

“Thanks for Saying Something”

Lent IVB

John 3:14-21

The Rev. Emily Krause Corzine
Associate Minister

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From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

Prayer for Illumination: Lifesaving God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, as the scriptures are read, and your Word proclaimed. Help us hear with joy what you have for us this day. Amen.

Studies from Johns Hopkins University Medical Center have found that the act of forgiveness can reap huge rewards for your health, lowering the risk of heart attack; improving cholesterol levels and sleep; and reducing pain, blood pressure, and levels of anxiety, depression and stress. Research shows that people who forgive have a broader, more flexible perspective on human behavior than those who do not.¹ Forgiveness is good for your emotional, mental and physical health.

I am grateful for those who study forgiveness.

In fact, my health insurance provider does something hosts a program, *Call to Health*.² It encourages healthy choices. If you do certain things – get an annual exam, exercise three times a week, lose weight, drink 8 glasses of water a day, walk regularly – you qualify for a reduced deductible. There's a new option: practice forgiveness. It says:

¹https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/healthy_aging/healthy_connections/forgiveness-your-health-depends-on-it

² PCUSA Board of Pensions, *Call to Health*, 2018. www.pensions.org

Research shows that forgiveness is good for our health, relationships, and communities. And because God wants us to love our neighbors, we need to know how to truly forgive. Follow the process in this challenge three times by 11/10/2018 to forgive someone who hurt you.

I love that an insurance provider recognizes the health benefits of forgiveness. Want to join me in a new a forgiveness project?

Forgiveness is a gift from God. Being forgiven is a gift, but so too, is the act of forgiving. Forgiving is a choice. I argue, and the research says, it is healing choice.

True Story. Late one night, a man broke into a church and stole items from that community. And as he left he set the church ablaze. It destroyed their sanctuary, decade's worth of history and their home. The church members gathered that very next day to pick up the pieces of their church, and their spiritual home. They worshiped outside that Sunday, giving thanks to the many gifts they had been given, despite the hurt and pain they experienced that day.

The man was eventually caught, prosecuted and served jail time because of his offense. Almost a decade later, with the pastor's knowledge, he appeared at the church one Sunday morning for worship. People greeted him and gave him a bulletin and invited him to sit down. During the prayers of

the people, he stood up and identified himself. He said, “Please forgive me for what I did and the pain I caused you.”

An elder in the church came forward, shook his hand and thanked him. He thanked him for saying something to those who gathered that morning. On behalf of the church, the elder said, “In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. We forgive you.” In that moment, they both began to heal again.

For the one asking for forgiveness and the one granting forgiveness--powerful stories of healing emerge.

The elder of this community didn't dismiss that man's courageous admission and contrition, by saying, “Oh, it's ok!” Nor did he hold such anger as to instruct the remorseful soul to leave. Instead of discounting that apology, he acknowledged the hurt that man had caused affected that whole community. And in offering forgiveness, he presented both a way forward. It was a future that was free from the past that held them captive.

In that community of faith, I witnessed first-hand the power of a forgiving heart in a community of faith. It was a community that lived out the power of God's forgiving love and offered it freely to others. That is a community alive in the spirit.

“Forgiving is liberating. It helps victims regain self-control. It puts an end to intrusive and traumatic memories. It allows people to reconcile through pain. Forgiving is not just altruistic, but it is the best form of self-interest.”³

A forgiving heart is not easy. Author Anne Lamott writes, "Forgiveness has become a pursuit more important to me than almost anything. Because... it's not my strong suit. I always joke that I wasn't one of those Christians who was heavily into forgiveness - that I was the other kind... But it's so awful to be a person who doesn't forgive..."

...To forgive someone is the hardest work we do. I've had to be disciplined about it. Like meditation or in my spiritual journey, or exercise - hiking... You never want to do any hard work - you just want to watch MSNBC and eat miniature Kit-Kats. Believe me, that's what I'd prefer to do. [But,] not forgiving makes you toxic. And then you really have very little to offer your family or the world or your audience, because you're faking it.

“[She often writes] ... about that predicament of that clenched, clutched feeling when we don't forgive. And then that miracle of grace, like a spiritual WD-40, that gets into the very stuck, grinding places inside of us...”

³ Archbishop Desmond Tutu. *The Forgiveness Challenge*. 2004.

Lamott advocates for paying attention to the pain and hurt and anger that accompanies all our lives. In some small way or in some major way, individually or collectively, the hurt and pain and anger can eat at us—and not provide a way to new life.

Lamott goes on,

“The more public I am, the more people I talk to, the more I realize that I’d been comparing my insides to people’s outsides. And people’s insides are all the same amount of screwed-up-ness ... I find out everybody’s in the same boat. ...People feel troubled and sad and overwhelmed by the amount of pain they’re carrying...

