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### "Beginning Again In Love"

Don't ever underestimate the power of your own family to teach you something. I've become accustomed to thinking of myself as the one that got away. Don't get me wrong. I love my family. I just can't live with them. But lately I've been wishing that I was a little closer to home. Something's shifting in their world and I find myself humbled by the power of the human spirit to transcend the past and begin again in love.

My father was recently diagnosed with cancer. He's been having a lot of trouble with side effects from the treatment he's been receiving. So much so that he hasn't been able to leave his house, except for trips to the hospital, for almost a month now.

My father is one of the most introverted people I know. He's lived by himself for 40 years and he doesn't often venture out into the world beyond a pretty tight radius of comfort. As friends pass away and his health deteriorates, his world just seems to keep getting smaller and smaller.

But for good or for ill, my mom has always been there for him. And he's been there for her too in many ways - which people looking in from the outside usually find fascinating because my parents were divorced when I was six.

I'm not surprised that my mom's there for my dad now. But she's no longer physically able to drive and shop and clean and so my brother's become my father's primary caregiver. And my father and my brother have always had a very awkward relationship.

Bill was only 3 when my parents divorced and he was just as hyper-active as they come - a real handful. My father was quickly overwhelmed by his enthusiasm for life during our visits with him.

Some of my favorite pictures of Bill were taken at my father's first apartment; peaking out from behind a fort he'd built with the cushions from the couch - his cheeks flushed and his bangs visibly damp with perspiration. Bill was a whirlwind of imagination and activity. My dad just couldn't take the chaos. It got to the point where he told my mom that he could only take us for visits one at a time.

Then my father got into the habit of planning things with Bill, only to call and cancel at the last minute. That went on for years. Whatever the reason, my father wasn't able to be there for my brother - which at some level hurt him deeply.

But my father's illness has pushed my father and my brother into a corner of sorts - a place of forced intimacy. There have been times when my father has been so weak that Bill has had to feed and bath him. (It doesn't get a whole lot more intimate than that.) It's not an easy place for either of them and it would be so easy for my brother to resent having to take care of a man who couldn't take care of him.

But somehow Bill's been able to let go of the past. He's forgiven our father for all the things he did and couldn't do when we were kids. He's willing to try again with an open heart. Bill's giving both of them the chance to begin again in love. And he feels really good about it.

I don't usually share such personal stories with you from the pulpit but on the eve of Yom Kippur; the Day of Atonement - I've literally been witness to the power of forgiveness to help break the chains that bind us to the past freeing our hearts to begin again in love. It's been a powerful experience - one that's bearing fruit for my whole family. It's little wonder Yom Kippur is considered the most sacred holy day of the Jewish liturgical year.

Yom Kippur is the culmination of the season of turning; turning away from our old limited and limiting ways of being, turning towards each other and returning to our true selves. But we can get stuck in the broken places; becoming fixated on our shortcomings and the shortcomings of others.

We weren't meant to sit around in sack cloth and ashes, dwelling on the ways we've failed and have been failed by others. It's important to acknowledge the broken places - to take responsibility for all the ways we've turned our

backs on each other and ourselves but it's also really important to honor the fact that it's human to make mistakes. All of us have broken promises to one another and to ourselves.

Yom Kippur services begin with what is one of most famous passages in the Jewish liturgy - the Kol Nidre. Chanted to a beautifully haunting melody, the Kol Nidre declares all vows and promises made and broken in the coming year null and void --- not in the sense that it's OK to make promises with the intent of breaking them but rather that promises made with the best of intentions will be broken.

Not that its OK - it's important to own up to our failings, confessing our shortcomings and the ways they hurt each other but its going to happen because we're human. The Kol Nidre is and expression of human solidarity, a reaffirmation of community.

Confession is a communal enterprise in the Jewish tradition. Sin is not a private, personal matter. Instead of saying, "I have sinned" they say "We have sinned" - acknowledging communal responsibility, confessing not only those things each person has done individually, but everything done by anyone within the community in a kind of "there but for the grace of God go I" response to human imperfection.

Secular Jews will stand outside the doors of the synagogue to listen to the Kol Nidre as a way of standing with their brothers and sisters inside. The Kol Nidre symbolizes their unity as a people saying that no matter what you've done you still belong. Confession is an important part of the process but it's not a place we're supposed to get caught up. It's not a place we're supposed to stay. Getting to a place where we can let go of the past and begin again is the goal.

Rabbi Reuven Hammer writes,

"The release we have obtained from our human imperfections and failings leads directly to the possibility of forgiveness. Kol Nidre is indeed a release, but from much more than technical vows; it releases us from all that binds us to our imperfect selves - the limitations that keep us from fulfilling our ideals of who we would like to be."

Forgiveness then is an acknowledgment and a letting go of human imperfection that allows us to begin again in the likeness of something larger than our finite, limited selves. In the Jewish tradition that something is God.

In a passage from the book of Isaiah read every year during Yom Kippur services, the prophet explains in no uncertain terms that God wants us to leave our guilt and our resentment behind and get busy healing our relationships with each other. God asks;

Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?

Is not this the fast that I choose:

To loose the bonds of injustice,  
To undo the throngs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free,  
And to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your break with the hungry,  
And bring the homeless poor into your house;  
When you see the naked, to cover them,  
And not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn and your healing shall spring up quickly.

Isaiah 58; 6-8

Resentment and guilt are like bricks we lay around ourselves building walls that separate us from one another. Forgiveness is about tearing down those walls so we can get out and other people can get in. When we tear down the walls healing can begin. We can begin again to be the people we were meant to be - people who live lives of connection - people who care for and love one another.

Mary Oliver writes:

You don't have to be good,  
You don't have to crawl through the desert on your knees  
For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.  
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain are moving across the  
landscapes, the mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air are heading home again.  
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your  
imagination, calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—  
Over and over announcing your place in the family of things.

Forgiveness allows us to take our place at the family table to which we all  
belong - to regain a sense of being at-one with creation.

All of us know despair but none of us are flawed or unworthy - we all have  
our place in the family of things.

This is what my brother is beginning to understand in the context of caring  
for my father. Bill has been able to begin again with our father in love. His  
compassion stems from knowing that they are family - father and son, yes,  
but there's also that larger family of things. Bill knows that he and his  
father belong to each other.

Yom Kippur; the day of at-one-ment - a day to practice letting go of the  
things that divide us and keep us from remembering that we belong to each  
other. May it be so. Blessed Be and Amen.

**Resources used on writing this sermon**

*The Jewish Holidays; A Guide and Commentary* by Michael Strassfeld  
*Entering the High Holy Days* by Reuven Hammer

