

Returning to Our Best Selves: A Sermon for the High Holy Days

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"Mistakes are the portals of discovery."—James Joyce

Sermon: Sometime early in the life of our world, a Jewish legend goes, something happened to shatter the light of the universe into countless tiny sparkling pieces. These sparks of light rained down from the heavens like stars and came to rest inside all of creation. To this day, inside every crevice and crack and corner of our world, there rests a spark of this light of creation. The legend teaches that the highest human calling is to search for this original light. We are here to seek this light, to point to it and to gather it up so that it might enlighten and repair our broken world.

No matter where we are in the world, no matter who we are, no matter how flawed and inadequate we may feel, the story tells us, each one of us has within us exactly what is needed to repair our part of the world—the part of our world we can see and feel and touch. From this beloved legend comes the Jewish idea of *tikkun olam*, or “repair of the world.” We are born, you and I, to repair our world—and the work of *tikkun olam* begins not in some faraway place but right here, inside ourselves. We can’t begin to repair the world until we first begin to repair our hearts. We are gathered here this morning just before the turning of the seasons. Autumn, one of my favorite times of year, begins on Wednesday here in our part of the world. As our seasons turn, so too, the Jewish tradition teaches, can our hearts. This turning of the human heart is called *teshuvah*, which means “to return.” Our hearts can turn from dwelling on past mistakes, stale grudges, old regrets. Our hearts can return to being our best selves. We are in the High Holy Days, those ten days that began last Sunday at sundown with Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and last until Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, which ends at sundown on Wednesday, this year on same date that autumn arrives. Now, as the seasons turn, our hearts can return toward *tikkun olam*—our human calling to find the light, both within ourselves and in one another and to gather that light to help repair our world. These High Holy Days, and these days of early autumn, can be a time to take a long, hard look at one’s life and to ask soul questions, questions like: How is it with my heart? How did I do over the past year? Did my mistakes hurt someone else? Whom have I wronged? Did I blame someone for something that no one could control? Whom do I need to call and say, “I’m sorry, I was wrong. Can we start over?” And who in my life needs to hear me say, “It’s okay. I understand. I forgive you.”

These High Holy Days are a time for turning our lives around, a time to repair our hearts by opening our hearts to change. The act of opening our hearts to change does not come easily to most of us. Without change, though, our hearts and our lives can stay stuck in the same old ways, those habits of spite and resentment and pettiness that serve only to cut us off from one another, to keep us isolated and spiritually adrift, and to block us from that original light of creation. Without change, without the practice of *teshuvah*, we can feel lost, at home neither in the world, nor in our hearts. Without change, we can have a hard time returning home—home to our best selves.

The human journey, whether or not we ever travel far from the part of the earth where we live, is one of pilgrimage, a journey of return. We are each searching, whether we know it or not, for that place inside ourselves where we are at peace, “at home” with ourselves. So often, though, it is our past—where we have been and what we have done—that can keep us from feeling at peace inside our own skin, “at home” with who we are.

Whether we know it or not, we all need to be forgiven for things large and small—things we have done and things we didn’t do, things we have said and things we didn’t say—and sometimes hardest of all, we need to

forgive ourselves. And all of us on this human journey have someone in our lives who needs to hear us say, "I forgive you." The practice of forgiveness is essential on this journey of becoming more fully human. When we forgive one another and ourselves, we begin to repair our hearts so that we can return home to our best selves. None of this is easy; forgiveness may be some of the hardest spiritual work we will ever face, but facing it, head on, and doing the soul work of looking at where we've been and what we've done and whom we've wronged and all the times we've wronged ourselves—as hard as all that can be, it has to happen before we can change anything, either in our lives or in our hearts.

It would be easier, of course, just to continue on with the busyness of our lives never really looking at where we've been and how we're doing on our journeys, but one of the things I love about the Jewish tradition is that it makes a place on the calendar for this work of changing the human heart. And so every year, my preaching calendar tells me it's time, whether I like it or not, to return to the theme of changing the human heart. And this means I have to look inside my own heart. I can't "talk the talk" without "walking the talk." I have to ask myself the same hard questions I put in front of all of you a few minutes ago. And this requires honesty and humility and sometimes even some heartbreak as I look back at past mistakes and ask where my heart is stuck and needs to change.

And every year my list is long but in this year of my return to the place of my raising, I am thinking of my parents, both gone from this life now for many years. I admired them but when I look inside my heart, I can't help but feel regret. I was rough on them, both of them. My father who grew up mostly in working class Brooklyn in a home where Danish was for a time the only language and only got as far as the eighth grade, spoke what I, the good student, thought was a shameful dialect, unlike any I heard at school or on TV, with grammar that I would not so kindly take it up on myself to correct. If he said, "I seen that red car 'yestrday'" I might say, "Daddy, you *saw* that car *yesterday* and it was not red, it was burgundy." I must have been hard to live with. And as hard as I could be on him, I was so much harder on my mother who, in my eyes for a good stretch of time, could do not much of anything right—and I don't think I ever kept my opinions to myself. Neither of them is here for me to call and say, "I'm sorry" but what I can do, right now, during this season of change is to own up to my foolishness, past and present, and get on with the work trying to be my best self for the people I love and serve. As the seasons turn, I can turn, and return, to living my values—I can choose to be kind, even when life is not; I can choose to look with compassion at the all too human foolishness of another and of myself; I can choose to live those words "honor all beings." I can choose to continue the journey of return, the journey of returning home to my best self.

"Mistakes," wrote James Joyce, "are the portals of discovery." We know this to be true in science and in art but it is no less true on the journey of becoming more fully human and our best selves. When we find the courage to face our mistakes, we discover more about life and about ourselves, and we turn toward the work of *tikkun olam*, the gathering of the light that can help to repair our world, one heart at a time. There is much in our world that needs repair, so many places in our world waiting to receive the light.

I invite you now to imagine, along with the rabbi and storyteller for today, that God is a woman, growing older, grieving the wars of body and spirit she sees us waging against one another and ourselves, weeping over all the ways we keep one another hungry, sad over all the times we fail to share of what we have, sick over the times we reject one another because of who we are or where we come from or whom we love. Maybe you can imagine with me that woman staying awake all night on *Kol Nidre* as the seasons turn lighting candles for all of us and for all of creation, longing for us to change our hearts, to turn toward our best selves and to find our way home. Maybe right now you can see her sitting in the candlelight waiting for the time when we are all home -- the time when stars of love and hope and peace rain down from the heavens, filling our earth and every heart with creation's original light. God is waiting for you and for me, waiting for us to come home.