

Dec. 1, 2019
Matthew 3:1-12
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
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Forgiving Self

INTRO to SCRIPTURE

Advent is a season of preparation. It is a time of *preparing the way of the Lord*, as the prophet Isaiah put it. In the New Testament this quote is attached to the ministry of John the Baptist. At times in church history Advent has been considered a penitential time similar to Lent, which is why the lectionary includes a reading about John the Baptist near the beginning of Advent.

The gospel of Luke begins by weaving together the stories of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus. During their pregnancies, John's mother, Elizabeth, is visited by Jesus' mother, Mary, prompting these famous words addressed to Mary,
*Blessed art thou among women,
And blessed is the fruit of thy womb.*

Each gospel describes the beginning of Jesus' public ministry as being his baptism by John in the river Jordan. John's way of preparing the way of the Lord is to call us to a personal accounting of the way we are living.

SERMON

We all have watched a child being forced to say, *Sorry*, when they clearly aren't. I suspect the child is thinking, *I'm only sorry that I have to say sorry.*

When our children were young, we didn't force them to say *I'm sorry*, but we did work with them on being accountable for what they had done. At some point, I realized that if I wanted them to learn to say *I'm sorry* in appropriate times, then I had to model that behavior and apologize to them when I was wrong. It is a humbling but transformative experience to apologize to your own children.

When I ask people what they would like me to preach about, one of the most consistent responses is forgiveness. In particular some mention forgiving ourselves. So, let's explore that today.

This week Ron and I went to see the movie, *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*. As you might guess by the title, Mr. Rogers is a central character in the movie. But the film is actually about a journalist and how his life is transformed by getting to know Mr. Rogers. It is a film about forgiveness.

The film was inspired by a 1998 article, *Can You Say...Hero?* by Tom Junod in *Esquire* magazine. That issue included a series of articles about contemporary heroes. Because Tom was known for his expose articles, all the other heroes didn't want to work with him. But Fred Rogers did. In the movie, Tom's character is called Lloyd Vogel, due to story changes for artistic reasons.

The construct of the movie is that Mr. Rogers is doing a show on forgiveness and tells us a story about his friend Lloyd and Lloyd's anger toward his father.

Mr. Rogers begins his show asking
*Do you know what forgiveness is?
It is the decision we make to release a
person from the feelings of anger
we have against them.*

Forgiveness itself is not a feeling. It is a decision. A spiritual commitment to not be enslaved or to enslave others by our own feelings of anger.

John the Baptist proclaims that *the kingdom of heaven has come near*. Now is the time to examine our lives for whether or not we are living in God's ways. If not, we are to repent. The biblical word repent means to change our ways. Literally to turn and go in the other direction. And so, John baptizes people to help them begin a new life, dedicated to the work of God. Repentance is a decision.

In order to repent we first have to recognize that something is wrong. In other words, we feel guilt. Guilt is an important emotion, because it alerts us that something is wrong. Yet, to respond appropriately to guilt means we have to be vulnerable. We need to make amends. We need to ask for forgiveness. We need to say *I'm sorry*.

Yet, because being vulnerable is an uncomfortable feeling, we often avoid guilt and push it aside. That sets us down a dangerous road away from the kingdom of heaven. Too many of our political leaders, at the moment, seem to be missing the guilt alert and simply profess that they never do anything wrong.

It's a shame that they feel no guilt because suppressed guilt can lead to a pervasive feeling of shame. Shame is that insidious gremlin that says you are never good enough. Ironically, it is often people who live with deep shame that profess they are always right. People who live deeply in shame long enough often end up lashing out at everyone else.

As Bene Brown, known through her TED talks about vulnerability, reminds us..

*Guilt - I did something bad.
Shame - I am bad.*

In Tom Junod's real life encounters with Mr. Rogers, he is transformed by Fred's spiritual gift of truly seeing and listening to Tom and affirming Tom as a person. In the process, Tom's feelings of vulnerability begin to break through his crusty exterior. He begins to be able to listen deeply to himself and to his father and to change his ways of interacting with his father and with himself. That is the beginning of forgiveness. A decision for release.

The holiday season is a good one in which to explore forgiveness with others and with ourselves because in this season of unrealistic expectations of what joyous gatherings should be like, so many of our old tapes of guilt and shame get played over and over again in our own minds.

*Do you know what forgiveness is?
It is the decision we make to release a
person from the feelings of anger
we have against them.*

Forgiveness takes courage, compassion, and the support of community.

Now is the time to make a decision to release yourself from the anger you have been holding against yourself and allow the kingdom of heaven to draw near.