...We’re all angry, no matter how sweet or Buddhist or Christian or tender-hearted we appear. We’re all angry. And we’ve got to deal with it at some point. And dealing with the grief and the anger and the lack of forgiveness is the way [we find] home.”⁴

The Gospel message and the saving grace of the life of Jesus Christ is that it doesn’t end in separation and death. It never does. Death does not have the final word. Instead the message of wholeness and healing resounds throughout the Gospel.

⁴https://www.salon.com/2014/12/03/anne_lamott_look_at_the_tea_party_some_of_the_angriest_most_hateful_people_on_earth_and_they%E2%80%99re_backed_by_what_they_think_is_scripture/

Following closely to the life of Jesus helps us know the power the Gospel has on transforming lives.

Which brings me to *The Forgiveness Project*. Founded in 2004, *The Forgiveness Project* collects and shares stories from individuals and communities who have rebuilt their lives following hurt and trauma. It is a secular organization that shares stories from all faiths and none.

At the heart of *The Forgiveness Project* is an understanding that restorative narratives have the power to transform lives; not only supporting people to move on from harm or trauma, but also building a climate of tolerance, resilience, hope and empathy. This project is about establishing routines of gratitude and generosity and forgiveness.

Here is one of their stories.

On the morning of September 11, 2001, Phyllis Rodriguez got a voicemail from her son, Greg, telling her of the terrible accident at the World Trade Center, but that he was all right. She assumed he had gotten out of the building. She told those who called her that he was ok – she had heard from him. Later in the evening when there was still no word from him, she suspected the worst. Greg was one of the many who died on September 11. His family was devastated.

Phyllis Rodriguez is an artist, a teacher and a social justice activist. What made everything worse for her, was the knowledge that the United States government would use their son's name to take military action abroad. She wrote an open letter calling on President George W. Bush to oppose a military response in Afghanistan. Phyllis writes, "before Greg died I'd felt a distant empathy for all those parents in the world who had lost children, but now there was a deep understanding. We were all the same."⁵

A year later Phyllis's life changed again. She met Aicha el-Wafi, a Moroccan Muslim woman living in France. Aicha el-Wafi is an activist with a French feminist group working with Muslim women. Aicha el-Wafi's son is Zacarias Moussaoui. Moussaoui was tried and convicted of his role in the World Trade Center attacks and is serving a life sentence.

Rodriguez and several other relatives of victims of the attacks were invited to meet Aicha el-Wafi. Rodriguez writes, it was the beginning of my learning that someone like Aicha, who has suffered so much, could still be emotionally generous. It brought out the generosity in me and I felt better for it. Since then I've learned that one way to heal is to bridge the gap between ourselves and the 'other'. When Greg was killed, I thought, I will never forgive the people who murdered my son,

⁵ <https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/phyllis-rodriguez-and-aicha-el-wafi>

but I have come to see forgiveness as more than a word; it's a context, a process. Forgiveness is being able to accept another person for being human and fallible.”

Rodriquez supported Aicha in the years to come and during the trial of Moussaoui in 2005. She said, “when I watched Zacarias at the trial my heart was broken because I couldn't look at him as a stranger. I saw him as the son of my friend, Aicha. Meeting her gave me strength and took away my anger and bitterness. It helped me forgive myself, because a mother always feels guilty when things don't go right for her children.”

In hoping to find peace, these two mothers have come to understand and respect one another. They met around a shared tragedy — and their friendship has become a powerful symbol for forgiveness and dialogue. They both found empathy for each other. They all connected as human beings.⁶

Empathy means standing in someone else's shoes no matter how uncomfortable those shoes may be. It means broadening your perspective so that you see things from another's point of view.

⁶https://www.ted.com/talks/9_11_healing_the_mothers_who_found_forgiveness_friendship

Building a life full of tolerance, resilience, hope and empathy doesn't come easy. It's a journey through the most difficult times our lives. But through reconciliation and forgiveness—there is the power of hope and new life.

Our journey through Lent is an interesting time to examine forgiveness. On this side of Easter story, we evaluate what we've done, what we've left undone, what others have done to us or to others and we wonder how we can forgive. We offer our confession each week and we receive assurance that we are forgiven once and for all. (It's interesting that we also come back each week to say our corporate confession again and here that sweet forgiveness in Jesus name.)

Our forgiveness project is to open up the doors that are closed to us or that we close ourselves and forgive others. In doing so, we free them, we free ourselves to live a life that matters. We know that God gave God's only son to the world so that we might have eternal life. That is freeing. That is liberating. That is healing.

Only God is the one who could find God's way into the place where true healing of ourselves begins and where healing of relationship follows. Under all our forgiving work is God. God undergirding all of us. All our pasts. All our pains. All our

hurts that we feel are too deep to be healed. God knows, and God forgives.

The shadow of the Twin Towers still straddles the world. But so does the shadow of the cross. That wondrous cross we survey, and the empty tomb proclaim the power of God to heal and to restore; the extraordinary power to forgive because God first has forgiven us. Forgiveness is not an easy thing. But it is possible. It is still possible.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

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