

*“Tearing Down:
An Inventory for Forgiving Hearts”*

Lent III

Exodus 20:1-17, I Corinthians 1:18-23, John 2:13-22

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens
Senior 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>

A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent 3, March 4, 2018 dedicated to Emerson Joy on her entrance into this world, Welcome Emerson!; to Pete and Ellen Boriin on their 15th Anniversary and to James Doone who entered eternal life 2/26/18 having died of ALS and to Donna and her family on their great loss & always to the glory of God!

“Tearing Down: An Inventory for Forgiving Hearts”

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(Part IV of VIII in 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 rock and our salvation. Amen.

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In today’s Gospel we meet Jesus in his most unforgiving moment. He is super angry. He enters the Temple in Jerusalem and finds that it has become a marketplace for profiteering rather than God’s house of prayer. He is so angry

that he makes a whip of cords and drives out the sheep and the cattle. He pours out the coins of the moneychanger (which means their individual money from the coin boxes is rolling all over the temple floors) and then he flips the tables. Referring to his own death and resurrection, his own body as the Temple of the Lord, he shouts that the temple will be destroyed and in three days raised up!

He is raging! He is angry beyond belief! We need to remember this moment. When we choose to see Jesus as only gentle and mild, we need to hold onto this story which appears in John, Mark (11:15-19) and Matthew (21:12-17). It is not random or forgotten. It is crucial story of righteous rage in the face of God's house being abused for human industry and profit. Moreover, it is Jesus at his most unforgiving moment.

This is Jesus straddling the world of the divine and the human. This is Jesus giving voice and action to robust and righteous anger. We can really relate to THIS Jesus.

When we have faced difficult days and experiences in our lives, we can find ourselves fuming with unforgiveness in the face of injustice and the stinking thinking and lousy behavior of others. We speak, act, and carry on in angry ways that are unforgiving and with words that tear down in the face of unmitigated injustice and wrong.

I can really relate to the anger Jesus was feeling. I have been there and had I tables to flip, I probably would have.

In the Spring of 2011, Ohio public employees came under assault from the newly elected Governor, John Kasich and legislature. The climate changed in our state – once again. Legislation came out of the statehouse calling for the end of collective bargaining for all unionized state employees - including police, firefighters and teachers. As one conservative Republican Senator said in opposition to this idea, “*March Madness’ has come to Ohio. It is like having a jump ball, but the possession arrow forever points in one direction.*”

On March 8, 2011 as the Governor gave his “State of the State” address, I addressed over 5,000 people outside the statehouse. It turns out, I spoke at the exact same time as the Governor. (It was the last time he ever offered his “State of the State” Address in the statehouse. Although I have spoken on the steps of our statehouse many times since then.) Our messages were demonstrably different. I won’t go through the entire speech, but I was filled with a cold rage.

I started out:

*What I love about Ohioans is that we work out our problems. We come together and work together and face the tough times. We find a way through. That is what **COLLECTIVE BARGAINING IS ALL ABOUT!** It is not about greed - as some people say. It is about fairness and equity. It is all about working things out for the good of all people! It means finding what is best for the common good. It means making sacrifices on both sides and finding a way forward. And it works! It has worked for Ohio for a long time. This is not the time to throw out what works in a state where ½ a million people are out of work!*

*What has changed in the spirit of Ohio - in the tenor of our times? Where has the moderation and collective spirit of doing the right thing gone? **Where has it gone?** How have we reached this point?*

I won't give the whole speech (although I have printed it for you to read – if you really want to see what I said in defense of firefighters, police and teachers – a fight we eventually won at the ballot box in November of 2011). But I will say that I had a lot of positive and negative feedback from people about the speech (not the first or last time for that). On the negative side – a number of people said I sounded angry. They said, people and especially preachers that they respected, were not angry people. One church in Connecticut saw it rescinded an invitation for me to preach there because I was an “angry

preacher.” So, in essence, I’m banned in Connecticut. I said, “then you probably want to check your Christian pedigree and beliefs – because Jesus was an angry man when addressing the leaders in his statehouse -i.e. the temple of Jerusalem.”

We often have to work through anger to get to forgiveness. Jesus did.

In the face of tearing down, in the face of dealing with our life hurts and hopes, we need to create an inventory for our forgiving hearts. I believe, when facing forgiveness, we go through at least four major stages: **we Hurt, we Hate, we Heal and we Come Together (maybe).***

First, we Hurt. If you live long enough, chances are you’ll be hurt by someone you counted on to be your friend or lover. If you are like me, you may let that hurt fester and grow until it stifles your joy and strangles your love for life. The good news is – you have entered the first stage of forgiveness. I am not talking about the kind of hurts that cause us to say “ouch.” It’s not a pinch. It’s a body blow to the stomach. This is the kind of hurt that causes you to writhe in pain. I experienced such pain as a young man. Having dated a woman through much of college, after college and into seminary for almost four years, she and I were apart for the summer. She was in Guatemala and I was in Philadelphia for the summer.

