

# *“A Forgiving Life: Offered to God”*

*Lent VI*

*Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 5:5-10, John 12:20-33*

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent V, March 18, 2018, dedicated to two amazing Confirmands, Cassidy Hopcraft and Finn Miller and also to my grandson, Rylan Antonio Ahrens on his first birthday and always to the glory of God!

*“A Forgiving Life: Offered to God!”*

*Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 5:5-10, John 12:20-33*

*(Part 6 of 8 in the sermon series, “Forgiveness”)*

Since Ash Wednesday, we have focused on Forgiveness. This is the sixth sermon on the topic – two by Rev. Corzine and three (soon four) by me. In a couple of instances, we have laid our hearts on the line.

I have written 42 daily thoughts (28 have been delivered at 7:01am each day so far... if you have not received them, let me know. Also, copies of all 42 are in the main office). A Lenten Bible Study is being held in five locations across central Ohio (including at 12:15 p.m. on Wednesdays at the church, led by me. Come and join us for our last class this week, if you like). I hope “Forgiveness” has been helpful for your life. I hope a little more light has broken forth in your orbit of living more fully into a forgiving and forgiven life.

You can, of course, close your eyes and ears; your heart and mind. You can choose to stay stuck in unforgiveness. That can be your choice. But, today I would really like you to reconsider that decision. I would like you to begin to live into a forgiving life. Actually, I would like you to embrace and step fully into a forgiving life.

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

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Forgiveness is always personal. But, forgiveness also and always affects the communal. In her Lenten study on Forgiveness, Marjorie Thompson tells the story of life among the Dakota Sioux Indians that illustrates the communal nature of forgiveness.

A young man in the tribe had been murdered and enraged relatives had gathered in the tribe's tent to plan revenge. The eldest male among them listened to their torment and pain and when all had poured out their wounded feelings and vindictive intentions, he sat quietly, smoking his pipe for a long time. In his silence, calm came upon the room. Finally,

he spoke. He told everyone to go home, look through all their possessions and then return with the one thing they prized most of all.

When they all returned, he said,

*“The gift you have brought shall go to the murderer, for a token of our sincerity and purpose. Although he has hurt us all, we shall make his a relative in place of the one who is not here. Was the dead, your brother? This man shall be your brother...As for me, the dead was my nephew. Therefore, his slayer shall be my nephew. And from now on he shall be one of us. We shall regard him as though we were our dead kinsman returned to us.”*

The tribe struggled mightily with this challenge because it demanded that each person had to bury pride, anger and desire for revenge. But they accepted the challenge because they could see it was deeply right. They knew – in their hearts – that to plan and execute a violent response would only fuel fires of hate over time and that taking this man into their family on a daily basis had the potential to heal them. So, they proceeded with the plan.

At the appointed time the young man was brought to the tent. They sat in the circle with their new kinsman. As they shared their gifts, one by one, they shared whatever love and compassion they would have had for their family member.

Whatever was his, now belonged to the young murderer, turned recipient of forgiveness.

Deeply moved, the young slayer began to weep. The narrator concludes in the book, “*this man will surely prove himself the best possible kinsman, given the high price of his redemption*” (Marjorie J. Thompson, Forgiveness: A Lenten Study, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2014, pp. 7-9).

Restoration. Redemption.

Our stories of revenge, struggle, anger and unforgiveness may not be as dramatic as facing and overcoming the tragic death of a family member. But, they may be even more horrible than this story. They may be stories of our own pain and trauma from which we struggle every day to recover. They may be stories of our acts against another or their acts against us of which no one knows but God and us. They may be stories of words that severed a relationship; words that destroyed another – although we knew them to be questionable and perhaps even false; or acts that caused another trauma and separation; or **simply silence** with life’s stories – a silence that carries deep seeds of betrayal, a breach of trust, a break which has left us separated – in some way or another.

The stuff of unforgiveness runs deep – like a river that flows under the rocks of time. Receiving forgiveness or granting forgiveness to the living is hard enough. To do it with the dead can be even harder. The story may be so old, that the place of reconciliation may need to be at a graveside, a crypt or by the sea where ashes were scattered long ago. To speak and act with forgiveness is often a hard step to take. But, the risk of leaving this alone, is even harder. It could cause more damage to our heart and soul than any step into forgiveness could ever imagine or conceive.

