

“Compassionate Prayers”

(5 of 9 in the Lenten series, “Prayer”)

Joshua 5:9-12; II Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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March 6, 2016

From the Pulpit

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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent 4, March 6, 2016, dedicated to the memory of Gerhard Wolff and Herman C. Ahrens, Jr. who passed to eternal life on 2/23 and 2/24 respectively and always to the glory of God!

“Compassionate Prayers”

(fifth sermon of nine in the series on “Prayer”)

Joshua 5:9-12; II Corinthians 5:16-21;

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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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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“You are in my thoughts and prayers...”

How often I have spoken these words to you and others? How often have you spoken these words to others – or heard them from others? These seven words are precious, priceless, meaningful, grace-filled and compassionate. As often as we have said them or heard them, I believe they mean different things spoken from the heart and lips of each person. For me, they mean, “I am giving you my love. I am holding you. I am thinking about you and your current

situation. I am present to you from whatever distance we are apart as you go through the joys and challenges of this **present moment.**” When you speak these words, what do you mean? Whatever it is, I know your meaning is true and beautiful and blessed.

“You are in my thoughts and prayers...” These seven words flooded my world beginning early on the morning of February 23 when I heard the news that my father, Herman Ahrens, had anywhere from two minutes to two days to live. He had suffered an aortic dissection – a tear in the aorta which claims the lives of 100% of those afflicted by it. His aorta tore at 3:10 a.m. and four hours later he was resting and dying in Abington Memorial Hospital. That was when my older sister Deb was finally able to call. She said “Dad is not going to live very much longer.” And just like that, my dad’s long life was ending.

37 minutes later I was in my car heading to Pennsylvania – 7 ½ hours of road before me. Listening to CD’s of hymns which I had received for my birthday two weeks before, I prayed and I thought. I sang and I cried. I drove.

Using my infamous “audio-texting” (for those who don’t have it as a feature on your phone...don’t ask), I messaged friends, colleagues, and family as I headed east as fast as my little Hyundai Tucson and the highway patrol

would allow. For hours and hours on end, calls and texts were returning with one message - **“Your father and your family are in our thoughts and prayers....”**

My son Luke was just behind me on the Pennsylvania Turnpike coming south and east from Cleveland. Daniel was coming by high speed train from New York City. My brother Paul was flying 500 miles an hour into Philadelphia from Los Angeles. **As I pulled into the hospital’s emergency room entrance, it hit me – “this is where my father will die.”** His sons and grandsons arrived while Dad was still breathing. He heard from his daughters-in-law, grand-daughters, sister and finally from his grand-daughter-in-law and great-grandson. He was able to share love and farewells one last time – with his eyes. Within 24 hours of our arriving, Dad breathed his last and was gone. Herman Conrad Ahrens, Jr. - 91 years, 8 months, 12 days of life was ended and his eternal life was begun.

Through this entire journey into death and ultimately into new life, I have been surrounded by your compassionate thoughts and prayers and your compassionate, loving presence. My mother has received over 30 cards from the First Church family which have touched her deeply. She has treasured all your love, thoughts and prayers. We have been embraced by all your thoughts and prayers. Thank you for your love.

Compassion is the really the root of all that matters in prayer (and I would add – in life itself). *Compassion* derives from the Latin “*patiri*” and the Greek “*pathein*” meaning “*to suffer, undergo, or experience.*” So compassion means “*to endure something with another person,*” to put ourselves in another person’s shoes, to feel her pain as if it was our own, to enter generously into his point of view. That is why compassion is summed up in the Golden Rule – that is “**Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.**” This Golden Rule asks us to look into our own hearts, discover what gives us pain, then refuse, under and circumstances whatsoever, to inflict that pain on anybody else.

Compassion can be defined, therefore, as an attitude of principled, consistent altruism. (drawn from Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, Alfred Knopf, New York, 2010, p. 9).

