

“All Involved: in Need of Healing and Forgiveness”

Exodus 32:7-14; I Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

Part one of the sermon series,

“Revive Us Again: A Return to Jesus’ Original Program”

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Tim Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, UCC, Columbus Ohio, Proper 19, Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 11, 2022, dedicated to Dr. Ruth Sitler who died five years ago today, to all who have found a home at First Church because of our extravagant welcome through ONA, now 20 years young this week, to all the men, women and children who lost their lives on 9/11/01; to Pat Tillman and all the men and women who have sacrificed their lives for our freedom in the war on terrorism; to Sergeant Major Gretchen Evans and all the women and men who left part of themselves on the battlefields of war and picked themselves up with the help of other soldiers, friends and family and made a difference as wounded warriors on this Patriot Day 2022, to all the people who love First Church and love one another and always to the glory of God!

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As we move into the Gospel of Luke, chapter 15, we enter into the part of Luke’s Gospel which is heavily sprinkled with parables, most of them parables you can find in Matthew and Mark. The difference however, can be found in Luke’s relating his parables to human activity and relationships – whereas the parables of Mark and Matthew focus much more on nature. Here we find two parables of joy. We often call them parables of grace.

In the manner that is typical for Luke, he introduces them with an interpretative context – in this case the criticism he receives for

attracting tax collectors and sinners to his flock and then eating with them. Jesus responds with two parables. As we always say at the end, hear what the Spirit is saying to the church in Luke 15:1-10.

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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 his book, *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship*, Fr. Gregory Boyle, founder of Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, writes about the lessons he has learned from former gang members. They are lessons about faith; lessons about compassion and lessons about the enduring power of kinship.

He writes, “In a recent magazine Q and A, Whoopi Goldberg was asked to name the living person she most admired. “Pope Francis,” she responded. “Yeah, she added, “...he’s going with the original program.” (p. 153).

The Original Program. We all know what that means, don’t we? The Original Program is about living Jesus’ Gospel of Joy. It’s always being mindful of those who are hurting, those who are in pain, those who are in the greatest need around us. It is about going to the margins, and knowing that if we stand there, the margins will be erased. It is about standing in the right place – with those who are excluded or demonized. There are people who do this without hesitation. They know what really matters and they know what really doesn’t matter. They inspire us, and we follow them because they follow the Original Program.

Fr. Boyle was inspired in his life by one such person. He was a Jesuit priest named Fr. Pedro Arrupe. Fr. Arrupe was in Japan with the Jesuits when Hiroshima was bombed. He immediately went to Hiroshima to minister to the victims of the bombing. In the aftermath, he ran straight into the bomb's wreckage, only to cast his lot with those facing unthinkable suffering. He inspired a generation of young priests to do the same – to run toward a bomb's aftermath rather than in the other direction.

Fr. Arrupe lived his life being available to people. Once in Brazil, he met a poor man who invited him to dinner in his home in a nearby favela. He had a gift he wanted to give to the priest. He led him into his home, in which the abject poverty of this man's family overwhelmed Fr. Arrupe. It took his breath away and brought him to tears. The man led the priest to a hole in his wall (not a window) through which you could see the sunset. The man turned to him and said, "This is the gift I have for you. This is view I see every night at sunset." This man was wrapped in the love of God and in touch understood The Original Program.

To connect to The Original Program, we need look no further than today's gospel lesson. After all, the Original Program is contained in the original program book we call The Bible – and especially it shines through in the Gospels.

In Luke 15:1-10, Jesus is faced by those who are judging him. They are on his case because he eats with sinners and tax collectors. (Here they are talking about Big Time Sinners – because in reality – all of us are sinners...anyway.) Following God's Original Program (passed down from father to son), Jesus responds by showing that God's unstoppable goodness is the true foundation for all life.

God points us to joy, as God seeks out the one who is lost and returns that one to the flock, it is joy that embraces that moment. What might appear on the surface to be a foolish act by the shepherd, is in fact an act of sheer love – going after the one, risking everything – life and livelihood – to find the lost. The whole flock for the one – that is what pure love looks like!

The same is true with the woman in search of the lost coin. She turns the house upside down to find one lost coin. Seeking the lost, caring for the one who is gone and returns, is the true joy at the heart of the gospel.

In speaking through the parables to the judging pharisees, Jesus is addressing their judgement with joy. But he is also talking to us and teaching us. That is what makes the Gospels so powerful. That is why they have survived all these years – because they have something to say to all of us – right now. He shows us all that we need to learn to drop the burden of our judgments, reconciling what the mind wants to separate, the heart wants to hold together. Dropping the enormous inner burden of judgment allows us to make ourselves right with God – who wants the world to ultimately be this – people who stand in awe. Judgement, after all, takes up the room each of us need for loving one another (drawn from Boyle, pp. 56-57). When judgment takes over the heart, it breaks the heart. When love takes over the heart, it holds the heart together.

