

“Renewal Through Making Amends”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on September 20, 2020

It is inevitable that there will be times in our lives—and quite probably many times in our lives—when we will do or say something that we later wish we hadn’t. At times our behavior or our words cause hurt or do harm. In our Story for All Ages this morning we heard about one particular day in Martha’s life when her behavior caused harm to each member of her family. Clearly this was not a good day for Martha. What made the day even worse was that, at that point in her life, Martha didn’t say sorry. She hadn’t yet learned an important step in making amends, the step of offering an apology. Her hurtful behavior toward her family members created rifts in the relationships with those who mattered most to her. Because she hadn’t yet learned the importance of saying “I’m sorry” she couldn’t repair the rifts she had caused. Saying “I’m sorry” was clearly difficult for Martha. As I read the story for the first time, I felt compassion for Martha. Having said I’m sorry many times in my life, I know how difficult saying those words can be at times.

As the story demonstrates, offering a sincere apology by saying I’m sorry can start a process of repairing the damage done to a relationship. Saying I’m sorry can be like applying stitches to an open wound. Saying I’m sorry doesn’t completely heal the wound. In many cases however, it does significantly assist and encourage the healing process—a process that takes time.

Often, as we heard in both the story and the reading, something is needed prior to an apology. The initial step in the amends process involves thinking about our behavior and recognizing where we have been at fault. The truth is that all of us, whether intentionally or unintentionally, have said or done something that has caused hurt or harm. Sometimes we recognize that right away. But sometimes we have difficulty acknowledging where we may have been at fault. At such times it is quite easy to become defensive—to want to protect our self-esteem or our sense of self-worth.

Martha’s defensiveness came through loud and clear. “Fine!...Who needs them anyway?” It is at this point that even more harm occurs. Once Martha’s defensiveness kicked in, the damage wasn’t just to the relationships with her family members. The defensive response turned the damage inward. She began harming herself. The reality was that things weren’t “Fine!” That was a lie she was telling herself. The reality was that she was in denial about the truth. Denial is a powerful defense mechanism that we humans may utilize in situations where we find ourselves unable to cope at the time. Martha was in a bind. She hadn’t yet learned how important it is to apologize and she had done enough damage that she needed to know those skills in order to respond in a healthy and healing manner. Which leads us to the answer to her question, “Who needs them anyway?” It is obvious to all of us that Martha needed her parents and her baby brother. And when she took the time to think about her situation, she recognized what was obvious to you and me.

Clearly the book, “Martha Doesn’t Say Sorry,” is a children’s book. The message it contains, however, isn’t just for children. The book our reading came from, *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, which is a foundational book for Alcoholics Anonymous, isn’t a book for children. It is a book for adults. Yet the portion of that book I selected as our reading this morning echoes closely what our Story for All Ages points out so clearly. Coming to terms with and taking steps to make amends for our hurtful or harmful behavior, is important at any, and quite possibly every, age.

As I alluded to earlier, there are several steps involved in effectively making amends. Some of the steps were easily recognizable in the story and in the reading. In case you missed them earlier I will share them now. In order to make amends it is essential we first recognize that we did something that caused hurt or harm. Next, we need to be willing to accept responsibility for the hurt or harm we caused. The third step is the one that Martha had so much difficulty with. We need to feel genuine remorse and apologize. While apologizing can be an important element of making amends, offering an apology may not be all that is needed to truly or fully make amends. To make amends we need to learn what is needed to repair the damage that was done and may still remain. Then we need to commit to ourselves, and to the other person, that we will take steps to change our problematic ways. The steps I just laid out may not be necessary, or even appropriate, in every

situation. And there may be other steps needed in some situations. There is no definitive recipe for making amends in each and every situation where making amends is needed. But if we learn and practice these steps, and I want to emphasize the word practice here, we may just find that our relationships improve. We might begin to let go of guilt and/or shame we have been carrying. And our sense of self-worth and self-esteem could move in a positive direction.

Both the Story for All Ages and the reading this morning focus on making amends at the individual level. But there are other, much larger, levels where the process of making amends could be beneficial and renewing. Let me offer some examples of larger scale amends making.

