

“Forgiveness, reflection of God’s love”

Matthew 18:15-35

Sunday, March 10, 2019

This Sunday our congregation joins the ecumenical church in entering into the season of Lent. This liturgical season is an intentional time of preparation for Holy Week in which Christians worldwide will remember the institution of holy communion, the death of Jesus, and the Easter significance of the empty tomb. The forty days of Lent mimic the forty years of the Israelites journeying through the wilderness towards their promised homeland of security and prosperity, and, they mimic the forty days of Jesus’ preparation in the wilderness before beginning his public ministry of teaching and healing. This season of preparation is one in which we are invited and encouraged to travel along with Jesus through word and reflection towards Holy Week, wondering at our own vulnerabilities and giftedness and pondering the ways in which we can and shall recommit to being disciples of Christ in our daily living. It is not a journey to take light-heartedly yet it is one that I hope you will enter into boldly.

As a congregation we commit to being present with you through companionship, meal, and word. In addition to our Sunday morning services, we offer midweek services on Wednesday mornings and evenings accompanied by a meal and fellowship. While we will continue to follow the narrative lectionary on Sunday mornings, hearing lessons about Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew, our Wednesday services will focus on the theme of “God’s love, our everlasting hope” with readings from the Psalms. A Lenten devotional based on the Psalms is available at the Welcome desk for your own daily prayer life. As a community of faith we commit to this journey, and I hope that you too, will join us, whether in communal worship and meal, your daily prayer life, or your own Lenten devotional and ritual that provides moments of sabbath renewal.

This Lenten season I have committed to the daily ritual of writing a letter or note of thanks to someone who has shaped my life. In my own reflection of my discipleship commitment, I yearn to bring joy to another’s day with the gift of a handwritten note through the mail and to intentionally give thanks for the ways in which I have known God’s love and blessing through the mentorship, support, and compassion of others. Through this ritual I hope that I will listen more to Christ’s presence in my life.

How will you prepare for Holy Week this Lenten season? To what reflection and commitment is Christ beckoning you forth?

Our Lenten preparations, communal and individual, are important to the life of our faith community because they shape who we are towards one another, ourselves, and our unknown neighbor. In today’s scripture reading from the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus emphasizes that community is vital and that it takes work to be in community together.

In teaching the disciples how to live as a community of faith, Jesus reminds them that conflict should be addressed directly and compassionately rather than being ignored, gossiped about, or inflamed. He wants the church, the family of God, to care for one another well. When Peter asks Jesus about the wideness of forgiveness, Jesus suggests, in the words of Professor Eric Barretto, that “forgiveness is a deep reservoir of grace” and “a reflection of God’s love.” Peter thought he was being generous with his count of seven acts of forgiveness which is far past our cultural three strikes and you’re out policy, and yet, Jesus goes even further and topsy-turns cultural expectations to emphasize that forgiveness isn’t about keeping track of real and perceived injustices but rather is about relationship.

Earlier in the sixth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus teaches the disciples to pray, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from evil.”

He teaches the disciples of yesterday and today to pray in this way because he cares about the well-being of the community and the relationships that maintain and nurture the church. Unresolved conflict, acts of harm, debts that weigh upon us, lack of repentance for hurts and debts towards others, and the struggle to let go of the things that have hurt us deeply in the past - all of these impair the vitality of our community and ourselves.

Talking about conflict, repentance, and forgiveness is hard. It’s hard because we all sin and we’ve all been sinned against. It’s hard because being corrected is painful and reminds us that we’ve let others down. It’s hard because there are situations in which conflict or acts of harm that have been perpetuated remain unresolved, unmet with justice and repentance. It’s hard because we may have differing opinions, definitions, and boundaries of forgiveness. It’s hard because some within our community may have been harmed through abuse, assault, divorce, etc and then re-victimized by others who have told them they should just “move on and forgive.” It’s hard because some may forgive too readily, too quickly and not hold those who have committed an injustice to accountability for their actions and words. Conversation and reflection around conflict and forgiveness is hard and it’s work. And yet it is hard work that Jesus wants us to enter into for the well-being of our community.

How do you define and understand forgiveness? How does your understanding of forgiveness relate to Jesus’ hope for a community of healthy relationships? Who are you about the hard work of forgiving or seeking forgiveness? What are your hopes for our community of faith in relation to conflict resolution, repentance, and forgiveness? How is God calling us to live more faithfully into Jesus’ teachings for the vitality of our community?

Pastor and civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., once preached, “We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies.”

Forgiveness is powerful and it is necessary work for us as God’s people because forgiveness reflects the grace of God’s love.

In early February I had the joy of spending a weekend getaway in New York City with my mom to celebrate her 60th birthday. It was a girls’ trip, just the two of us, which my sister and I provided to her as our shared gift. We wanted to do something special for her as she had made so many of our birthdays special throughout the years.

When I asked her what was at the top of her list for NYC, she named three things: see a Broadway show, see the Statue of Liberty, and visit the 9/11 Memorial and Museum. I was excited for the first two items on her list and dreading the third item. I didn’t particularly want to be reminded of the terrorist attack on 9/11 or any of my memories tied to it on a fun girls’ weekend, but it was on my mom’s list and it was her birthday, so we went to the museum and memorial.

The last time I had visited the World Trade Center the museum and memorial did not yet exist, just the absent foundations of buildings that once stood tall and the construction of the new One World Trade Center nearby. This time beautiful fountains filled those spaces with the water sloping downwards towards the bases where the towers once stood and the names of those who died etched in granite along the rim. As we walked by, our hands touching the etchings of those names, the occasional flower, flag, or picture would be placed alongside a name, a remembrance to a person who lived and breathed and then died so tragically.

As we entered the museum, we were guided downwards by a gentle walking slope through the newscasts and video footage of the day. With a rush of memory that I wish I could’ve stifled far down, I keenly remembered seeing the planes crash into the towers. Quickly walking past the videos, I stumbled onto the balcony that opened into the metal foundations of the those towers, including the base that had twisted into a cross and became a symbol of hope for the survivors, firefighters, and police. With tears in my eyes and prayers in my heart, accompanied by my mom, we walked together around the foundations, and then in silence back up towards the light of the ground level.

As we steadied ourselves, exchanging memories of that day, a museum volunteer wearing a vest covered in decorative pins approached us. He introduced himself as Guy from Connecticut. We began casual introductions and, out of curiosity, I asked him about his vest covered in pins. He smiled and asked if we had time to listen to a story. We said yes, and Guy explained that the pins were given to him for his years of service as a volunteer guide and from visitors across the world to the museum. He

pointed to one pin in particular - an American Airlines flight pin - and shared that it was the most meaningful pin for him of all the ones he had.

One of his best friends was an American Airlines pilot. She was on the American Airlines flight from Boston that was crashed into the north tower. He spent time talking to us about her, gently weaving humor and fond memories into his portrayal as he shared her story with us. After her death, he chose to honor her life by spending one day per week at the museum as a volunteer guide, taking a ninety minute train into the city from Connecticut. He wanted people to know her and to remember her rather than just her death. After sharing her story with us, he gave us each a hug and a bracelet to remember 9/11 and all the people who lived out their daily lives there.

Guy's story reminds me of the capacity we have for forgiveness and our human need for relationship. His story reminds me of Jesus' lesson that forgiveness reflects God's love. I don't know what Guy's path of healing and forgiveness is or has been like. What I do know is this - Guy's story and his act of showing up weekly to remember his friend and share her story with others reflects God's gracious love and embodies Jesus' hope for how we can live in relationship with one another as community.

May we all have a little bit of Guy from Connecticut in us. In Jesus' name, Amen.