

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Tim Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 13, September 11, 2011, dedicated to the staff of First Church, who all “geared up” to get us ready for September 11, 2011, and to 2,997 men, women and children who lost their lives 10 years ago this morning in New York, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania, and always to the glory of God!

“Gearing Up!”

**Genesis 50: 15-21*;
Matthew 18:21-35**

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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.

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The button simply read: **“Remember, Rebuild, and Resolve.”** In a circle around its edge it read, *“Shanksville/Stoney Creek School System.”* That button was pinned on the t-shirt of my 5-year-old daughter on October 8, 2001, by Principal Tilton as we visited the Shanksville/Stoney Creek School in Shanksville, Pa. Shanksville/Stoney Creek School is home to 500 children, K-12, who each day gather to learn about the American dream and everything else pertinent to growing up in America, specifically rural America. Traveling from my hometown in eastern Pennsylvania back to Columbus, Daniel, Sarah and I had stopped in Shanksville to listen, to learn, to mourn, to pray 27 days after 9/11/01.

Located a half mile from the crash site of Flight 93, you could see the jagged and severed tree tops destroyed by flying plane parts only 27 days mornings earlier. Only a ridge of one hill southwest of the school stood between Flight 93 and

Shaksville/Stoney Creek School. The school sign outside facing that direction read: "**Our hearts are with you, Flight 93.**"

Mrs. Tilton told us the plane was on a trajectory which would have brought it down on the school and into the middle of the town. **Two seconds or less separated all of the children of western Somerset County from devastation and almost certain death.** Instead, a farm field over the crest of the hill was the final resting place for the 40 courageous men and women of Flight 93. Mrs. Tilton told us, "*They not only saved the White House, they saved every school age child in western Somerset County. We are eternally grateful.*"

I asked Mrs. Tilton how things had changed for Shanksville and their school. She told us: "*Everything has changed. The lesson plans have changed. For the last month, whenever a family member of the deceased on Flight 93 comes to Shanksville, school stops. All 500 children come to the auditorium to care for the families. They gather round those who've lost so much and have come to our town to grieve. They gather to thank them for their fathers, their mothers, their children. They listen to stories, they sing for the families and we pray with them. That has become our educational lesson plan for everyone 5-18 years old. We are teaching our children to be compassionate. Maybe, compassion is the only lesson worth learning in the end.*" With all sincerity she asked, "What do you think, Pastor Ahrens, is that a good lesson plan?"

Yes. I think Mrs. Tilton was right then. She is still right. Modeling and teaching compassion may be the only lesson plan worth teaching and learning in the school of faith and life. Today, we begin a new program year at First Church on our Celebration Sunday 2011 centered on the theme, "Faith and Life." Our classrooms for pre-school to high school and two adult offerings greet us today and each Sunday at 10 a.m., one topical and one biblical. Our choirs have returned after a summer of working hard and joyfully leading worship in the

National Cathedral in August. We are so proud! Many of us have come in today after a summer of moving here and there - sometimes worshiping, sometimes not. It is good to see so many of us back together again!

We have received copies of our Long Range Plan by mail and email. It is a plan that projects a dream and a vision of faith, hope and love into our ministry and mission for years to come. Today is truly a day to celebrate and to look forward in faith! It is also a day to “**Remember, Rebuild, Resolve.**”

On this day, along with people gathering across our nation, but especially in Shanksville, Pa., at the Pentagon in Washington and Ground Zero in New York City, we would be remiss to forget what happened the morning of 9/11/01. It has shaped all of our lesson plans and life plans ever since. Perhaps, in these trying economic, political and spiritual times we would benefit from teaching and learning compassion. That is a our best lesson plan.

Into the mix of this day both our Gospel lesson and our Hebrew scripture lesson teach us to forgive from our hearts. Forgiveness and compassion are lessons to be lived and learned in every generation.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells a story about forgiveness in the parable of the king and his slaves. While the king forgives the debt of his slave (which is great), that forgiven man turns around and demands payment from his fellow slave (not so great). Upon hearing this, the king is outraged. He sends the forgiven yet unforgiving man to prison where he is tortured - apparently to teach him a lesson about forgiveness the hard way. The closing line of the parable says it all: *“If you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart, you will pay!”* Lesson learned: Forgive as freely as God forgives you. Do this 77 times and you are only beginning to make a dent in forgiveness needed.