Since Columbus first arrived on the shores of islands off the coast of North America, the colonists who came to this continent have committed some terrible atrocities toward both Native Peoples and to people of African descent who were brought here as slaves. Anyone who has been listening to those who have been demonstrating and protesting in the streets over the past several months know that, while chattel slavery and the intentional genocide of America's Native Peoples may have ended, proper and adequate amends have not been made. The racism which was at the very foundation of both slavery and genocide continues to be a significant issue in this country. Some of that racism is on an individual level. By that I mean that some individuals hold beliefs that are clearly prejudicial to people of a particular race. There are groups of people, groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and the Aryan Nations, that openly espouse racist ideology and promote violence toward people of color as well as others.

Racism at the individual level is a significant problem. There is another type of racism, however, that is far more pervasive and destructive. Again, if you have been listening to what many of the protestors and demonstrators have been saying over the past several months, you are likely familiar with the term systemic racism. If you haven't heard of or don't know what systemic racism is, I encourage you to learn about it. Do an internet search of the phrase systemic racism and you will get plenty of reading material. Today systemic racism harms far more people than the individual level of racism does. Systemic racism is built into so many aspects of our country and our culture that those of us who aren't directly impacted by it may not know how to look for or see it. And some of our leaders claim that systemic racism doesn't exist. This is a clear example of denial. And this denial amplifies the hurt and harm to those who experience the effects of systemic racism in their lives on a daily basis.

One example of systemic racism can be seen in our nation's criminal justice system. I want to note here that our criminal justice system is based on a punishment model—an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Here is a quote from a report titled "Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2020" that can be found on the "Prison Policy Initiative" website at www.prisonpolicy.org.

"...people of color — who face much greater rates of poverty — are dramatically overrepresented in the nation's prisons and jails. These racial disparities are particularly stark for Black Americans, who make up 40% of the incarcerated population despite representing only 13% of U.S residents."

If those numbers aren't enough to convince you that systemic racism exists in this country then I would recommend you read Michelle Alexander's book, *The New Jim Crow*. Her thorough examination of the mass incarceration of those who are black is compelling and quite convincing.

The United States has the highest number of inmates and the highest per-capita incarceration rate of any country in the world. The "Mass Incarceration" article states that "the American criminal justice system holds almost 2.3 million people" in jails, prisons, juvenile correctional facilities, and immigration detention facilities throughout our country. More people are locked up in this country than the number of people who live in Montana and Wyoming combined. And whether or not we hold any prejudice or animosity toward people based on skin color, all of us who pay taxes provide the money that keeps the jails, prisons and detention centers operational. In other words, we financially support the systemic racism that is currently present in our criminal justice system.

At this point you might be wondering what all of this has to do with making amends. As I stated earlier, our criminal justice system is based on punishing a person for their behavior. There are other approaches that can be used, approaches that have been shown to be less costly and often times considerably more effective

than punishment. The restorative justice approach is one such model. Restorative justice focuses on restoring right relationship. Here is a quote from the website of the Center for Justice and Reconciliation.

“Restorative justice repairs the harm caused by the crime. When victims, offenders and community members meet to decide how to do that, the results can be transformational. It emphasizes accountability, making amends, and—if they are interested—facilitated meetings between victims, offenders and other persons.”

“Restorative justice repairs the harm caused.” Making amends is an integral, and essential, part of the restorative justice approach. This approach makes far more sense to me than locking a person up and hoping they will never commit another offense once they are released. This model is an example of how making amends could have a positive effect, not just on the lives of a few individuals, but on the lives of most people in our country. If nothing else, it would dramatically reduce the amount of money we currently invest in locking people up. And maybe with the money that is saved, we could begin to consider, as a nation, making reparations—reparations to the descendants of slaves and to the Native Peoples of this continent. That would be an example of making amends on the grand scale.

It is my hope that what I have shared with you this morning has given you a sense of how making amends has the capability of providing renewal—renewal for us as individuals, renewal for our relationships with those around us, renewal for our communities and even renewal for our nation as a whole. In order for such renewal to begin and continue to grow, the practice of making amends will need to become a part of our everyday lives. May we commit ourselves to the practice of making amends. Through a regular and concerted practice of making amends we can make the world a better place.

May it be so.