



PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

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WELCOME

Lydia Talbot: Welcome to “30 Good Minutes!” We’re so happy to have you with us for this half-hour of reflection on faith. I’m Lydia Talbot.

Lillian Daniel: And I’m Lillian Daniel. Our guest today is renowned thinker, writer and teacher, Rabbi Irwin Kula. He’s going to talk with us about steps we can take to learn how to forgive and to be forgiven.

Lydia Talbot: We also welcome back Jason Byassee, associate editor of the Christian Century, with a story about two political rivals, and fellow church members, who stopped speaking to each other.

Lillian Daniel: And we begin with the story of an Episcopal priest in Chicago. For him, God’s command to do justice is more than just words. Father Juan Reed has transformed the ministry of St. Martin’s Episcopal Church by speaking out publicly on issues of equality. Let’s take a glimpse at his personal spiritual journey.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Juan Reed: I think a part of Christian life is definitely a life of deep prayer and social justice. I grew up on the south side of Chicago in what is now Ida B. Wells homes. I had an interest in monasticism and religious life which developed over the high school years. As I began to think what would I do with myself after high school I looked around at various religious orders and applied to the monastery. I entered when I was eighteen in 1966 in the midst of the Civil Rights movement and Vatican II. So there were a lot of changes going on, an exciting time. But also my own growth, my own conflicts, issues around identity, sexual identity, sexuality. When I entered this particular monastery, I was the first African American to be admitted. I grew a lot that year. When left monastic life, it was natural for me to apply to social work school.

I was at a church in Chicago as a deacon. When it came time for ordination, there was a question about my ordination because they knew I was openly gay. I looked up in church and said, “Why the hell am I here?” And I walked out and thought that I would never be back. Church is a place where we should be able to be most at home. Most times I felt as if I joined a particular church, I’d have to leave a piece of me out: at a white church, I’d leave the black part out culturally; in some of the black churches, leave the gay part out. So I just said that I’ve tried to make this fit and it doesn’t, so I’m done with Christianity.

I remember one Holy Thursday when I saw an ad for a Holy Thursday service. So I went. There

was an African American priest who said something very positive about gay people from the pulpit and I said, “Well, maybe this is something I need to check out.” I joined that local community, which was wonderful. I found a group of people that I liked. So I began to discern a call to an ordained ministry. Eventually, my ordination was approved.

St. Martins has been here since 1878. The community changed and the church did not change. Change is very, very hard for people and often anger is a response to change. Our church is extremely progressive on issues around sexual orientation. I’m very proud of that. We think of ourselves as prophetic and part of being prophetic is to speak the truth, but also part of it is to stir up and invite people into a new vision of what Jesus’ reign of justice is all about. I think justice and holiness are different faces of the same reality in that when they are separated we get in trouble.

INTRODUCTION

Lydia Talbot: Fr. Juan Reed is a powerful preacher and a prophetic voice in the church, calling us to radical hospitality as the people of God. Our thanks to Juan for sharing his story.

And now, let me tell you about today’s speaker. Rabbi Irwin Kula is President of the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, a think tank, resource center and leader in promoting religious pluralism. He was named one of the 50 “top rabbis in America” by “Newsweek” magazine and has made numerous appearances on national television. Rabbi Kula was the host of a PBS series called “Simple Wisdom with Irwin Kula” and is the author of “Yearnings: Embracing the Sacred Messiness of Life.” We’re delighted to have Rabbi Kula with us today on “30 Good Minutes.” Welcome!

MESSAGE

Irwin Kula: Thank you.

Imagine for a moment that you could forgive everyone who ever hurt you in your life; that you could let go of all your resentment towards anyone who ever harmed you. Now, imagine for a moment that you were forgiven by everyone you ever hurt, for anything you ever did to harm anyone. Call it grace, or atonement, or unconditional love. Just the thought of it touches some better place within us.

We all know the healing power of forgiveness from our personal lives even in our small forgiveness experiences: mother’s forgiving words when we were children and broke that special vase and those words affect our parenting to this very day, a colleague we forgive for undermining us at work that leads to an unexpected partnership, a friend’s forgiving words when we mess up and gossip about them that leads to a deeper friendship, a parent we forgive for not being there when we were growing up who becomes a wonderful giving grandparent.

And forgiveness is not some touchy feely experience. In the past decade science has shown the physical benefits of forgiveness to our cardiovascular systems, blood pressure and stress levels. Apparently forgiveness is not only good for the soul it is good for the heart!

And yet in my travels around the country I so often hear about the hurts that won’t go away: siblings who haven’t spoken to each other in years who do not even remember why, parents and

children who can not sit in the same room because of resentments, ex-spouses who speak contemptuously about each other a decade after they have split up.

