

"Fault Lines"

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tamara Lebak, Associate Minister
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, October 24, 2010

Did you feel that earthquake we had last Wednesday? I was sitting in my dining room on the second story of our home when I heard the windows shake and could feel the floor moving. My head spiraled, my temperature rose, my stomach tightened – because that wasn't the first time I had ever felt the earth shake beneath my feet – and felt completely helpless.

A month or so ago, I was at home when I heard this deafening, cracking noise. I made it outside in time to see this enormous tree, nearly four stories tall, falling in the direction of my mother's tiny house on our property. I remember I felt the air involuntarily pushed out of my lungs as the tree hit, shaking the ground beneath our feet, barely missing her roof by only a few inches. It landed on exactly the spot where the two of us were headed. So it could have killed us – and if it had hit the house, it would have completely destroyed it.

So last week when I felt the house trembling, I was nearly nauseous thinking about what it could be. Was it a plane flying way too close overhead? An explosion? Had the dam broke that kept Keystone Lake from flooding the river behind our home? Would another tree fall and come crashing through my windows? Beckett, our five-month old, was downstairs asleep when everything started shaking. I scooped her up and stepped outside, fearing the absolute worst, and instead found nothing out of the ordinary. Back inside, I discovered on Facebook, much faster than the local news, that the trembling was an earthquake whose focus was near Norman.

I was so relieved. Our house had not been crushed or swallowed up by Lake Keystone. A war had not begun. But the experience shook me up a little. It reminded me of just how fragile life really is. I think we need that sometimes. To be shaken out of our comfort zones to remember what is really important. I was reminded of how easy it is to forget that, in a single second, our whole lives can be turned upside down. Life as we have known it can cease to exist and our world can come tumbling down around us.

That earthquake last week also reminded me of April 19, 1995; a day that changed many Oklahomans' lives forever. I was actually running late on my way to work, driving on interstate 40, just passing downtown Oklahoma City around 9:00 am, when the highway trembled and then swooned beneath me. Later, friends would tell me that the explosion had felt like a Mack truck running into the side of their home. Of course, I would come to find out that I had felt the explosion ignited by Timothy McVeigh; the explosion that destroyed the Murrah building and severely damaged a nearly sixteen-block radius of downtown Oklahoma City. The destruction

also included the Y, where I had been earlier that morning. As that event unfolded, I felt very deeply the near-miss of my own life and loved ones, and grieved the loss of those whom I did not know personally but who were connected to my students and teachers and friends.

For many people in Oklahoma, life was divided that day into before and after the tragedy. Maybe you have had a few of these moments where life is divided into before and after. Moments when everything that felt solid just moments before, crumbles around you? I bet you know the moments I am talking about; moments when a loved one dies too soon, a relationship can't be salvaged, the money or time or treatment has run out, the truth comes out and makes you question everything you have ever believed.

We are all subject to forces, seen and unseen, that shape and shake the very foundations upon which we stand; that crumble the pillars of our understanding to dust, and shake us to our core. How do we pick up the pieces and build something new? For a very long time, humankind believed Earth was the center of the universe and was a flat and solid rock. But we have come to find out that we are not, in fact, at the center of the universe, while, at the center of the Earth, lays the core of its strength. It is what gives the Earth the ability to withstand all of the forces that are impacting it – and it is not solid.

Charles Darwin wrote, “The world, the very emblem of all that is solid, moves beneath our feet like a crust over fluid.” It is not obvious in our day-to-day lives that the ground beneath our feet is really in a constant state of flux. In our day-to-day lives we are fooled into believing in solidity, believing in permanence. The truth is that the foundation of our Earth and our lives is not only moving, the foundation on which we stand is also covered with fault lines – places where two forces have met and sometimes have buckled under the pressure. It is here where texture is added to the land, where our lives are marked with hills and mountains and valleys. Proof that our lives have not always been easy.

What if we read the Earth's makeup and landscape as scripture? After last weeks' earthquake, I began to wonder: where are my own fault lines? After last weeks' earthquake I wondered how I might focus on the places in my own life where the pressure is building, where two opposing forces meet. Places in my life where I might benefit from spending a little bit of time mulling over the F-word. No; not *that* word. Although, let's spend a minute with that word because it is relevant. If we are tempted to use *that* F-word, especially followed by *you* or *off*, that is a pretty big sign pointing us to places in our lives where the pressure is building, where we might have some resistance – and probably some work to do.

If you are using *that* F-word in *that* way, then you probably need some of the F-word I am really talking about this morning. Forgiveness. You see, the good news is that the strength of the

Earth comes from its forgiveness. The strength of our planet, of God's creation, comes from its capacity to move *with* the tension, move with the pressure. Not clinging to the nearby plate but sliding independently and in conjunction with it. Our strength comes from our forgiveness. Our resilience comes from our capacity to forgive.