The deeper the hurt, the harder it is to do this. This is never easy.

In his work with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa at the end of Apartheid, Bishop Desmond Tutu sat through hours, days, weeks, months and years of people working through the real pain and trauma of apartheid in his nation. He saw firsthand that the path to healing was an excruciatingly difficult path confession, forgiveness and reconciliation all along the way.

Bishop Tutu reflects on the complexities of forgiveness in his book, No Future Without Forgiveness. Bishop Tutu writes, *“In relations between people, you can ask another person for forgiveness and you can be spurned. The one you have injured may refuse to forgive you. The risk is even greater if you are the injured party, wanting to offer forgiveness. The culprit may be arrogant or blind; not ready or willing to apologize or ask for forgiveness. He or she cannot appropriate the forgiveness that is offered. (We found in our efforts) such rejection can jeopardize the whole enterprise”* (Bishop Tutu, No Future without Forgiveness, Image Books, Doubleday, NY, NY, 1999, p. 269).

He continues, *“We all know how difficult it is for most of us to admit we have been wrong. It is perhaps the most difficult thing in the world – in almost every language the most difficult words are, ‘I am sorry.’”* So, imagine how hard it is to say this when the atrocities that have been committed against people and communities are so horrendous that one can’t imagine them ever happening – let alone that the perpetrators would come face-to-face with those they have sinned against and confess that truth.

Across time, those who have committed atrocities deny them or say they knew nothing about them happening at the time. Nazis denied the Holocaust. Soviet leaders denied killing

hundreds of thousands of their citizens in the Gulags of the 30's and 40's. Our own soldiers denied the atrocities in the My Lai massacre of close to 500 men, women, children and infants in Vietnam 50 years ago this past week.

Denial holds sway today when we deny that guns kill people and legislators say they don't need to listen to teenagers who are not registered to vote yet (yes- that happened just this past week at our Ohio Statehouse. I heard the stories on Wednesday while sitting in our sanctuary in the debrief of the teens' lobbying day). As one teen said, "If we are old enough to die in our schools by gun violence, we are old enough to effect legislation which helps stop the killing."

In personal relationships and in our societal relationships, we need to forgive and be reconciled. Forgiving and being reconciled is not about pretending things are other than they are. It is never about patting each other on the back and acting like nothing is wrong. True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the pain, the degradation, the truth. It could even make things worse for a while. It is a risky undertaking. But, in the end, it is worthwhile.

A life of forgiveness grows out reconciliation – no matter how great or small. The greater the crimes, the more necessary the efforts of restoration. The work of restorative justice, similar to

the story of the Lakota Sioux tribe, is the work of true forgiveness and reconciliation.

To live a forgiving life, you must be forgiving. To live a forgiving life, you must accept someone else's apology. To live a forgiving life, you must do this over and over and over again. It is a cleansing that continues forever – once it has started. In the midst of it all, we need to always remember it is God who is at work in the midst of this all of this.

Bishop Tutu concludes his book of Forgiveness with these words:

*God has a sense of humor. Who in their right minds could ever have imagined South Africa to be an example of anything but the most ghastly awfulness of how NOT to order a nation's race relations and governance? We South Africans were the unlikeliest lot and this is precisely why God has chosen us.... We were destined for perdition and were plucked out of total annihilation. We were a hopeless case if ever there was one. God intends that others might look at us and take courage. God wants to point to us...and say, "Look at South Africa. They had a nightmare called apartheid. It has ended.... because of what has happened there, no problem anywhere can ever again be considered to be intractable. There is hope for you, too.... God wants to show that there is life after conflict and repression – that because of forgiveness there is a future" (Ibid, p. 282).*

So, what about you? What will God show through your life? How will God heal you? How will God use you as an instrument of peace and reconciliation? How will God say of you, because of forgiveness there is a future?

And finally, how will you embrace a forgiving life – offered by God? Amen.

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