We know forgiveness is important, but why is it so difficult to forgive?

We are actually the first culture in history to focus almost exclusively on how we can forgive others for what they do to us. None of the great wisdom traditions—Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam—focus on how we can forgive others. They all focus on our asking to be forgiven.

The great spiritual traditions understood that our ability to forgive other people depends on how forgiven we feel. The more forgiven we feel, the more forgiving we can be. After all, we can't give away what we don't really have. The spiritual truth is, to be a Master at Forgiving Others we need to become Masters of Asking to be Forgiven.

The 12th century sage Maimonides taught that asking for forgiveness is actually a process and when we practice this process we wind up feeling forgiven. I call Maimonides process “the four Rs.” We need to *recognize* what we did, *regret* that we did it, *resolve* to never do it again, and *repair* what we did if we are going to be forgiven, yet alone feel forgiven.

Recently, I had the opportunity to use this process with my younger daughter, Talia. Talia is a night owl just like me. When everyone else in our home is asleep Talia is watching TV or playing on the computer until after midnight in the one common room we can hang out in.

These late hours could have been a time of closeness between father and daughter. We could have talked into the night or at least kept each other company as we did our own thing. But for some reason it just annoyed me that Talia was up during what I thought should be my private time after a long day. Almost nightly I would hassle her about going to sleep which she quietly just ignored.

Well, one evening after a particularly stressful day at work, my frustration got the best of me and I lost it and just yelled at her, “Can't you go to sleep already! Why don't you read a book in bed! You won't be able to focus in school!”

I could see her crumble. You know, the way our kids often do when we underestimate how sensitive they are and how powerful we are. Through her tears with a quivering voice she said to me, “What's your problem? I'm not bothering you, and I am a straight A student and I never miss the bus! Why are you so mean?”

I felt terrible and apologized profusely. But much as I hate to admit it, over the next few weeks I repeatedly lost it and after one more apology Talia nailed me. “Don't say you're sorry anymore, just stop yelling at me!” And then for good measure she said, “I am going to write a letter to your students telling them that you're not such a spiritual guy!”

Clearly sorry was not good enough. Forgiveness demanded a more serious process. I needed to practice the four R's. And so I sat with what I did. After a few days of soul searching I recognized that screaming at Talia was obviously not about Talia at all.

As the eldest of six brothers I was never alone growing up. I shared a room and like in many big families I was often responsible for my younger siblings. There was always someone around. You couldn't even use the bathroom without someone knocking on the door. I resented the lack of privacy. As an adult I still wanted my own space and there was innocent Talia, the object of my childhood resentment!

Here was the first stage of a genuine process of forgiveness. I *recognized* where my temper was coming from. Getting angry at Talia had nothing to do with Talia. I was burdening her with the baggage of my own childhood.

That night, after what had been a few days of chilliness between us I explained all this to her. I explained to her what I realized about my losing my temper and how much I *regretted* what I had done. She listened with genuine interest to stories from my childhood. I could see she understood and that she had compassion for me, her father. Now it was time for *resolve*. I had to show her that I could act differently. And only then would reconciliation be possible.

Well, I am happy to report that as of now things have gone pretty well. Talia is still at the computer or in front of the TV late at night. I still long for time alone but the edge is gone. Recently, she was reading by my side on the couch and she looked up at me and said, "Now Dad, isn't this better?" We both laughed. That's *reconciliation*.

The forgiveness process had strengthened our relationship. Of course knowing that I could get angry at my daughter and actually make her cry for reasons that I was not conscious of and that had nothing to do with her, makes me much more forgiving of other people when they have their outbursts of anger. And being forgiven by Talia even though she had no iron clad guarantee I wouldn't lash out again, reminded me that forgiving someone else is always an act of faith and hope in people.

In other words really going through the process of recognizing, regretting, resolving and repairing and then being forgiven we realize that we are not bad people but that sometimes we do bad things because we are unaware, and realizing this about ourselves makes it easier for us to forgive others.

Most contemporary teachings on forgiveness tell us that forgiveness is an internal process. It doesn't require the other person. If we just have the right attitude we can let go of the hurt and resentment. But letting go is something we can do only after we have exhausted the forgiveness process because the forgiveness we actually yearn for is that the damaged relationship will somehow, in however a small way, be made better. This requires that we move toward the person who has hurt us not away. I call this the sacred messiness of forgiveness.

A few years back, I heard an amazing story about a woman named Susan. Susan's teenage son was murdered in a drive-by killing. The killer who was the same age as her own child was found and convicted and sentenced. After the verdict was announced, Susan stood up and stared directly at the young man as he was being taken away and screamed, "I am going to kill you!" About a year later Susan went to visit her son's murderer. She just needed to confront him directly. He had been living on the street before the killing and actually Susan was the only

visitor he had that year.