Compassion always takes us into painful places – places where hearts and the hearts of others are broken. Parker Palmer shares this reflection on such Heartbreak. He writes:

“Heartbreak is an inevitable and painful part of life. But there are at least two ways for the heart to break: it can break open into new life or break apart into shards of sharper and more widespread pain.

A brittle heart will explode into a thousand pieces and sometimes get thrown like a fragment grenade at the perceived

source of its pain – there's lots of that going around these days. But a supple heart will break open into a greater capacity to hold life's suffering and its joy – in a way that allows us to say, "the pain stops here."

The broken-open heart is not restricted to the rare saint. I know so many people whose hearts have been broken by loss of someone they love deeply. They go through long nights of grief when life seems barely worth living. But then they slowly awaken to the fact that their hearts have become more open, compassionate, and welcoming – not in spite of their pain but because of it."

What if our prayers were always grounded in a consciousness of compassion? What if our prayers took us into our hearts broken open for others – rather than broken into shards of sharper and more widespread pain?

What if our compassion led us fully and deeply into the total joy of birth and new life when we heard of the babies of First Church being born and the just as fully into the trauma of the final journey into death when we lift up those who were critically ill?

In today's parable from Luke 15, compassion is tested to the max. We encounter Jesus being challenged by scribes and Pharisees as the tax collectors and sinners come around him for encouragement, healing and hope. In the midst of the challenge, Jesus tells a story. His story takes us into a

family of two sons and a father. There is a dutiful older son and renegade younger son. We meet their father who gives his troubled son half the family inheritance and watches as he goes off – quickly squandering the family wealth in a far-away land. When he hits bottom in a pigsty, he returns and we see his father meeting him with compassion and unconditional love and welcoming him home. Dad throws a party for his “lost and found” son. Meanwhile, the older son, working hard as always, returns to find the party happening for his younger, wayward brother. He is fuming when encounters his father who presents the upside – the lost son thought to be dead is alive; he was lost and is now found. Unconditional love wins the day. But, the story listeners are left somewhat unresolved – especially through the eyes of the older brother.

This parable is packed with problems and possibilities. I will lift up one – the older brother. In her delightful reflection on the older brother, Barbara Brown Taylor recalls what it felt like to be the oldest child herself, watching younger ones in her family get away with so much more than she had: instead of the punishment, or at least discipline, the younger son so richly deserved, he got a party! It's just not fair, right? "What do you have to do to get a party around here?" Here she poignantly observes the ways that both sons are lost to the father, one to

irresponsibility, and the other to self-righteousness. Taylor beautifully describes the love of the father who, like any good parent, gives his sons unconditional love instead of what they have coming to them. Taylor then suggests that we who imagine ourselves in the older brother's place will end up on that doorstep, too, struggling with our own self-righteousness, and will have to make the same difficult decision to join the party, or to stay out in the cold with our principles. Compassion wins in the end.

Her reflection pulls us into the upside down world of compassion as it is lived out in our families. I have often thought; it is much harder to be compassionate with those closest to us than for an unknown people on the far side of the planet. Has that been your experience? Our prayers for family members often sound more like this: *“God, help my hard-hearted brother to be kind and stop being a knucklehead”* than like this: *“God, thank you for my brother who, through his logical and systematic approach to problem solving, has shown me what a varied and differentiated analysis of life can bring.”*

God is calling us each day to open ourselves to others. God is calling us to truly hold others in our thoughts and prayers. We are called to be merciful and not judgmental. We are called to be graceful and not resentful. Like the father who ran across open fields to welcome home his

wayward son with unconditional love, we are called to be compassionate. My prayer for you today is that compassion will guide your heart and mind as you truly hold others in your thoughts and prayers. And once again, thank you – from the depth of my heart – for holding me and my family in your thoughts and prayers at time of our loss. Your compassionate prayers have touched me deeply – may they continue to be so for others.

Please know each and every one of you is in my daily thoughts and prayers. Amen.

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