

A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent III, March 7, 2010, dedicated to James Robert Holton who was born and died, March 5, 2010, to his parents Jason Holton and Christen Coyle and sister Audrey, and always to the glory of God!

“An Exciting Faith Admits Mistakes’

Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9

***(Part IV of VIII in the sermon series
“An Exciting Faith”)***

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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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We have arrived at the midpoint of Lent. Let’s celebrate that we are half way to our goal of that we have given up. But we are also half way to finishing what we have taken on. Our hearts and minds turn evermore to Easter as we hear the words of Isaiah 55. In a call to salvation for all people, the prophet speaks to his people in exile in Babylon. He cries to them to trust and hope in God. To reach a relationship of trust and hope, Isaiah calls people to worship and to pray; to change their behaviors, which is tearing them away from the heart of God. Through confession of sins and true repentance of wrong-doing, they must return to God with all their heart.

Luke also speaks of repentance. Severity and grace meet in the parable of the fruitless fig tree. God is patient with the fig tree and offers a chance for change, but returning to God is

urgent business. Forgiveness follows repentance in the eyes of God. Grace is never cheap. Grace is costly.

If we feel the weight and burden and these texts, the cost of discipleship, if you will, we need to remember that **nobody in scripture is perfect, save Christ**. The texts of all 66 books of the Bible are replete with stories airing the dirty laundry of God's followers. Peter denies Christ, but through the grace of God, the incident remains in the text. Moses is a murderer, David cheats on his wife, Lot offers his daughters, Abraham offers his wife Sarah to save their own skin, but all these stories remain in the text. Thomas won't believe his friends who saw Christ alive, and the beat goes on. There are only a handful of good marriages in the Bible, and way too few good fathers and mothers. Repentance is so deeply needed because sin is so deeply afflictive. Let's admit it, confessing sins, admitting mistakes, and trusting and waiting on the grace of God and others isn't easy.

We live in a time where there are less and less acceptable ways to practice admitting mistakes, particularly in the realm of service to others. Whatever happened to the days when people accepted wrong-doing and took ownership for their mistakes? We have become such a litigious society in which we set policies in place to protect ourselves rather than be honest. Instead of civility and honesty, we have a culture which perpetuates the concept of "protecting one's back-side." The days when people displayed integrity and provided quality service appear to have vanished. Admitting mistakes is to be avoided at all costs. The fig trees are withering and dying before our eyes. God must not be pleased.

So where do we begin to water the fig tree and restore health to our relationships? In the words of Isaiah, how do we begin to return from exile?

Let's start in our families. Don't worry. I am not meddling. I am confessing. We need to speak with our family members in honest and open ways. Parents, explain your

shortcomings and imperfections. In our own neediness and selfishness we often fail to admit our mistakes. Our imperfections allow for our children to breathe a bit. Our authenticity gives them a chance to be authentic as well. For every mistake we can point out in our children, I imagine we can find one (or two or three) in ourselves.

Here a few thoughts on admitting mistakes while serving others that may be helpful to you in your daily walk. The list primarily comes from James P. Krehbiel, a licensed professional counselor and nationally certified cognitive-behavioral therapist practicing in Scottsdale, Ariz. Some insights for those serving the needs of others are:

Tell the truth.

- Admit your mistakes when you are wrong.
- Thank others for pointing out your errors.
- Demonstrate courage by doing the right thing for others. Maintaining your integrity is more important than following unreasonable rules.
- People like it and respond when you treat them right.
- Admitting mistakes is not a sign of weakness; on the contrary it is a sign of strength.
- People see you as more human when you take responsibility for your blunders.
- Forgive yourself for being less than perfect.
- Show your strength through your vulnerability.

There are days when we all feel we do not need to repent of sins or to regret our failings. On such days, we probably don't feel the need to improve our way of relating to other people. But those are the days I have found, that I stand most in need of repentance. Those are the days we have been given the gift of self-awareness and we are actually safe to admit our mistakes and come into balance again.

We need a cultural paradigm shift. What happened to "honesty is the best policy?" Serving each other means

demonstrating leadership, civility, and the courage to admit mistakes. Only then can our society regain the integrity that has been lost through our feeble efforts to protect ourselves from our own humanity.

We have an exciting faith as a basis for re-balancing our out-of-balance cultural paradigms. The daily work of repentance and forgiveness; of confession and the assurance of grace and pardon is a model for all to follow and to be done well, takes a lifetime - or more. But through the daily process of confession and prayer and forgiveness and grace we live into the Yiddish proverb – “You are not what you were. You are what you are.”

Writing years ago, United Church of Christ pastor and theologian of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, Dr. Reinhold Neibuhr penned these words:

“Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone, therefore, we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite a virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our standpoint. Therefore, we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.” (Found in *Day By Day, Reflections on the Themes of Torah*, edited by Chaim Stern, Beacon Press, Boston, Mass., 1998, p. 163).

May we be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness. Amen.