They talked and she wound up visiting him again. At the end of his three years of incarceration she asked him what he would be doing? He was confused and had nowhere to go. Susan offered to help him get a job and to let him stay in a spare room she had. For eight months he ate her food and slept in her home.

One evening Susan, with great seriousness, asked him to sit down and said to him, “Do you remember what I said to you the day you were convicted of murdering my son”? The young man, nervously nodded, “Yes, you said you were going to kill me.”

“Well, I did,” said Susan. “I did not want the boy who could kill my son for no reason to remain alive on this earth. I wanted him to die and that old boy is gone now. So now I want to ask you, since my son is gone and that killer is gone, if you will stay here. I’ve got room and I would like to adopt you, if you want.”

Susan became the mother of her son’s killer, the mother he never had. You see, Susan understood that forgiveness is not simply about feeling better or letting go. Forgiveness does not mean condoning or making everything all better. That sort of expectation actually keeps us from forgiving.

Forgiveness is a process—an art and practice—that flows from our deep intuition that relationships are always worth trying to restore because life is about learning how to love. Forgiveness converts the hurt into new depths of awareness and with awareness anything is possible.

In fact, we discover the part of us that trusts and hopes and loves despite it all—our Forgiving Self—that gives truth to the saying: to err is human, to forgive is divine.

CONVERSATION

Lillian Daniel: If you’d like a free printed transcript or audio copy of the message you just heard from Rabbi Irwin Kula, stay with us and we’ll tell you how to place an order at the end of the program. Or you can visit our website at 30goodminutes.org to watch the video or download the text anytime. Now, let’s talk with Irwin Kula.

Irwin, there has been a lot written recently about apologizing and how the act of apology has broken down in our society and particularly pointing to sort of bad apologies such as, “Mistakes were made.” There’s even a song on the radio right now—a dance song—that goes: “It’s too late to apologize” and it repeats that refrain over and over again. There seems to be a growing cynicism around apology. What is that about?

Irwin Kula: Well, I think all religions have this notion of “cheap grace.” Even in secular America we have the cheap grace of apologies, so “I’m sorry” is a kind of throw away. But there are actually some rules for “I’m sorry” that if you use them appropriately, it works. It’s very simple. For me, you have to apologize as soon as possible, kind of immediately. You know how you let things go and they always get worse? I’m going to get to it. It doesn’t feel so good so I’m going to get to it and then it always gets worse. The worse it gets, the harder it is to do. The

harder it is to do, then when you do it you generally do it wrong! You undermine a colleague at work or you're impatient with a spouse or you're impatient with your child. Immediately say, "I'm sorry." Immediately.

And then second is, no excuses. A lot of times it's: "I'm sorry, but..." The person's not interested in the "but..." and the but takes away from the apology. And then be specific.

Lydia Talbot: I'm sorry. I'm sorry to break in! I'm sorry and apologizing and confession are, of course, central to the four wisdom traditions, as you refer to: Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism and Islam. But as you point out in your message, they don't focus on how to forgive others. Say more about that. You dealt with human relations. I guess I want to know, what would be the impact on diplomacy and world peace if government leaders applied your four Rs, your formula?

Irwin Kula: I think we actually have an example of that. The Truth and Reconciliation Committee in South Africa really made a decision that forgiveness is going to be a process. Any time you have something like that, that's a process, it's a choice. And it's a serious choice. Forgiveness is as difficult in some ways as war. It just turns out that the end of war is a lot of casualties and the end of the forgiveness process is hearts that are broken, but in fact there's nothing as whole as a broken heart. And part of our decision—I think this is part of what the world is going through right now—is to decide. Do the spiritual and religious wisdom traditions, in general, have anything to contribute to the secular, political, diplomatic efforts? I think that's a big decision. Religious people have a choice to make in that. We can either be part of the problem, which in many ways, religious people in general are a part of the problem now, adding to polarization and adding to partisanship. Or, are we a part of the solution? Part of being part of the solution is taking forgiveness practice really seriously.

Lydia Talbot: We were just talking before the show about the internecine warfare among religionists of all faiths. You yourself in Israel experienced that between conservative and liberal Jews. You were there in 1980. What about current wars and conflicts where religion is a defining component?

Irwin Kula: I think there is low level religion and more highly evolved religion. Religion can always do two things: religion can actually simply stabilize and comfort you exactly where you are and affirm your group's identity, whether it's your creedal group or dogma group, tribal group. Or religion can blow apart the boundaries and religion can actually shake you up in your certainty. I think that's a big choice that religious people have to make. Right now it turns out that the most religious people tend to be the most certain. That's a very dangerous thing because when you invoke God, whatever you mean by God as some ultimate authority to make you more certain, that makes you a very dangerous person.