In Genesis 50:15-21*, Joseph and his brothers are still

working on forgiveness an entire generation after the dreamer was sold into slavery by his brothers and pronounced dead to his father. In essence, the final 13 chapters of Genesis are all about “the dream.” Some would willingly and intentionally try to kill the dreamer and the dream. It happens in every generation. Joseph is the original preacher of the “I Have a Dream” speech. Starting in Genesis chapter 37, the dreamer is unleashed on the world. His brothers despise him and his dream. But, Genesis 50:15-21 must be read in the full knowledge that the dreamer was right. The would-be killers of the dream are not yet rid of their guilt for having tried to kill the dreamer and his dream.

The enduring power of guilt and its resultant fear is a matter about which every family knows. Like every family, the 11 brothers know that the only one who can break the cycle of shame and banish guilt is the wronged party, the one whom they fear the most.

So they make a candid plea for forgiveness. Now the prime minister Egypt, Joseph is the only one who can do what needs to be done. He can forgive his brothers. Without his forgiveness, the brothers are fated to the old history of fear and anxiety. The brothers fall down before him and the dream has come full circle. They bow down before the prime minister as those who are guilty as charged. But the story is not interested in guilt. The story is interested in God and God’s plan.

He responds, “*You planned it for evil, but God planned it for good.*” The lesson is this: In God’s world, we are not helpless in the face of evil’s plan. We can side with God and choose God’s side in the turmoil. This is where faith comes in. Joseph is sure that God’s plan for life will triumph. He does not know how. But, he is a dreamer! He is a believer. He trusts in a plan that God will reveal, but he is not sure how or where God will do this.

But, Joseph’s trust in God is not willy-nilly. He does not

leave it “all in God’s hands” He also doesn’t pretend that “God has no hands but ours.” Instead, he accepts that he is God’s man in the plan and his life given to fulfill God’s plan is a vocation, a calling. Vocation is the place between God speaking and our acting. Vocation is the place where we “gear up” to be God’s chosen ones - holy and beloved.

In the end, Joseph forgives his brothers. Moreover, Joseph shows great compassion for them and comforts his brothers. He gets down on the floor, down on their level and he cares for them. His brothers have been mostly homeless and ill at ease since they took action against Joseph in Canaan. As the story of Genesis comes to a close, new life, growing out of forgiveness and compassion arises for the sons of Jacob and their families. Through the power of forgiveness and faith, the wronged-one sets things right. Amazingly, life begins again in a distant land which will become home to the children of promise.

Today, as we reflect on 9/11 and step into in our life together this Celebration Sunday, I want you to think of Principal Tilton and the children of Shanksville/Stoney Creek School who separated from death by two seconds of miraculous sacrifice 10 years ago this morning. In the grace and protection of God, they were given a new lease on life and now are 10 years into their lesson plan of compassion. Saved by two seconds 10 years ago, the kindergarteners are in high school and the high schoolers from the class of 2002 are raising a whole new generation of compassionate children. From this generation, we will come to experience, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, “a new birth of freedom.”

As we gear up for a new year of learning and living together, may we do so with deep gratitude and grace for the all the gifts of life we have been granted. May we gear up for this new year, remembering that God is calling us all into a **vocation** of forgiveness and compassion. Let us remember that vocation is that beautiful point, that nexus between God speaking and our acting. Vocation is the place where we “gear

up” to be God’s chosen ones - holy and beloved.

Today, we are being called to “gear up” in our lives of compassion and faith in action. As we come forward in a few minutes to place our gears in the baptismal font, let us forever be people who “**Remember, Rebuild, Resolve**” to live out our faith in our daily life.

It isn’t just a suggestion. It is our calling. It is our way of life. It is the way of our Savior. Soli Deo Gloria. To God alone be the glory. Amen.

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* The story of Joseph and Genesis 50:15-21 draws significantly from Walter Breuggemann’s *Genesis: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1982, pp. 369-378.

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