

ARE YOU WILLING TO FORGIVE?

May 17, 2020

Rev. Richard Maraj

Rev. Richard Maraj: Good morning, everyone, and welcome to Unity of Phoenix Spiritual Center! I'm Richard Maraj, senior minister here, and we're so glad that you are joining us for our Sunday worship celebration.

Today we have another great service for you! Craig and Rusty are going to provide some great and wonderful music. And we are going to begin, as we usually do, by taking a bit of quiet time as Rev. Lori leads us in a time of prayer and meditation.

MEDITATION

Rev. Lori Fleming: I invite you to close your outer eyes. To take in a deep, cleansing breath, and release it slowly. Moving your awareness into that center of your being: into your soul. Into that time and space where we are one with the Divine. As we feel the presence of God in us and as us and through us, and all around us. Knowing that we are one with each other and we are one with God. That in this quiet, still place, it's filled with endless possibilities. That, though life in the outer may throw us a challenge, that when we go within, we find the strength and the wisdom to overcome everything. That, when we spend time in prayer and meditation, our lives improve. We find new ways to do things that uplift us; creative ways to solve old problems; new ways of seeing; new ways of being. Creating a brand new amazing life.

In this time of challenge in the outer, when we go within we experience that peace that passes understanding. We know our true power. We know who we are, and why we came here: and that is to glorify God; to be one with the presence and power of Spirit. To know our wholeness. To know that our bodies are filled with health and vitality. That every cell of our body I filled with God's light and love, bringing each cell to wholeness; keeping us safe; guiding us; showing us the way to live the path to the Divine.

As we rise up in consciousness – as we know that we are the hero in our own story, and that we cannot fail – that all we can do is succeed as being the best that we can be. And so, in this quiet, still space within, we take just a few moments to go more deeply into that quiet place, and know God, and know God's love within.

SILENCE

Mother/Father God, we come in gratitude for this time together that brings us closer to you, O God. We say thank you for all of our blessings; we count them every day, knowing that what we think about becomes more real and true to us. So thank you, God, for everything! Thank you for being our Source. Thank you for loving us. Thank you, God; thank you, God; thank you, God. And it is so. Amen.

SONG:

Rusty Ferracane: 'One Heart' (accompanied by Craig Bohmler on piano)

There's a new church on the horizon
Made of light, not of stone
Calling out to all creation
You are not alone

Lions and lambs, saints and sinners
Best of friends, enemies

Woman and man, losers and winners
They are all in you and me

Yes, we are one heart, looking for answers
We are one soul, finding our way through the dark
One dream we share together
We are all a part of one heart

Out in the cold, there are faces
Hidden by the wind and rain
Hold out your hand, someone will take it
And bring you home again

Yes, we are one heart, looking for answers
We are one soul, finding our way through the dark
One dream we share together
We are all a part of one heart

Out in the world tonight
Oh, the fires are burning
Tears are falling from the sky
Still the world keeps turning

We are one heart
One soul
One dream we share together
We are all a part

Yes, we are one heart, looking for answers
We are one soul, finding our way through the dark
One dream we share together
We are all a part of one heart
We are one...
Yes, we are all a part of one heart

MESSAGE

Rev. Richard Maraj: [Applauds] Thank you so much, Rusty! Thank you, Craig! You guys are doing a fabulous job; really appreciate it!

Alright! 'Morning again, everyone! So what do you call a cow with a twitch? Beef jerky! **[Simulates rim shot drum roll]**

You know, I don't really trust mermaids... There's just something fishy about them!

Do you know why bagpipers walk while they play? To get away from the noise! **[Chuckles]**

Now, I hope those jokes made you laugh or smile... But if, by chance, they didn't, what I'd like to do is ask your forgiveness for telling those horrible, bad jokes! And the reason I say that is that today's topic is about forgiveness.

And so I want you to think about these questions for a couple of seconds... and that is: Is there anyone in your life that you need to forgive? Is there anyone in your life that you are still holding a grudge or some ill will towards for something they might have said or done a long time ago? Is there anyone in your life who, when you hear their name or even picture their face, you immediately get tense and your attitude changes, and your heart closes towards them?

You know, in the very best of times we all have situations where we feel some resentment or blame or conflict and negative feelings in certain relationships, towards certain people. And, you know, with the Covid, a lot of emotions have been intensified, with the fear, the vulnerability, the uncertainty. Even our anger has increased: anger towards the government; anger towards the fact that our lives have changed so drastically; maybe even anger towards God.