Lillian Daniel: Or do you think that it's that the people who are certain are the ones who are the most likely to speak out? There might be a huge group who are in that more searching, questioning group, but are less likely to get in front of a camera and say, "I speak for my religion."

Irwin Kula: I think part of it is that certainty is more entertaining. When you put two certain people, on opposite sides, in front of the camera—we speak here about the media—two certain

people fighting is a more entertaining thing. But that just is a challenge to those of us who understand that the fundamental state to be in the world most of the time is uncertain. Whether it's mystery in the Christian community or the uncertainty of truth in Jewish life or the surrender aspect to something bigger than you in Islam, that aspect of what it means to be a religious and spiritual person we need to talk about. That will require a lot of forgiveness between groups. And part of the reason we don't say "I'm sorry," part of the reason within these groups we don't actually ask for forgiveness is because we don't want to show vulnerability and we don't want to show weakness on either side. Because the more liberal religious communities really need to ask themselves: How have they stereotyped the more fundamentalist communities? It's not that they're all good here. And fundamentalists really need to ask: Where has our certainty and our aggressiveness actually been a way to avoid what we're, deep down, uncertain about, too?

Lydia Talbot: I must ask you about growing up and how you learned about forgiveness from your parents when you were a kid.

Irwin Kula: It's a great question. I don't even know if I should tell this story. I haven't thought about this story as you were asking it. My parents may kill me for this, OK?

Lydia Talbot: They'll forgive you!

Irwin Kula: I have five younger brothers so there are six boys. Now you can imagine a lot of pressure in a family. My father is a cantor and so you can imagine the economics of that. My parents almost never fought. They just really treated each other kindly. But I remember one time, I must have been about twelve or thirteen years old and my parents got into a fight. My father who was a cantor never raised his voice because he was an artist. He didn't want to, you know. And he raised his voice. I remember he walked out of the house and slammed the door. Now that never happened in our home. I remember my brother and I, the one right under me, sat at the curb and said, "Who do we go with if our parents get divorced?" That thing that all kids do at some point! About an hour later my father came back and we were all standing outside the kitchen. He came in and he apologized. And that I remember was like the first public, so to speak, apology I had ever seen. I think that really made a difference in my life. I don't even remember what the fight was about. All I remember is my father apologizing to my mother, they hugged and that was it. I think that was really crucial to my life.

Lillian Daniel: What do you do when you offer a sincere apology from your heart, the kind you've just described, and it's not accepted? What happens then?

Irwin Kula: One of the things that we don't teach about forgiveness is forgiveness doesn't always clean up the brokenness. In America everything has to be clean. You say I'm sorry, you forgive and everything is nice. And if you can't, there's something wrong with you, you should just let go. Here's what we also need to teach: there are different levels of forgiveness. There is the kind of forgiveness you're talking about which is really what religions call grace. And that, no matter how hard you work, that's grace. It can't be earned. Whether it's grace in Christianity or "kapparah," atonement, on Yom Kippur, no matter what you do, you can't earn that. Now there are other levels of forgiveness. One of the levels of forgiveness is you try a few times. Here's what happens. There is actually a Jewish wisdom: try three times, genuine forgiveness three times, and if you don't get it, watch, you'll be able to let go because you've gone through

the process.

Lillian Daniel: Thank you so much for being with us today. Very rich.

Irwin Kula: Thank you.

INTRODUCTION TO REFLECTION

Lillian Daniel: And now Jason Byassee, Associate Editor of “The Christian Century,” brings us a final thought on forgiveness.

REFLECTION

Jason Byassee: I was pastor of a small rural church once. One of our members ran against another for a seat on the county commission. Naturally this did not make for cordial relationships in a congregation of eighty people. Folks lined up for one candidate or another. Longtime friends stopped speaking. No one could wait till Election Day—just so we could go on as a church. In the midst of the unpleasantness one Sunday we had the passing of the peace. And one candidate went up and offered his hand to the other. He told me later he had no idea why he’d done it. He still resented the other man for running against him. “It was like I couldn’t help myself,” he said. That’s the church at its best: forgiving before it knows what it’s doing, erring on the side of forgiveness even when we’d rather not.

CLOSING REMARKS

Lillian Daniel: Thank you, Jason, and our thanks again to Rabbi Irwin Kula, Father Juan Reed, and to you for joining us today on “30 Good Minutes.” I’m Lillian Daniel.

Lydia Talbot: And I’m Lydia Talbot. Before we go, I encourage you again to visit our website at 30GoodMinutes.org for more information about today’s program and a wonderful collection of messages, reflections, and stories to deepen your faith. Now, from all of us at “30 Good Minutes,” may your faith be strong in the week ahead and may your heart be open to God.