Standing in joy, dropping judgments and seeking the love of God, is at the heart of the Original Program. When joy is embraced, when judgements are dropped, when love prevails, we reach a new level of healing and forgiveness. When we carry our anger, when we cling to

our judgments, when love is given little room in our hearts, we keep away from healing and forgiveness.

Each of us needs to return to the Original Program – myself, you, all of us. We need to trust God to guide us. We need to forgive ourselves and one another. We need to seek healing over prolonged judgment and unexplainable judgments – remembering that when we are caught in spirals of judgment, we leave no room for love. This lesson is taught today by Jesus – who switches the focus from judging to joy. Let's follow him into joy and leave judgement in the dust behind us.

I want to end with another lesson to be learned from the Original Program. It has to do with the core value of doing the right thing – which on this Patriot Day 2022, comes through clearly in the story of one of America's great heroes of the past 21 years. She probably isn't known to many of you. I became aware of her this past July. Her name is Gretchen Evans. Gretchen understands this part of The Original Program – which is – to lay down your life for your friend.

On this Patriot Day 2022, the story of Retired Army Commander Sergeant Major Gretchen Evans is inspirational. She is a true American hero. Prior to her retirement due to combat injuries, Evans was responsible for more than 30,000 ground troops in Afghanistan and is one of the most decorated female veterans in US History – and yet we don't know her name. This should be written in every history book that every child reads.

Sergeant Major Evans served our nation in the war of terrorism with nine deployments overseas including Afghanistan and Iraq. A 27-year veteran, Sergeant Major Evans experienced loss of hearing and traumatic brain injuries from wounds in combat.

During her recovery from lost hearing, traumatic brain injuries and PTSD, Sergeant Major Evans hit the lowest point in life. But thanks to her faith in God, her faith in other people – in soldiers and friends in her life, she rose. In her rising, Sergeant Major Evans formed Team UNBROKEN, a group of veterans and civilians who have experienced life altering injuries, illnesses or traumas that participate in adventure races worldwide. She is an author whose first book was entitled, *Leading from the Front: Lessons by a Commander Sergeant Major*, published in October 2017.

The winner of the 2022 Pat Tillman Award for Service told her moving story at the ESPY Awards earlier this summer. I encourage all of you to google and watch the seven minute video telling her experience. You will be deeply touched. I take one segment of her story to tell today.

In her words, Sergeant Major Gretchen Evans, tells of a battle on a mountain in Afghanistan which her soldiers were losing. They were surrounded and faced possible annihilation. “I talked to the troops. I said, ‘We can stay right here and try to hold for reinforcements or we can try to take the top of the mountain which would be better terrain for us to defend ourselves.’ (I told them), The decision is mine to make. We made it to the top of the mountain. We decided that would be our last stand. We were running low on ammo and I said, ‘this is not looking good.’ So, we laid down and we took our magazines and we stacked ‘em and we said, “ok, bring it.” And then I heard it before I even saw it, that beautiful sound of the helicopter, Apaches flew over us and fired missiles into those enemy troops that had been pursuing us. And took care of that. As we pulled away, I thought to myself, I just spent a lifetime on that mountain. I left three men on that mountain. And actually, I left part of myself on that mountain.

As we were leaving the mountain, I went to the pilot and I said, thank you for saving us and he said, “Sergeant Major, we were listening to you all morning on the radio. We were not going to leave you on that mountain.” And I said, “thank you. Thank you. I appreciate that. I really do.” He said, “That’s my job. That’s what I do.”

That’s my job. That’s what I do.

As a follower of Jesus Christ, what is your job? What do you do?

Are you following the original program of compassion, love, and joy? If you have lost track of the program, I encourage you to open the Gospel of John and begin again. I encourage you to read, Matthew, Mark and Luke and rediscover your baptismal calling to love one another. If you haven’t lost track of the original program, good for you. This is also your chance to deepen your walk with Jesus – so read, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John as well.

Do you see where I am going here? No matter who we are or where we are on Life’s Journey, We ALL are in need of healing and forgiveness in our lives! We all need to read the Gospels of Joy and Love – all over again!

In the coming weeks, together, we will seek revival and renewal in the love of God found in the Gospels. We will explore kinship and healing; tenderness and trustworthiness. We will deepen our commitments to Kindness and compassion; to hope and to love.

My sermons and teachings will focus on Jesus’ Original Program. I hope you will join me for the next ten Sundays of preaching and teaching – with the Gospels as our Guide, as we return to Jesus’ Original Program. Bring your friends, neighbors, co-workers and family as we turn to rejoicing and return to God.

We will figure out what we are here to do. And that's a good thing.

Thanks be to God! Amen.