public acknowledgement of wrongdoing and apologies all around the world.

The Truth and Reconciliation process did attempt to address the profound wounds of apartheid in South Africa. And it did much to create a new kind of future in that country, a future unimaginable a few short years before the TRC process began. It is true that horrible and horrific scenes of violence were acknowledged and dramatic scenes of forgiveness did unfold. But in so many ways it felt short of what was needed. We still have much to learn about what constitutes lasting and real reconciliation.

Archbishop Tutu argues that forgiveness is possible, and not only possible, but essential for our shared future. But as essential to the future as forgiveness is so is liberating truth. The truth must be part of the equation for true forgiveness to occur. And in addition to the truth, there are other ingredients that are also essential for true liberating forgiveness to transform people and communities. Apologies must be offered.

Apologies are complex acts and their success or failure depends on certain essential factors. First, the truth of the injury must be acknowledged. The apologies themselves must be offered with sincerity and remorse. They must involve some level of shame and embarrassment. They should express a promise to refrain from similar actions in the future or some stated intention for future change. How do we know that an apology is sincere? We can't know, but we can watch behavior change. We can watch lives change.

Restorative justice processes are effective in part because the important elements that make forgiveness possible are present. The offenders admit their guilt, they offer sincere apologies. They provide explanations and context for their behavior. The victim or victims get to express their pain and the results of the crime. They create the context for the transgressor to feel empathy for the suffering of the victim. In the book, *Beyond Revenge: the Evolution of the Forgiveness Instinct*, author Michael McCullough lifts up the restorative justice process as one that integrates the necessary ingredients of true forgiveness.

I put Bill Clinton's apology on the cover because it is an example of an effective public apology. It is an institutional representative apology in that the wrong was committed at an earlier time and he was not personally involved. I lift it up because he fell so short when it came to his own personal behavior in the

Monica Lewinsky affair. He denied and denied until denial was no longer possible. And then he didn't take responsibility for his behavior. As a result, it is an incomplete event in the American psyche.

Oh, but we understand the urge to deny wrongdoing. The urge to deny culpability is as old as the human story. Think about Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. When God discovers that they have eaten from the forbidden fruit, he confronts them. Each one in turn points to someone else. Adam, when confronted by God points to Eve and says, "Eve made me do it." Eve points to the serpent. Neither of them says, that's right I did eat the apple. I opened my mouth and crunched down on its luscious flesh and all was revealed when I did.

And now I see you for who you are God, a punitive small minded control freak. Give me my fig leaf because I am out of here.

I added liberally to this story because offering an apology and taking responsibility for our actions and shortcomings is a complicated and courageous act.

East Timor was invaded by the Indonesian army in 1975 nine days after the country won independence from Portugal. For years, unspeakable violence occurred in the country. Some citizens joined the Indonesian army and fought against their own people. After years of bloodshed, in 2002, independence was once again won by the East Timorians. Many of the people who fought with the Indonesian Army migrated to Indonesia rather than face their fellow countrymen and women. Inspired by South Africa the country began a Truth and Reconciliation process for those who did not flee to Indonesia. It was village based. One village that had experienced particular violence scheduled a session with the Truth and Reconciliation Leadership. One of their fellow villagers came. He told them, "I want you to know that I burned your fields and your houses. I hurt members of your families. I was cruel and I am sorry. I do not blame you if you burn my fields and my house and kill me. I will understand if you do these things. I deserve your revenge." He sat waiting for their response, assuming that they would vote to have him punished in some way, but when he looked up at his fellow villagers they were crying and coming up to hug him. They said to him, "All we have yearned for was to have one person acknowledge what they have done." No one else from the village had accepted responsibility for the trials and tribulations they had endured. A member of the TRC in East Timor said this in response, "Reconciliation means to build a different society. It means to build a society in which people excluded feel empowered, in which those once impoverished have a future, in which the values that created the alienation in the first place are no longer the governing norms of a nation but are a memory of how things used to be before the age of awareness arrived."

These processes do change the moral climate of a society. Just as reconciliation is a gift to a relationship between individuals it can offer the same restorative function for a community or a nation.

Do public apologies make a difference? Mary Robinson, who played such a vital role in the peace negotiations in Ireland, replies empathically, "yes they matter!" In response to that question she responded, "The truth that is acknowledged matters because the wounds of the earlier generation continue to fester in the current generation, because the past shapes our present and public apologies restore the public moral order."

Public apologies, like Jacques Chirac apologizing for the role the French played in the persecution of Jews during the war, or F.De Klerk apologizing for apartheid publicly as he did in 1993, in 1996 and 1999, or the Japanese apologizing for treatment of the Koreans during the war changed the moral climate.

To what extent can we correct the wrongs of the past? How in both a personal and political sense, can we confront and conquer the pain of past wounds that are passed down generation to generation? Truths of past wrongdoing must be acknowledged and owned as part of our inheritance.

The role of reparations, though important and significant are beyond the scope of this sermon, but they too are something with which we must wrestle and consider.

As a nation, we inherited two significant and important holidays from the Puritans—a day of Thanksgiving at harvest time and a day of Fasting in the spring. The New England Fast Day was incorporated into the country's calendar at the discretion of the President. It was created so that we might enter into a ritual that reminded us that we were not just a free people but bound to one another through the past as well as the present and future. It provided the opportunity for people to think about what must be done to be in right relationship as a nation. It was a day of collective atonement, a day of somber reflection on the state of the nation, a day to acknowledge the many ways we fall short as individuals and a nation. Can you imagine if a day like this still existed? Can you imagine if true patriotism was framed in this kind of humble reckoning

rather than the empty platitudes of our impenetrable greatness? Can you imagine if our greatest as a nation was framed by our willingness to acknowledge our mistakes?

Can you imagine if a new holy day was added to the country's calendar and that it was the reclamation of this important and significant holiday last celebrated in 1863?

We propose that we once again, as a community, take on this solemn and sacred response—to fast and humbly examine the ways that we have fallen short as a people and to find ways toward corrective restoration as a people committed to the common good.

Taking stock, speaking truth of past mistakes and transgressions, seeking balance in the face of that truth are expressions of our commitment to the future. They are ingredients that are essential to a secure and honest future. May it be so and Amen.