

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Ash Wednesday, February 14, 2018, on the this Valentine’s Day, I dedicate this to Grace Glaros on her tenth birthday, to the memory of my father, the love of my mother, the love I feel for and from my children and grandsons, and most of all, dedicated to my beloved, the love of my life, Susan Elizabeth Sitler, I pray today that we all rise from the ashes of our mistakes and human failings to be forgiven and to forgive, and always to the glory of God!

“Out of the Ashes: The Journey to Forgiveness”
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17, Psalm 51:17, II Corinthians 5: 20b-6:10,
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

(Part I of VIII in the sermon series, “Forgiveness”)

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our salvation. Amen.

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On February 23, 2016, while my father lay dying in a hospital bed nearby, I was walking in the rain with my oldest son. My face covered by my tears mixed with the cleansing waters of heaven dropping gently upon me, I was reviewing and reflecting on 58 years of life lived with my dad. Flashes of memories from a lifetime were flying through my head. I knew that any moment he could be gone forever following an aneurism which had brought him to the edge of death 16 hours earlier. Suddenly I blurted out to Luke, *“There are so many things my dad and I have to talk about. There are so things I never told him. There are things that are not yet reconciled.”* Luke listened – for a while. Then he stopped me on a street corner in the cold rain of a Philadelphia February night, wrapped his arms around me, looked me in the eyes and said, *“I have known the two of you for 28 years. I have only seen and heard love spoken and shared between you. You are okay with your dad. Forgive yourself. Forgive your dad. Let all of this go, dad. Just let it go.”* I took a deep breath. I sighed and cried. He held me. And I let it all go.

Like an angel of God, my oldest son had ministered to me in my hour of anxiety and growing grief. He had held me, wrapping me with the spirit and words of forgiveness I needed and helped me cross over to embrace forgiveness and grace. 22 hours later my father died. We were reconciled – father and son, graced by the mediating presence of a son and grandson to guide our way.

You and I carry things we need not carry. These things we carry burden us. Sometimes our burdens are imagined or blown far out of proportion. Sometimes they are so real and so visceral, to give them voice, to give them names and dates and storylines in our lives feels nearly impossible. Naming, claiming, and laying down the things we carry - imagined or real – is very difficult – sometimes seemingly impossible.

Often the things we carry reflect our conscious or unconscious inability to let go of the pain of our lives and to trust God and allow God to heal us. So, rather than engage the journey to forgiveness, we keep piling on the weight of unforgiving and unforgiven trauma, struggle and pain. The pain we carry hurts us. Our backs hurt, our hearts hurt, our heads hurt, our bodies and souls hurt from the burdens of the present or past. All of the pain is too much to carry. We have to find a way to relieve the pain – a way that will not add enduring pain to others. We need to rise from the ashes of our lives this day and journey toward forgiveness.

In this journey, we are not alone. Forgiveness is a central theme of scripture. In the Hebrew scriptures God is calling God's chosen people to confess their sins, turn from their ways and receive God's forgiveness. Forgiveness is also a powerful theme in Jesus' ministry and mission. The word "Forgiveness" is spoken of 14 times in the Bible – once in the Hebrew scriptures and 13 times in the Christian scriptures. But, the derivatives of "forgiveness" appear another 127 times. "Forgive" appears 75 times and "forgiven" appears 45 times and "forgiving" another seven times. So, altogether the scriptures call us to engage and receive forgiveness at least 141 times. This happens at least 75 times in the Christian Scriptures alone.

In Hebrew scripture texts, only God forgives. So, forgiveness is received as a divine act. Forgiveness comes down from heaven to earth in the vertical relationship of the Divine embracing each of our humanity.

But, in the Greek New Testament, we see the openings for human to human interactions – forgiving one another AS GOD has forgiven each of us. We see the horizontal nature of forgiveness – person to person, led by the words and actions of Jesus. **Forgiveness is so important to Jesus.** He places Forgiveness at the heart of the Lord's prayer. God in human form, in the person of Christ, comes into our midst to stir up the forgiveness stew. He is all about forgiving and moving on. While he is actively dying on the cross, Jesus is just as actively forgiving those who crucify him and forgiving the penitent criminal who dies beside him. His

witness for forgiveness, his words and actions of forgiveness set in place for us a model and method to forgive ourselves and one another.

And Paul picks up on the **Jesus forgiveness initiative** as he calls to us clearly in Ephesians to, “*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgave you*” (Ephesians 4:32).

So, if Forgiveness is central for Jesus and the early Christians, how it is that we struggle so mightily to forgive ourselves and others? How can we walk away from forgiveness when Jesus sacrificed his life for us with words and actions of forgiveness in his dying breath?

Today, is the first day of Lent. Today, take a close look at yourself. How are you forgiving others as you move from the ashes of this day? What are you carrying against someone today? How have you spoken or acted uncompassionately and unkindly to another person? How have you hurt someone in the orbit of your life?

Moreover, if someone has hurt you – knowingly or unknowingly - how have you responded in the aftermath of this painful interaction – which may be once and may be a multitude of times over a period of years? What are you carrying from someone else or because of someone else? How can you let go – today?

It is time to let it go. It is time to forgive. It is time to take the dis-membered part of yourself and Re-member it. Re-member it and let God heal your pain. Today, do an inventory of your “unforgiven stuff.” Write down all the things you are carrying in this world of unforgiveness and unreconciled pain. Take time. Write down the stuff you are carrying. Then, burn them. Turn the stuff you carry into ashes. Let all of it go. Then, out of the ashes, make a new path for your life. It is only a starting point. But, you must begin somewhere and sometime. Today is that time. And this is the place to begin the journey to forgiveness.

Lewis Smedes wrote a classic book called Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve. It is a powerful book—the author reports that “letter after letter has begun with these words, ‘If I had not discovered your book, I would have taken my life.’” As I close, listen to Lewis Smedes’ “Postlude.” But, trust me, as forgiveness is a need in each of our lives, I recommend the entire book. He writes in his Postlude:

We have seen the unpredictable, outrageous and creative thing we do when we forgive another human being.

*We reverse the flow of seemingly irreversible history. . .of our own history..
.of our private painful history. We reverse the flow of pain that began in the
past when someone hurt us, a flow that filters into our present to wound our
memory and poison our future. We heal ourselves.
It is utterly unpredictable; no one could suspect, in the nature of things, in
the natural cause and effect of things, that anyone should ever forgive.
We perform a miracle that hardly anyone notices.
We do it alone; other people can help us, but when we finally do it, we
perform the miracle in the private place of our inner selves.
We do it silently, no one can record our miracle on tape.
We do it invisibly, no one can record our miracle on film.
We do it freely, no one can ever trick us into forgiving someone.
It is **outrageous**. When we do it, we commit an outrage against the strict
morality that will not rest with anything short of an even score.
It is **creative**: when we forgive we come as close as any human being can to
the essentially divine act of creation. For we create a new beginning out of
past pain that never had a right to exist in the first place. We create healing
for the future by changing a past that had no possibility in it for anything but
sickness and death.
When we forgive we ride the crest of love's cosmic wave; we walk in stride
with God.
And we heal the hurt we never deserved.”
(Smedes, Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve. San
Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1984, p. 152.)*

Today, the journey to forgiveness begins. It continues for the 40 days of Lent – until we reach the day of Resurrection. I pray you move from the ashes into the journey of forgiveness. Today. Amen.