Where are the fault lines in your life? Places where the pressure is building and a shift is likely to occur? Where do you need to forgive? Someone said, "Forgiveness is giving up the possibility of a better past." The *possibility* of a better past – because the past, of course, cannot be changed. So forgiveness becomes about assessing the damage; that which you have caused and that which has happened to you. Assessing the damage and then picking up the pieces and going on with your life. Rebuilding with the resources you have left, knowing what you know now.

The good news is that we are not the first to grapple with forgiveness. For thousands of years, people on this Earth have had to deal with conflict and tragedy. The world's religions grapple with the question and teach us that forgiveness is the answer when our world has fallen apart, when relationships fall apart. Forgiveness loosens us up so that we can withstand the forces confronting us, so that we can salvage what we have and go on.

There is a Hasidic parable which tells of a king who had a terrible argument with his son. In a fit of rage, the king exiled his son from the kingdom. Years passed, and the son wandered alone through the world. In time, the king's heart softened, and he sent his ministers to find his son and ask him to return. When they located the young man, he answered them that he could not return to the kingdom – he had been too hurt, and his heart still harbored bitterness. The ministers brought back the sad news to their king. The king told them to take his son the following message: "Return as far as you can, and I will come the rest of the way to meet you." The king's heart softened because he gave up the possibility of a changed past. The king's heart softened because he was willing to do something differently today. The king's heart softened and he moved in the direction of his son. Where in your life do you need to soften your heart? To let go of the possibility of changing what has been and take a step today—in the direction of someone else? What can you do today that will help you give up the possibility of a changed past? Do you need to grieve? To talk about what happened to you to someone who will listen? Do you need to reach out to someone?

I have often counseled those struggling with forgiveness to write a letter, that they have no intent of ever mailing; to the person they need to forgive. Sometimes it's a letter addressed to a younger self forgiving them for making the choices they made at an earlier time in their life. Handwrite this letter so that there is no accidental, "Oops! I hit send!" Handwrite it so that you can be really present with the words you choose. Spend time on it. Tell them in that letter all the

ways that you have been hurt, that your life has been changed, all the things that you have missed out on because of this event, and because you have been holding onto it for so long. And then, tuck it away for you to find in a year, so that you can go back and see how far you have come. Or set it on fire and forgive as the smoke is sent like a prayer to the heavens.

We are taught that we must forgive over the course of our lives, not seven times, but seventy times seven times! Jesus meant that we must forgive more times than we ever thought possible. We must forgive even when we think we are done. We must forgive again and again, even when our world has crumbled around us; forgiving ourselves, our family, our friends, even forgiving God, for what they have put us through.

Why? Because there is no possibility of a changed past, and holding on makes us more rigid and less flexible. Holding on makes us less capable of dealing with the next conflict, the next difficulty. Why must we forgive over and over? Because life is certainly not fair. And clinging to the idea that something wasn't fair certainly doesn't change it. We must forgive over and over again because forgiveness gives us strength. We need forgiveness in our lives at the places where we have faults, right? Where the fault lines exist, where we have made mistakes, where we have wronged another. We need forgiveness in our lives when we have been wronged, when we blame someone else for our circumstances or for the pain we are experiencing. We need forgiveness in our lives when we say, "It's your fault!" When we draw lines between ourselves and someone else saying, "You never..." or "You always..."

People are not consistent, and life is not fair, and forgiveness gives us the strength we need to survive – to move *with* the inevitable resistance in our lives. Forgiveness allows us to live better today because it is giving up the possibility of a better *past*. Forgiveness gives us strength. Where in your life are the places that you might be made stronger by softening your heart and letting go of the idea of a changed past? Did someone die unexpectedly? The work may be to forgive them. Or even to forgive God. Oh yes, maybe you need to forgive God. You may, in fact, need to pay attention to where you have fault lines in your relationship with God. Maybe you are one of those people who use that F-word we don't say in church, when it comes to thinking about your relationship with God – I know you are out there. Just like your relationship with people, you also, in fact, have a history with God that cannot be changed. So what will your future with God look like, starting today? You could spend some time writing a letter that forgives God.

Maybe you have a fault line because you or someone you know is suffering from an illness? Maybe your work is to forgive your own body for failing you, or to forgive God for this injustice. I can see a letter addressed to "Dear Cancer." "Dear Cancer, I did not invite you into

my life." Or "Dear Heart." "Dear Heart, I know that you have been beating inside me since I was in my mother's womb. I am sorry I did not treat you better."

Where might there be pressure building in your relationships? With your parents? Your children? Your siblings? Your spouse? Your boss? Friend? Can you commit to doing the work to soften your heart, to taking a step in their direction to meet them?

We live in an unfair world – on shaky and unstable ground. We have limited time on this earth, and a limited amount of time to experience the beauty and the love that is all around us. What can you do today to give up the possibility of a better past and instead begin having a better today?

Our strength is in our forgiveness.

May it be so.