So it's not always easy to handle these emotions and feelings, so I think it's good and important for us to talk about forgiveness today.

And so, you know, there are three ways that we usually handle anger and upset and hatred, and these kind of feelings. And the first one is we tend to stuff it. We tend to bury it, deny it, pretend it isn't there. The second way is that we tend to project: projecting blame, projecting all kinds of judgments about people's intentions. And then the third way is through forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a vital – and I mean vital: not just good, important and helpful – but a vital life skill and spiritual practice. Because what it does is releases and frees us from the pain and the hurt of the past that we sometimes hold onto because of the ways we've been treated. And whether that was through abandonment or rejection or abuse, or some kind of unkind or unfair behavior that caused us pain, forgiveness is the key that frees us.

Today I not only want to talk about forgiveness, but I want to even introduce a fourth way to look at some of these feelings and perspectives. And I want to introduce that fourth way by sharing a statement with you. I want you to think about it for a second. And here's the statement: **Without exception, everything that happens to us is divinely guided, purposeful, and for our greater good.**

Let me say that again: Without exception, everything that happens to us is divinely guided, purposeful, and for our greater good. Just take a deep breath into that. Just kind of see how that resonates with you. And now what we're going to do is just set it aside, and we'll get back to it later.

Right now let's turn back to forgiveness. And why is forgiveness so hard? Forgiveness is hard. And some of the reasons that it's hard is that we tend to take things personally and feel really hurt when certain things are said or done, or not said or done. Another one is that we tend to not know how to deal with anger very effectively. A third one is that we tend to be fearful that we might get hurt again, so we don't want to forgive. And we have a hard time trusting and feeling safe again. And the final one is that, we don't want to forgive because we feel we need to punish the person somehow. There's a sense of justice that you did that to me, so I should do something to you. Some form of revenge or some kind of whatever... just even thinking, "I won't forgive you" as a way of punishing them.

And so, we hold on to this anger, but we don't realize how much damage: how much hurt and pain, and how much we block our own joy and happiness. The great spiritual writer Emmet Fox said, "*If you can't forgive, you can't make spiritual progress.*" And you could also say: If you can't forgive, you can't make progress towards happiness or peace or joy or fulfillment in your life.

So where to begin in that process of learning how to forgive?

The first place, to me, where we start is with desire and willingness. Sometimes we reach that point where we realize that this stuff is eating us up inside. This is really affecting our lives and our focus. We're just kind of filled with pain, and we're kind of grumpy and upset. We can't concentrate. And it

really affects our lives in a negative way. So it begins with a desire to heal: a desire to stop living in the past; a desire to get over it; a desire to move forward; a desire to be happier; a desire to choose something better and healthier than staying stuck in pain.

And so the first thing is to have a desire and a willingness to forgive. You don't need to know how to forgive; you just need to be willing to forgive.

The second step is you've got to feel it to heal it. You know, sometimes we won't even allow ourselves to acknowledge how hurt, how devastated, how angry we are. And it's important to get to that realization, because you've got to feel it to heal it! We've got to walk through that valley to get through it. And so we need to acknowledge what it is that we're hurt about, and allow ourselves to process the feeling. Because stuffing it and holding it and not feeling – pretending – actually does more harm.

And sometimes we might need some help in getting clear about what we're feeling and processing it. We might need to go to therapists; we might need to do some journaling to actually get honest with ourselves in what's up. And to be clear: we need to forgive our father for whatever it was, or our spouse. And getting clear about what we're feeling is an important part of healing and processing it.

Next is understanding and compassion. No matter what someone has done – whatever they might have done, intentional or not – to forgive and to be willing to forgive, we need to be willing to also understand that they were trying their best. Understand that they were acting from a place of fear or woundedness themselves. It doesn't excuse what was done, but it's important to open up a space to some level of understanding and compassion for them. And also a level of understanding for ourselves: what we've been through. And having a level of compassion for ourselves, as well.

You know, the truth is that we're all children of God. We all mess up; we all make mistakes. We all say hurtful things. We all hear hurtful things. So opening a space for understanding and compassion is something that we should all be able to do. But the question is: Are we willing to do it?

And then the final part is to release it and to send love in its place. That we need to really just release it to God. And a part of the releasing is also releasing the repetition of the continuation of telling the story over and over again. When we release it from our lives, it means we stop it popping up in daily conversation of saying how badly we were hurt, or what that person did. So release it from our lives and release it to God.

