

## **Can You Forgive Me?**

**Sermon by Rev. Stephen Kendrick December 2, 2007**

**First Church Boston**

As you all know this year I have been preaching a lot of sermons based on some pretty elemental and basic questions. And one of the most poignant questions that you could ever possibly put up on a church message board out front is, *Can you forgive me?* All week long I have imagined people strolling past and saying, “No.”

Liz bought me a book by Aaron Lazar called Apology some years ago. And I was given by Lori Nielson a book on the process of forgiveness by Janice Abraham Springs which I warmly recommend called, How Can I Forgive You? These two books had a galvanizing effect on me. I have preached about forgiveness many times in my ministry, over and over again, because I think it is one of the absolutely crucial, primal, elemental, aspects of the spiritual life. Without forgiveness I’m not sure there is a church there. It is one of those hallmarks, it’s got to be present. Yet in reading these books, I realized I had never talked about apology. I knew very little about apologies. And I realized there are really two sermons here, two topics, two social gestures and two inner processes. Today I want to talk about learning to apologize, because I think it is just hugely important. Especially how to learn how to apologize successfully.

Now, I have always thought of these two things as bound up in one another and they most certainly are. Forgiveness and apology are bound up together like inhaling and exhaling, but let’s separate it out a little bit because it is important to realize the crucial reality about living this life, about apology and forgiveness. That is, as I have gotten older and more experienced, I learned that apologies do not have to be answered with forgiveness to change us. I have learned that the offer of forgiving can and often must, especially when the offender has died or is beyond our reach, come without apology or even hope of apology. Our forgiveness can be denied, and it may be rejected, but it still transforms, still changes us. So what about apology?

Janice Springs brings up an important question, that is, all the literature about forgiveness is specifically written to the hurt party – what you need to do to grant forgiveness rather than telling the offender what he or she needs to do to earn forgiveness. The single-minded focus on forgiving has compromised, twisted and cheapened the process of forgiveness and created a saintly abstract process that many of us feel pressured to accept at any cost. I have thought about that a lot in the last week. In preaching about forgiveness over the years, I think that I never mentioned apologizing, and how difficult it is. Within the religious realm we always talk first about God’s forgiveness and that would be seen incalculable – the sea of forgiveness. But we’re not God, we’re not God.

I want to mention another thing, and I hesitate to mention it but here goes – there have been numerous scientific studies that show that women seem to be able to apologize not only more than men, but better than men. Why? The simplest explanation is that women have the propensity in analyzing relationships to ask the question, “Is this interaction bringing us closer or farther apart?” Apologies, if you think about it, tend to bring people who are estranged closer together. Men, on the other hand, tend to ask, “Is this social interaction putting me on a higher plain or a lower plain than the person I am dealing with?” To apologize can often be seen as putting ourselves in a weakened

position. But I have to say something really directly here. I have thought hard about the people I have known who have been able to apologize and I find them to be the strongest people I know.

Lazar says, apologies are made up of four acts. The first is acknowledgment. Where did we go wrong? What is the offense? And the second is a short and equally frank explanation; an explanation that is not a rationalization in disguise, because we can rationalize all day long. And third, subsequent action that reveals our sincerity and a willingness to change, and if not to change, then at least engage. And lastly, an effort to repair the relationship in real and tangible ways. Four different acts. Apologies should be short and simple, not awash with caveats and excuses and tangents to get you emotionally off the hook, but you can also see that these four acts are social gestures that are not simple.

We can flounder and fail at these four steps, and even if all four actions are quite heartfelt and sincere, forgiveness may in fact not be forthcoming. What I am learning is that forgiveness is not the object. It may be the result, but it is not the goal in and of itself because to apologize is to try to get into the right relationship with another person or persons. If truth be told, one reaches down deep and finds the gumption, the sheer courage to offer an apology so that we can recover our own best self. To recover a truer self or to begin the long, slow slog into the self we would wish to become. Don't let anyone ever lie to you and say that it is ever easy. It is not. You have to reach very deep to do it. And I am ashamed to say that some of our Unitarian-Universalist forebears have not been terrifically wonderful exemplars of that. Emerson said, "No sensible person ever made an apology." Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "Nine times out of ten one finds a man's companion knows his shortcomings by his apologies." Well I find this kind of advice grotesque. But, hey, they're guys!

So I do know this because I have lived it, I have felt it, I have been on the receiving end and I have tried as best I can, when I can, to be on the giving end-- that apologies on any level are worth it. They are liberating; they reveal, and they can heal. Lazar is absolutely right in that to be freed of rage, which is really what we keep inside us if we can't find our path into apology, is to keep humiliation, and shame, and anger and rage within us, and generally what becomes of such emotions? They become corrosive and they turn into that little petty thing called a grudge. All of us carry these kinds of feelings and they are not pleasant. And they are not worth carrying with you the rest of your life.

There has to be a way out of this humiliation and this powerlessness and this anger, and yet even when we somehow find the willingness to apologize we can fumble and we can stumble and let me count the ways. If you say, "I am sorry for anything that I did," that's not going to work. If you say, "I'm sorry for everything that I did," that's not going to work. Placating will not heal the rupture, the wreckage.

The use of the passive voice – now I was a big fan of Bill Clinton, but he drove me crazy every time he said, "Mistakes were made." By whom? And when? And why? Or the Cardinal, Edward Egan, from the NY Diocese: "If in hindsight we also discover that mistakes may have been made as regards prompt removal of priests and assistants to victims, I am deeply sorry." Well, was he really sorry? How deeply was that? How hind must his sight be? And President Nixon, "I regret deeply any injuries that may have been done in the course of events." These are not apologies. "If anyone was offended, I am so

sorry.” That’s not an apology. People who offer deepest and most sincere to anyone who may have been hurt, like anyone who happened to be around. “I am sorry that you are responding in this way.” Not an apology. Words that say such things ultimately demean us and they reveal little or no remorse or even an insensitivity that something is truly, seriously wrong. My favorite is when former NY Knicks player Letrice Sprewell tried to choke his coach, and, facing suspensions and fines he gave a classic. He said, “I think it’s fair to say, I had a bad day. That’s not me, I don’t have a problem, I don’t walk around angry.”

The lack of ownership apology: “I’m sorry your feelings were hurt.”

The grudging apology: “I said I was sorry, what more do you want?”

The yes but lame deflecting apology: “I’m sorry I did it, but you’re no Mother Theresa either.”

The contemptuous apology: “I’m sorry for stepping on your big fat ego.”

The exaggerated apology, manipulative apology: “I so hate myself for what I did, can you ever, ever, forgive me?”

If you want to make an apology, do it the simple way. Here’s how you do it. In the end, simplicity and sincerity wins the day. No explanations are better than those that verge on insulting and manipulating the other person. Lazar says it so well, “The simple message, ‘I was responsible, I deeply regret it, I have no excuse.’ ” If you can do that, you are strong. If you can do that, you can repair things, you can change things, you can transform a relationship.

Now the holidays are coming, and I guess my deepest wish for all of us is we take this luminous time and do something powerful and creative with it, and if you can make an apology, what a gift. I have always wondered in one of the songs I love, Leonard Cohen’s Famous Blue Raincoat, a song about grudge and hurt and pain and betrayal, and there is this line in it that I have never understood where the singer says, “Did you ever go clear?” I never understood it until I was writing this sermon. Now I understand it because if you can make your apology simple and clear and focused, you can go clear.

Amen.