

“You’ve Been Pre-forgiven! (Open to find out how)”
Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley
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Invitation to Worship

Ellen Buller

When Geneva and I met so that we could discuss what she had in mind for today’s service, she explained that *pre-forgiveness* relates to the Unitarian principle of Universal Salvation—a belief in an unconditionally-loving God who would not consider any human being unworthy of divine love, and that salvation is for everyone.

Pre-forgiveness embodies the Unitarian Universalists’ rejection of the concept of original sin, replacing it with the general belief that all people are good and have no need for spiritual redemption from the effects of sin—original blessing instead of original sin.

In fact, the index of our hymn book has no heading for “sin” under the Topical Index of Hymns—instead there are much more positive listings starting with “Acceptance of one Another,” running through “Affirmation,” “Beauty,” “Beloved Community,” “Commitment,” “Compassion,” “Courage,” “Forgiveness and Reconciliation,” “Goodness,” “Humanism,” “Love,” “Social Justice,” “Truth,” and ending with “Yom Kippur.”¹

We had a lively discussion about the meaning and importance of forgiveness: who has the right to forgive wrongdoing?; are some acts so damaging as to be unforgivable?; what about reparations and responsibility?

When I was walking to my car after saying goodbye to Geneva and Michael, all these ideas and questions were rolling around in my mind. Our preparation time left me enthused and eager to do more research and dig deeper into what we had talked about.

At that time, a car went by me with a proud front license plate: “Christians are not perfect—just forgiven.”

My first reaction was a smug and obnoxious, “Well you may be forgiven, but we UUs are *pre-forgiven*.” I’m glad I didn’t say that out loud.

Come let us explore and worship together.

¹ *Singing the Living Tradition* © 1993 by The Unitarian Universalist Association

Reading

Geneva B. Politzer

I Stand Before You

I stand before you, asking you to love me,
to forgive my frailty, my fallibility.

I honor your complexity, woundedness, beauty.
Where you see flaws I see God.

I am not easy to love, and yet you persist—
countering weakness with strength,
arrogance with generosity.

Awash in tidal waves, you need an anchor.
I'm a lightning bolt, all flash & noise & ricochet
capable of chance destruction or revelation.
But when darkness falls, I rise to the occasion.

Now torch, I cast light, and shadow,
sometimes touching your hand,
sometimes simply inhaling your pain,
your joy, your anger & grace & doubt.

We walk in silence, we walk in song
harmonious, cacophonous, jubilant, subdued;
love, the feast that sustains us.

Thus we become a holy place.
Your honesty releases me from fear.
Above all, I savor the treasure of you,
ever changeable, intriguing, new.

Sermon You've Been Pre-forgiven! (Open to find out how)

Geneva Politzer

Have you heard the good news? The kingdom of heaven is at hand—and this week only, on sale for \$99.95. Some restrictions apply. See manufacturer for details.

Please forgive my irreverence, especially spoken from a pulpit, on the eve of Yom Kippur, that most solemn Jewish high holy day of atonement. But I really *am* excited about one piece of good news—we've got universal salvation right here, right now. You don't even need this application to make a claim.

That's right, brothers and sisters. I received this miraculous offer recently; many of you also got the same mailing. Imagine my delight when I read the bold blue promise that **I've been pre-forgiven!** Naturally, I opened, to find out how.

I was understandably intrigued with the promise that if I put my faith (and my checkbook) in this particular guarantor (not any of those *other* knock-offs), I'd be forgiven even before anything happened. Knowing my own knack for stumbling into stuff that happens, how could I resist this type of, ah, insurance?

But being a responsible consumer, of course I went online to check out these claims. After all, if something sounds too good to be true, it usually is.

I typed “pre-forgiven” into my web browser and instantly came up with 168,000 hits—many of them from bloggers who received the same offer of prior indemnity. Another click of the mouse and this bold headline flashed:

“Shopping for salvation: Looking for an enlightened way to reach the great beyond? Look no further.”²

Unitarian Universalism was second, after Buddhism, on this rather exclusive list. *That* was good news, indeed. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that there's something fundamentally amiss in a culture where forgiveness is reduced to a marketing catchphrase.

