

# **“Forgiven and Forgiving”**

**Psalm 51; Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; II Corinthians 5:20-6:10;  
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**

**Part I of VIII in the Lenten sermon series, “Forgiveness”**

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February 22, 2023

From the Pulpit

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A meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Ash Wednesday, February 22, 2023, dedicated to all the people who have lived into their baptismal calling to forgive others, for all who are struggling to forgive others and for all, on this Lenten Journey, who will gain strength, courage, and conviction to forgive and to receive forgiveness from others and always to the glory of God!

## **“Forgiven and Forgiving”**

Psalm 51; Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; II Corinthians 5:20-6:10;  
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Beginning today and continuing through Easter Sunday, April 9th, our theme for this season will be “Forgiveness.” We will experience this in worship each Sunday at 9am and 11am and in small groups in March – some held in homes and some here at church. I encourage you to join in worship each week, to join in our small groups, and to go one step further and engage “Forgiveness” in your daily discipline of prayer and reflection during the 40 days of Lent.

For example, where in your life and who in your life, do you need to forgive? Who do you need to ask forgiveness from for the ways you have thought, spoken and/or acted in ways that have harmed them or the community? On a larger scale, what debts and actions in our lives, our communities, our nation, our world need to be forgiven and how can we set things right in relation to the whole human community and the earth?

This season, we will be blessed by the preaching of Rev. Amanda Conley, Rev. John Aeschbury, Rev. Sarah Reed, Rev. Larry Miller, and Rev. Joanna Samuelson – each a member of our congregation and each who has served in congregational settings, chaplaincy and social justice witness caring for countless thousands of people in many ways. We are grateful for their presence in our congregation and the pulpit of First Church.

Please join me as we step into our series on Forgiveness... Let us pray....

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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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**Forgiveness is not too hard to understand. But it is surprisingly easy to misunderstand.** Forgiveness is not something you have to accomplish or deserve. Forgiveness is always present – although we don't always recognize it or accept it. Forgiveness is part of the Present moment every moment of every day. It is the Divine Face of God which our Divine Love offers each of us. Forgiveness is a fresh start – a new beginning. This is always true no matter what has happened, is happening, or even what might happen. Through forgiveness, an option for fresh start and a new beginning is offered to you and me and everyone in this very moment.

Forgiveness takes from the past moment and presents hope for change in the present moment. The past is real. It cannot be changed.

But our relationship to that past can be changed. The first change we may need to consider is our memory of that past. We have forgotten the real past. What memory we do have of the past is a memory of what we thought was real at the time, but our thinking was always limited. It was always a mix of somewhat true and somewhat flawed.

However flawed our memory is (and Ash Wednesday is the perfect day to acknowledge the flaws in our memory), the real past is completely gone, **and** the real past is already forgiven. A fresh start is at hand, perhaps that fresh start will include remembering more of the real past. And when we remember the real past, perhaps we will laugh or cry at how mistaken our views of that past have been.

Cleaning up such memories may improve our lives, but not the consequence of what our lives have done. These consequences live on as part of our capacity as human beings to alter the course of history. We altered history in every moment of our past living, just as we will alter the course of history in our next action and even in our next thinking about our next action. Every motion of our brain or our body alters the course of history in our lives and in the lives of all we touch, and through them in the lives they touch forevermore. Such truth can be healing or tragic – yet wondrous karma is very real.

Nevertheless, (and Remember God is always in the “Nevertheless”) a fresh start is already open before us right now. No admission fee is required. No begging is necessary. There is no price to pay for this fresh start except the consequences of taking on this humbling new start for our lives.

Our understanding of this “forgiveness for a fresh start” makes us bolder in our freedom to take on the consequences. We can make this

unprecedented leap into the future because we know, however this works out, we will be forgiven for a fresh start once again.

Forgiven does not mean we have an excuse or permission to flee from real life or to indulge in our worse impulses and potential meanness. We will pay the consequences of whatever actions we do. We will remain in need of forgiveness for whatever we do. Believing in forgiveness means believing that there is a fresh start in Realism before us, right now and there always will be.

Let us also be warned that our choices can become “stuck ways” of life for our personal being – ways to which we cling, defend, and never own up or accept their needed forgiveness. Being stuck in unrealism is like an internal bondage or slavery in which we may have become powerless to change.

We cannot presume that when we have lost touch with Reality, that Reality will find us again – at least not right away. We can drift down the corridor of time for quite a while before the judgement of our unrealism comes up again for review. We need to take care to not mess with Reality, or thumb our nose at Reality, or think we can get away with creating our own reality.

