

Listen With the Ear of Your Heart
Unitarian Universalist Church of Urbana-Champaign
A Sermon by Elizabeth Marsh
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The stories I tell you today may or may not be true, but they have truth in them.

Two boys had grown into men and no longer living with their mother, who was widowed. This small family tended to converge on the mother's house at the winter holidays. During one Christmas and New Year holiday season, tensions in this small family were particularly high. For various reasons, in this particular year, the mother and her two sons were each experiencing tremendous stress in their personal lives. One was experiencing an extended illness, two of them had been unemployed too long, and the snow blower was on the fritz during a winter with non-stop snow storms. Times were stressful.

These family members, like yours and mine, loved each other as only family can. They also were, like you and me, completely human and were capable of saying things to each other that they were not proud of; that is to say, this family's personal tensions erupted a number of times during their otherwise festive visit. Sometimes they apologized, sometimes they didn't, and sometimes hurt feelings lingered after everyone had gone home.

A few weeks later, in January, the younger brother sent his older sibling a letter saying that he, the younger brother, still felt bothered by some things the older brother had said and done at Christmas. The older brother replied, thanking his sibling for telling him, and inviting him to call if he wanted to speak more about it.

Days, weeks, and then months passed. No phone call. The older brother felt fearful; had he hurt his sibling so badly that he was refusing to speak? He really disliked this distance between them.

The younger brother felt hurt but thoughtful: Did his sibling's words really have anything to do with the younger brother or were they reflections of a really stressed person? His love for his brother ran deeper than the hurt.

During those weeks and months of no contact, each brother was processing his own thoughts about the unresolved tension between them. It wasn't until the spring when they finally talked.

"I'm glad we could finally talk," said the older to the younger. "I admit that I've felt nervous about calling you."

"Why have you felt nervous?" asked the younger. "Please don't ever feel nervous about talking to me."

The older brother loved his younger brother tremendously and didn't like this separation between them, and so he bravely went on, "I wondered if you still wanted to talk about what happened at Christmas that was bothering you."

"Oh," said the younger brother in recognition. "No, I've moved passed that now."

And after a moment of shock and relief, the older brother answered, "Oh, okay. Well, then, how have you been?" And that was that. Forgiveness granted, reconciliation made.

Time, it is said, can heal all wounds. That is not always true, but in the case of these brothers, it was. Over the course of a few months, the younger one was able to forgive his sibling for hurt feelings, and they were able to repair their strained relationship. Each one of them listened to their feelings and paid attention to their thoughts, and together they were able to move on.

It could be said that they "Listened With the Ear of Their Hearts." This phrase comes from an ancient Christian text called the Rule of Benedict. The Rule is a set of instructions for people to live orderly, spiritual lives together. The phrase "listening with the ear of your heart," can conjure up a humorous image—there's an ear on my heart?—but it is a poetic, metaphoric way to encourage us to understand something not only with our intellectual minds but with our feelings.

A French bishop from the 17th Century once said, “The heart has reasons that reason does not understand.” So listening with the ear of our hearts leads us to new discoveries that our thinking mind could not conjure alone. In the story of the brothers, their hearts told them that being connected to one another was more important than any single instance of human weakness; it was more important than pride or one of them being more right than the other.

We are each of us so fully human. We come complete with a full set of human emotions. Jealousy, greed, also kindness and sorrow. This is the beauty and terror of being human. We love each other and we feel threatened by one another. These truths bear themselves out over and over throughout human history and in our daily lives with one another. Admitting to ourselves and others that we are flawed yet capable people can be a profound confession.

Forgiveness and reconciliation are two related but different things. Forgiveness ultimately involves only ourselves while reconciliation takes two people. Both forgiveness and reconciliation are spiritually arduous undertakings, involving healthy doses of humility and intention. Each are processes, meaning they may need to happen over and over.

Have you heard the phrase, “forgive and forget?” There's something not quite right in that. I've also heard, “I can forgive but I can't forget.” That's seems to be more accurate. Often, for our own safety, we ought to remember that someone once hurt us; but forgiving is the process of no longer letting that action from yesterday tell us how to live today. A child should remember that yesterday, a bully tripped him on the playground and ought to avoid that bully again, but the child should not to let that bully keep him from enjoying the playground today.

Mallory was a single woman in her late thirties who had always been competitive with her younger sister, Joan. Mallory had become estranged from Joan because Mallory said that Joan had broken her heart. What had happened was that Mallory had begun dating a man, then introduced him to Joan. Within two weeks, the man had broken things off with Mallory and moved in with Joan. This had happened a few years ago and Mallory remained on non-speaking terms with her sister.