But the more I pondered this flippant use of a sacred UU tenet, the more I realized at some deeper level how very much humans value forgiveness—enough for it to seep into every nook and cranny of our existence.

Forgiveness is a cornerstone of living in community. It's so fundamental that every major religion, virtually every social code, relies on its practice. Judaism and Christianity are based on the assumption that we *will* err and we *will* need forgiveness to move past our errors and set things right.

This Judeo-Christian tradition from which we UUs evolved holds that salvation is achieved through God's forgiveness. Sadly, this God of antiquity was an angry, vengeful God, and those he created *in his image* were born in sin—destined to dodge lightning bolts and fiery infernos.

Even more disturbing, biblical Christianity is based on a savage event—the brutal crucifixion of a young Rabbi who ironically preached the best good news to date—that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Right here. Right now. We need only open our hearts.

A growing number of serious Bible scholars agree that no responsible translation or interpretation of the New Testament shows that Jesus either claimed to be God incarnate, or intended to act as intermediary between heaven and earth—between salvation and damnation.

Rather, he preached that upon the heavenly throne, which resides in every heart, reigns a loving and forgiving God who wants us to turn radically toward one another.

Nevertheless, horrifying interpretations of his teachings became “The Word” that's tyrannized Christianity for centuries. Jesus was declared the one and only access point to heaven. Anyone who didn't accept him as personal Lord and Savior was as a spider dangling over Hell's inferno—doomed to eternal damnation.

² This Magazine | May 01, 2004 | Munday, Evan | COPYRIGHT 2004 Red Maple Foundation.

This *thorny* pathway to salvation grew more treacherous yet, culminating in the Great Awakening of the 1700s, when Calvinist Jonathan Edwards preached his infamous sermon, “Sinners in the hands of an angry God”:

“You hang by a slender thread,” he admonished, “with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder; and you have no interest in any Mediator, and nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing of your own, nothing that you ever have done, nothing that you can do, to induce God to spare you one moment.”³

Whew! This is hardly the good news Jesus preached! I can’t even imagine—these folks must have been scared out of their wits. It’s inconceivable to us, in this safe and sacred space, that any spiritual leader would use this kind of imagery in connection with *anything* deemed holy.

Against this terrifying threat, a new breed of Christians arose. Early American Unitarian William Ellery Channing challenged the very *notion* of eternal damnation. “Not ONE WORD of this description can we find in the Scriptures; not a text, which even hints at these strange doctrines. They are altogether, we believe, the fictions of theologians. Christianity is in no degree responsible for them,” he preached.

“How dishonorable to [God] is the supposition, that his justice is now so severe, as to exact infinite punishment for the sins of frail and feeble men, and now so easy and yielding, as to accept the limited pains of Christ's human soul, as a full equivalent for the endless woes due from the world? How plain is it also, according to this doctrine, that God, instead of being plenteous in forgiveness, never forgives; for it seems absurd to speak of men as forgiven, when their whole punishment, or an equivalent to it, is borne by a substitute?”⁴

Thankfully, Unitarians just weren’t buying into that notion. Instead we embraced a theology based on reason and social responsibility. We refused to accept the victimization of original sin. We had the power to work toward the good of humankind, in a spiritual community where deeds, not creeds, defined us.

Unitarians found kindred spirits in Christian Universalists, who also held that God is all-loving and all-forgiving. Rejecting the divinity of Jesus, original sin, and eternal damnation, our Universalist forerunners believed that “God is love, good to all, and his tender mercies are over all his works; that he loves all the things that are, and abhors nothing that his hands have made, for he never would have created anything to have hated it; that he is a just God and a Saviour, who will have all men to be saved...”⁵

Clearly, *this* loving God would never condemn anyone to eternal damnation. We are, after all, human—subject to those oh-so-human frailties that riddle our lives and challenge us in all our relationships with one another.

³ “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” by Jonathan Edwards, Enfield, Connecticut, July 8, 1741

⁴ “Unitarian Christianity” by William Ellery Channing. Delivered at the Ordination of Rev. Jared Sparks, First Independent Church of Baltimore, May 5, 1819

⁵ “Christian Universalist Beliefs,” from the Winchester Profession of 1803

Which brings us back to the distinction between forgiveness and pre-forgiveness. Ellen mentioned her momentary feeling of smug satisfaction about the bumper sticker, “Christians aren’t perfect—just forgiven.” Smugness because we Unitarian Universalists are *pre*-forgiven. Fortunately, her better nature prevented extended gloating.