Consider how long the racist patterns of the U.S. Confederacy have lived on in the lives of both whites and blacks and all those in between. We are all forgiven for a fresh start in a new world order in which black and white have no more horrific implications than the weather forecast on any given day. Nevertheless, we cling to familiar patterns of status, privilege, mindsets, and rages, rather than be forgiven for that fresh start that fights the tragic karma and caste of our ongoing culture. To overcome the unforgiveness of such a

culture, we must step into and own the perverse Reality and sickness which it unleashed.

Martin Luther King Jr. and other key leaders in the Civil Rights Movement helped us find a fresh start on this unrealism, but we return to, and still cling to, or slip back into old familiar untenable patterns of delusion and racism. Many U.S. citizens persist in fanning and fostering our racial delusions for the sake of some other delusion that Reality has not yet vanquished.

So, when and if Reality has found us again, we need to grab hold of Reality with all its forgiveness and fresh starts before we lose our way again. The pay-out of unrealism and unforgiveness is despair in the end – for Reality always wins. And the pay-out of Reality, however costly in some ways it may be, is always on the winning side. It is always for healing and always for hope. Reality always wins.

**Let me say it again – Forgiveness is not too hard to understand, but it is surprisingly easy to misunderstand** (drawn from Progressive Theology website).

Forgiveness is huge. It might be the greatest work any one of us will do in our lifetime. **The heart of our Christian faith is Forgiveness.** Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it best, *“Christianity IS forgiveness; nothing more and nothing less.”* Dietrich Bonhoeffer never wasted words. This sentence is typical. Every phrase carries deep meaning.

“Nothing more.” If you call yourself a Christian, you better be ready to back it up. I don’t say this to scare you away from calling yourself Christian. I say to encourage you to live into the forgiveness you are called to as a Christian.

Nobody walked the walk of faith and forgiveness better than Bonhoeffer. Perhaps Bonhoeffer had in mind the words of Jesus as he was dying on the cross, *“Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”* All the theological interpretation that has gone into that sentence aside, the plain and simple idea is to forgive others under whatever circumstances may pertain.

*“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”* All of us have heard these words and spoken these words thousands of times in the Lord’s Prayer (perhaps with “trespasses” in place of “debts” before you came to First Church). Nothing more can be asked of us than that we step back, realize that we have been offended by another, and then let it go. That’s what forgiveness is, a letting-go of the past grievances and pains and hurts.

This does not mean that we forget, nor that we allow ourselves to be hurt the same way again in future. **Forgiving is not the same as forgetting.** We all get hung up on our worries that to forgive is forget. Let go of your worries with this one. Forgiving is not the same as forgetting. Your memory of the past will not disappear when you forgive, but your memory will heal when you forgive.

Bonhoeffer meant that forgiveness is central and is the most that can be asked of us, but it is asked in every situation. Forgiveness is not a sometimes or somewhere proposition. It is not a once-and-done posture. Forgiveness lasts for life. We are asked for nothing more than this. We are not asked to seek vengeance nor dissolve into endless anger, and surely not rage. We are meant to forgive.

**“Nothing less.”** What would be less than forgiveness? Many things, beginning with holding grudges. We hold grudges when we think that we are superior to those who have offended us. We have

all fallen into this trap. We hold the incident over their heads, as it were, never to relent on the pressure available to us in the moment of confrontation. This way we never have to deal with forgiveness, because we hold ourselves to be permanently in the right.

**Less than forgiveness** may mean ignoring others who have offended you. Rather than forgive, it is easier to simply bypass the whole process and act as if nothing happened. This is retreat from responsibility to oneself. You owe it to yourself to confront those who have wronged you in as clean a manner as possible. How have they wronged you? It is in that exact place and way that forgiveness must take the place of judgment. Not by accusing and judging, but rather by expressing how an action made you feel, you can enter a renewed relationship with another. Then, once reconciled, let it go.

**Less than forgiveness** may mean ignoring the truth that you have been hurt or offended. This never works. You can bury pain under a blanket of platitudes, but the truth remains that you have been diminished and it is better to come clean about that (drawn from “The heart of Christianity is forgiveness” Gabe Rochelle, found in “Path of the Spirit,” and progressive theology).

I ask you to take away two things from this Ash Wednesday reflection: **First, Forgiveness is not too hard to understand, but it is surprisingly easy to misunderstand.** So, let’s not misunderstand forgiveness. Rather, step into the fresh start of understanding forgiveness and practice it.

Second, **“Christianity IS forgiveness; nothing more and nothing less.”** To not forgive is not Christian. To fail to forgive you fail to be the Christian you were baptized to be. To be unforgiving is to not follow Jesus.



As we step into 40 days of Lent, we have a season of Forgiveness to embrace. Let's start right now. Let's start today. With the cross of Christ calling us to be truly who we are meant to be, may each one of us be forgiven and forgiving. Amen.