Mallory grew very unhappy. She watched several movies each weeknight and ate a lot of ice cream to comfort herself. Eventually she sought help from a workshop on forgiveness.

In this workshop, she realized that she often spent two hours or more a day concentrating on her negative feelings toward Joan. These thoughts were keeping her attached to a past event that was still controlling her present life.

To heal, Mallory began a new way. She worked diligently to fill those two hours focusing instead on times in her life when she felt peaceful and fulfilled. It wasn't easy, because those negative feelings had become a familiar habit for her. Slowly, by focusing on gratitude, beauty, and love, Mallory was able to release herself from the negative feelings that were holding her as a prisoner in her own heart. She was able to think of Joan neutrally, and to realize that the man wouldn't have lasted long in her life if he was able to leave her so easily. Mallory's life took on new meaning and new direction as she filled her heart with peace.

A wise teacher once said, “Peace is a conscious choice. It starts within, and moves from heart to heart.” As a religious people who seek peace in the world, our sacred duty is to seek peace first in our own hearts. It is so easy to get riled up behind the wheel at rush hour, or to feel jealous of people with more wealth than we have. It is so easy to feel negative because it is so human. Seeking peace in our hearts does not mean that we will stop feeling furious or embarrassed. Seeking peace means listening with the ears of our hearts and controlling how we respond to those emotions. It is choosing not to suffer from the feelings we feel.

Forgiveness is always possible since it is a gift we give to ourselves. And it's not immediate; it's a process that takes commitment and rest, then going back in and continuing until something shifts. And often, if the hurt is deep enough, we keep going back into anger and having to deliberately choose,

again, to focus on peace. In journeying toward forgiveness, we are fully human. Sometimes we are better at forgiveness than others.

If forgiveness is something we as individuals can do for ourselves, reconciliation is different because it takes two to tango. Reconciliation is possible if both parties are willing to confront their actions and feelings. The relationship can be repaired, like the two brothers who moved on past the hurt. On the other hand, sometimes relationships are not repair-able, and instead it is best for each person to let go and find peace on their own.

A story of irreparable hurt comes in the story of two women who were girls in the 1950s. Brenda and Carol were best friends from girlhood, and for many years after that. As they grew into adulthood, they were committed to experiencing life's transitions side by side. They said tearful farewells when one of them moved away temporarily for school, and then permanently for love. Brenda traveled across the country to be near Carol for the birth of her first child. Still they stayed in contact and were important touchstones for the days gone by. They shared many secrets with one another as they grew from girlhood into young womanhood and on into motherhood.

Yet as they grew older, their connection began to feel uneven to Carol. Brenda, naturally more worldly than her friend, saw it as her lifelong duty to help Carol improve her standing in life. When they were younger, Carol relished her role of plain student to Brenda's sophisticated teacher.

But at some point in their long friendship, Carol began to reach out into the world on her own. She began to discover her own path and began to resent feeling controlled by Brenda's constant advice. But because their love for each other was based on this student and teacher dynamic, it became difficult for them to know how to love each other on more equal terms.

The two friends talked for many months about the growing strain in their friendship. They tried for a long time to reconcile but found, in the end, that it was not possible. Though neither of them wanted to completely sever ties, Carol knew, for her own well being, that she had to step away from what had become Brenda's unhealthy friendship. Brenda felt hurt but respected her friend's wishes. They continued to send birthday and Christmas cards to one another, yet they moved on to create important friendships with other people.

Much like some separations between two partnered people, Brenda and Carol's separation of friendship was instigated by one of them and resisted by the other. They came to a strained agreement after much difficulty. Each of them moved on, choosing to focus on beauty and love in their lives instead of the hurt they had caused one another.

Sometimes we love each other best by respecting each other's wishes even when it might hurt us. If both parties are not satisfied with the outcome, full reconciliation may not be possible. That is when choosing making a journey on our own, toward forgiveness, becomes a powerful act of peacemaking in our own hearts.

The reading earlier said, "When we love another heart and allow it to love us, we journey deep below time into that eternal weave where nothing unravels." Loving another person takes us to a place beyond right and wrong, and "despite the hurt of rupture," that kind of love never is never fully extinguished. Even if there is only enough love remaining to heal our own hearts, let us first wish ourselves peace so we might eventually wish peace upon the other, and let "spirit summon beauty from wounded space." May it be so. Amen.