Somewhere late in the summer, I received a letter from her declaring, “my love for you on a scale of 1-10 is “zero.” **That hurt.** There is no coming back from zero. That’s the kind of hurt we are talking about.

Have you felt personal pain like that? It feels unfair. Although the people who hurt us that way feel we deserve it. We can say it is a spill-over from their problems – but that doesn’t make it go away. We can put all sorts of labels on it – all sorts of Band-Aids, if you will – but our hurts feel like gaping wounds that band-aids won’t cover or help heal. Such deep pain feels like betrayal, disloyalty, brutality and more. The first step to forgiving is feeling and naming the hurt.

The second step is Hate. Now if you are like me, you were raised not to be angry. Anger is unbecoming and unacceptable. Hate wasn’t even allowed to be spoken in my home. Can you imagine how your parents react to you saying, “I HATE HIM!” or “I HATE HER!” Hate is a tiger snarling in the soul. Hate is our natural response to any deep and unfair pain. Hate is our instinctive backlash against anyone who wounds us – or especially a loved one – wrongly. Hate can kill you from the inside out if you don’t deal with it. There is passive hate and aggressive hate.

Passive hate is the kind of hate we carry when people lie about us, treat us unkindly or more. We cannot say a nice word about them. We will not say a nice word about them.

Aggressive hate is different. Here we are braced for attack against the other all the time. You hope they get hurt. It is what I call “the voodoo- doll hate.” We walk around acting like we are sticking the hater with pins in their body. We wish them ill. We hope for them to be in pain. We blame for something and we hate people we blame for things. As I said before, hate can be fatal. It can grow to an enormous size within you. You can feel your belly full of it. Sometimes it can nibble at the edge of your heart or burn out the lining of your soul. The bottom line is – hate can kill you. But, even such hate that has been broiling in your body can be healed.

We come to Healing as our third step to forgiveness. We heal ourselves – with a lot of help from God. For this step to happen you have to pull your heart and mind away from the one who hurt you. You have to pull it away from hate that surrounds you and holds you on the inside. You need to take your eyes off the one who hurt you and look at yourself. You need to tend to the wounded forgiver. You need to perform spiritual surgery inside your soul. Detach from the person who hurt you and let it go.

As part of this process, I have found myself, through the years, wondering about Nancy Oliver. Nancy was the first Moderator of my first congregation in 1985 in Cleveland. She seemed to always be doing things that hurt me or my family. I couldn't figure out why she would lie about me and seek to undo the ministry about which I was apart. It took me a long time to realize that it wasn't really me she hated. Nancy just didn't like pastors or people in authority in her life. Once I was able to detach from the pain I was feeling, I gained insight into the source of the pain-producer. I felt compassion for Nancy and I was able to heal. I was able to wish her well once I gained the gift of INSIGHT and understanding.

Hate will blind us, healing gives us new eyes to see. Forgiveness is love's antidote for hate, beginning with passive hate, the loss of energy to wish people well. When we have lost the slightest urge to wish them ill, to wish that life would be drained from them, we have started to release those who hurt us from the blight of the harm they did to us. We begin to heal ourselves.

Finally, we Come Together (maybe). When we are able to face the hurts and the hates of our lives and begin to heal, we will eventually be able to come together. This is often a tough one. Our coming together following the forgiveness we express and experience doesn't always mean the person we have

forgiven will be “our best friend” again. It may mean that we can co-exist in a room without burning laser beams of hate through their body and soul. It may mean we can sit in the same pew without burning up inside for our daughter’s wedding day. It may mean that we can start over, in the semi-darkness of our healing lives, to feel some peace. But, we might be able to fully forgive and move on. That would be beautiful and brilliant. Moving from anger to love; from hurt and hate to healing and hope is the way to go. It will help us be whole. That is a blessing.

Let me say a few final things about forgiveness today as it relates to our personal lives and the struggles we have with others.

First, you do not have to forget after you forgive; you may, but your forgiving can be sincere if you remember. But, as I shared in my daily meditations last week, you can also remember to love. Don’t forget love when you remember the hurt. Second, you do not excuse people by forgiving them. You forgive them at all only because you hold them to account and refuse to excuse them. Third, you also do not forgive people merely by accepting them. You forgive people who have done something to you that is unacceptable. Finally, you do not have to tolerate what people do when you forgive them for doing it;

you may forgive people, but still refuse to tolerate what they have done.

Please take what is helpful today and apply it to your life as you seek to heal from the unforgiven people and experiences you carry. Drop them somewhere. Let them go – somehow. Amen.

* Drawn from Lewis Smedes book, Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve, Harper and Row, San Francisco, CA., 1984.

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