And when we release that, we also need to just send love to that person. You know, you don't have to be "BFF" with that person, but we do need to send love. You know, the key indicator of if we've forgiven or not is our ability to send unconditional love to that person. Our ability to send them blessings; hold an intention and desire that they have a happy and joyful life. Because, again, they're children of God, just like us! They deserve a second chance, just like us! And they deserve a happy life, just like us. True healing and forgiveness – and releasing the pain of the past – gets to that place where we can sincerely desire that they have peace and happiness in their lives.

So who in your life do you need to forgive? And are you willing to move through the process of forgiveness? It is liberating; it is powerful; it is freeing. But the thing is, we need to practice forgiveness. It begins with willingness, but it's something we need to practice to experience the peace and freedom.

Anyone who has practiced forgiveness knows you feel lighter, you feel brighter, you feel clearer. There's more space for joy and happiness and fulfillment. So, again, who in your life do you need to forgive? And are you willing to practice the process of forgiveness?

You know, one of the questions I get asked a lot is: *"Reverend, I'd like to learn more advanced spiritual stuff. I'd like to go a little deeper. I want to raise my consciousness higher, and have a greater spiritual*

perspective.” Well, with that I want to introduce a spiritual perspective and a God perspective on forgiveness.

And so let’s head back to that statement I said at the beginning: Without exception, everything that happens in our lives is divinely guided, purposeful, and for our greater good. And so that, alone, is a higher spiritual perspective. And just like the other practice of forgiveness, it begins with a willingness to open a space and maybe see the situation a little differently than we were seeing it.

Often, we see a forgiveness situation as a wrong being done – that there was a villain and a victim. Or that there was punishment. You know, that we see it in an interesting paradigm: some wrong that has to be corrected. Because there was bad, and we’re good, and this horrible thing happened. And that’s understandable to a certain point.

But one thing we need to realize is that everything that happens in our lives is actually interpreted by us. That there are facts, but we add a story or meaning or label or definition to it. So something can happen, and we create a victim story, or we can create a story of triumph, of overcoming, of joy, of peace. We can create – if something happens – we can create a story that that person ruined my life. We create stories: *“I have a horrible family; they’re all dysfunctional and messed up. And if it wasn’t for them, I’d be happier.”* We develop stories from fast that: *“You can’t trust men”* or *“You can’t trust people.”* Or, *“I’m not good enough.”*

We have all kinds of stories! And you’ve heard that line: *“That’s my story, and I’m sticking to it.”* Well, we tend to do that! We have facts; we create a story; and we hold on to that story. And what happens when we keep holding on to a particular story – *“Life’s unfair”*; *“I always get hurt”*? Guess what? We attract more of that. Over and over again, over and over again. And we’ve all heard that we attract things in our lives over and over again until we’ve learned the lesson.

Katherine Ponder had this wonderful line. She said, *“Until we meet it with grace, it’ll always be in our face.”* Meaning we will always attract it! And where does it come from? The story we’ve told ourselves over and over again. Facts happen, but our interpretation – of *“It destroyed my life”* or *“It helped me be a better person”* – is our story. And sometimes we’re so stuck in the story we can’t forgive, and we can’t see or attract anything greater than that.

And so I was reading Colin Tipping’s book, *Radical Forgiveness*. And one of the things he says that we need to do to heal at a higher level is to separate the facts from the interpretation. And he gives an example of his sister. She felt that her father didn’t show her a lot of affection: didn’t hold her hand and stuff, didn’t say, *“I love you,”* didn’t spend a lot of time. Those were facts. But her interpretation was: he was a horrible father; he couldn’t love anyone; something must be wrong with me; I’m not good enough.

And so, then, when they were older, the father spent more time with the granddaughter, and was loving and affectionate to her. So he thought, *“Oh, he can love; he just chooses not to love me, so clearly something is wrong with me, and I’m not good enough.”* And that interpretation and story followed her her whole life. In a relationship she was in, the guy cheated, and she said, *“Well, I’m not good enough.”* That [the cheating] was a fact, but she made the interpretation: *“I’m not good enough.”* When she got married, she and her husband were having some distance; they weren’t really talking. And he turned to his eldest daughter from another marriage, and was giving her attention, and she felt: *“Oh, there we go again; I don’t deserve love. I’m not good enough.”*

And so Colin took her through this process to realize there are facts, but there are also stories that were told. And often, the stories that we tell aren’t true! They’re false! They’re inaccurate, but we believe them so much – and keep living them – that we keep attracting the same thing. And keep repeating and getting that same pain triggered over and over again.