You might say that pre-forgiveness—or prior indemnity—is the insurance that covers pre-existing conditions, such as, well, feeling smug and superior. In short, of being human.

Christian Universalist “pre-forgiveness” derives from Preventive Grace. “Preventive” means “come before.” According to John Wesley, eminent eighteenth-century Methodist theologian, Preventive Grace assured humanity of “that little spark of divine grace” necessary for salvation—our ticket to heaven.⁶

According to Wikipedia,⁷ Universalism’s defining tenet is the belief that a loving God would not create any person destined for eternal damnation. Therefore, any existing person must be destined for salvation—pre-forgiveness.

Simply put, pre-forgiveness assumes that due to our imperfect nature, we’re *gonna* fall short eventually, but we shouldn’t fall all the way into eternal perdition. This has led some to argue that pre-forgiveness releases us from responsibility for our errors. To my mind, this eliminates any compunction humanity might have against reprehensible behavior.

Says one anonymous blogger, “For the true believer, all sins have been pre-forgiven and prepaid for. Rush [Limbaugh] needs to know that no matter what he does, so long as he comes back to Jesus [there’s that “some restrictions apply” clause], there will be no consequences in the afterlife, so he has nothing to fear. Jesus will love him no matter how much he sets back human civility and science, no matter how evil he is. Jesus is about love.”⁸

Well now, I agree with the love part, but the rest just sounds ridiculous. Equally disturbing is this unsavory *definition* of Unitarian Universalism—under the heading “Cults”—from the Biblical Discernment Ministries (BDM). “The UUs teach that the essence of salvation is character development (‘deeds not creeds’), rather than faith in Jesus Christ alone -- the ‘social gospel’ reigns supreme in UU. This belief allows every person to do whatever is right in his own eyes as long as he is sincere about it.”⁹

Yikes! I’ve never seen *that* in our UU principles.

Universalists, BDM continued, “also . . . rejected such important Bible doctrines as the total depravity of man.” I say, Amen for that!

So where is the happy medium between total depravity and total non-accountability? I believe that pre-forgiveness means no one is automatically condemned from birth—and we have free will that allows and encourages us to forgive and be forgiven. Forgiveness teaches us to stand on the side of love—to affect our *own* salvation.

⁶ “Free Grace” by John Wesley, preached at Bristol, 1740

⁷ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universalism>

⁸ http://groups.google.com/group/alt.fan.howard-stern/browse_thread/thread/ecb2616ae444367e

⁹ <http://www.rapidnet.com/~jbeard/bdm/Cults/unitari.htm>

As we sang earlier, “words that we hold tight won’t let us go. Paths we don’t follow will haunt us so. . . . When love is doubtful, choice is not clear, we turn to worship to cast out our fear. Teach us forgiveness, make love our end. Show us, O spirit, how to befriend.”¹⁰

For only when we see ourselves as one human family, united in a common bond of love, can we live together in peace. Only when we learn to forgive ourselves and each other can we begin again, in love.

In the end, concludes Dean Fisher of the American Unitarian Conference, “It isn’t important whether or not I believe that salvation exists; what is important is that I live my life as though it does.”¹¹

I’ve been pre-forgiven—a comforting thought, but *not* carte blanche to do whatever I choose. Along with this blessing comes a sacred responsibility to live authentic lives dedicated to the principles of our free faith. True forgiveness, says David Ridge, “is not an action after the fact; it is an attitude with which you enter each moment.”

During a defining moment in 1961, Unitarians merged with Universalists—surely a match made in heaven. Like souls found a way to live together and grow together and worship together in loving community. The union of forgiveness and pre-forgiveness was complete. Or *maybe* it’s only just begun!

AMEN.

¹⁰ “Words That We Hold Tight” by Bishop Dr. Adedeji Ishola, op. cit. *Singing the Living Tradition*

¹¹ <http://www.americanunitarian.org/universalism.htm>