Here's what Colin Tipping says. He said, *"Seeing, from a spiritual standpoint, our pain and discomfort in any given situation provides a signal that we are out of alignment with spiritual law, and being given an opportunity to heal something. This may be some original pain or some toxic belief that stops us from being true to ourselves. Stops us from living our lives fully and wholly."*

Again, back to that statement: Without exception, everything that happens to us is divinely guided, purposeful and for our greater good.

And so maybe things in our lives don't happen to us; maybe they actually happen for us: to help awaken us to some false belief, to some area in our lives where we absolutely need to be healed.

One of the things that was interesting was Jill realized that she had told herself a false story: that it didn't mean her father didn't love her. Yeah, she didn't get the love she wanted, and that hurt... but the story that there was something wrong with her, and that she wasn't good enough, was something that was made up. It was created. And so, just bringing that – and not putting blame or victim anywhere, but saying this happened to teach her – actually reduced her resentment toward her father; reduced her resentment to her husband. And she actually felt healed and free. And releasing that to God actually began to transform her; transform her relationships; and transform her life. Because, instead of looking at it that a wrong was done, she looked at it that this happened for a purposeful reason.

And one of the things she said to do – and this is where the spiritual stretch comes! – is to see everything that happens in our lives as something that was meant to happen, and was perfect the way things unfolded. No blame, no victims, no "bad." That this was a teaching experience and a part of our life and our spiritual journey and process.

So what if things were just meant to be to teach us? And we didn't have to play a victim? We didn't have to blame? We could just face, embrace and live it to the highest and best?

Maybe this pandemic is meant to happen: to teach us, to heal us, individually and as a human family. As a country, as a world. Maybe there isn't anyone to blame, and putting anger about it isn't the way to do it, but just to live it and handle it in the greatest way.

There's a Buddhist saying that says, *"Every moment is perfect. And if we're suffering, it's because we can't see it."* We don't allow it to be.

Life isn't easy. There are pains, there are hurts, there are disappointments. There are heartaches. And I have found, many times, that the areas I learn most in happen to be the toughest and the most challenging. The ones that call me higher and make me dig deeper than I have. And maybe some of the things that are happening in our lives – even at this very moment – are perfect the way they are, because they're here to help us grow and transform and develop a perspective and awareness that we haven't allowed ourselves to see.

Maybe it's too bold to say: Can you see the perfection in everything that's going on right now? Maybe it is a huge stretch. But the truth is, if everything happens for a reason – and everything, without exception, is purposeful and for our greater good – maybe it's possible for us to be willing to open a space and have that perspective on all things that happen in our lives, especially the things where we feel like blaming or holding on to resentment or bitterness.

Life isn't easy. It is an intensely emotional experience with a lot of highs and lows, and all of us making mistakes and hurting and being hurt on a regular basis. And the key to a greater and more peaceful life is forgiveness. It is the ticket to releasing ourselves from the hurt and the wounds and the pain.

And so the question we all need to ask ourselves is: Are we willing to move through that process? Are we willing to see things from a difference perspective? Are we willing to release and to let go? And are

we willing to have better lives and be more fully? More spiritually connected? All of that is available! The question is: Are you willing to forgive?

God bless you all!

OFFERING

Rev. Lori Fleming: It's that time in our service to give of our gifts and our tithes and our offerings. We're so grateful to those of you who have been sending checks in the mail and using our online service, and just keeping this ministry going. We're so grateful for that!

Our offering blessing is: *"Divine Love, through me, blesses and multiplies all that I have, all that I give and all that I receive."* And so we say thank you, Mother/Father God, for these gifts, these tithes and these offerings that keep this ministry going. We know that they are given in love, and that we receive them in love; and that they move through this ministry out into the world as good. And that each giver is blessed: heaped up, pressed down and overflowing, for that is the Law. And so it is. Thank you, God! Amen.

CLOSING

Rev. Lori Fleming: Well, thank you all for joining us! We really appreciate that you've tuned in! Will you join me in our prayer for protection? *"The light of God surrounds us; the love of God enfolds us; the power of God protects us; and the presence of God watches over us. Wherever we are, God is... and all is well!"* Have a fabulous week!

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