

*“Choose Love: Communities of Forgiveness”*

The South Central Conference of our denomination, the United Church of Christ, sends out a weekly email newsletter. Usually, our Conference Minister, Rev Dr. Don Longbottom, writes an article for each of those newsletters. As I was preparing for today’s sermon, I read the most recent of the Conference Minister’s articles. He began by writing, “I have always been moved by the story of Jesus and the woman that was caught in the act of adultery. The penalty was death by stoning so she was dragged before Jesus so that he could pass judgment. However, Jesus responded in a manner unexpected.”

Longbottom continued, “Jesus said, ‘Whoever is without sin cast the first stone.’ Nary a stone was tossed because the accusers possessed the decency and integrity to admit that they themselves were flawed. So, the question in my mind is how they were able to react in this unanticipated manner?” The Conference Minister answered his own question, **“I believe it is an honest recognition of our own flaws that enables any human being to grow and mature into a better person. This kind of honest humility is the only effective vaccination against self- righteousness.”**

Longbottom elaborated, “The sense that we are not all that we should be does not come easily for those who are gifted, successful and maybe in our own minds at least rather moral.” The Conference Minister confessed, “One time I really offended some of the people at my church in Omaha. I was doing the welcome and I said to the people visiting that day. ‘You are welcome here.’ Pause. ‘No I really mean it; we have very low standards.’ Explaining in the article, he wrote, “Folks ... its all about grace. We are all undeserving but God loves us anyway.’ Forgiveness is rooted in God’s grace extended to us and to everyone.”

Discussing the subject of forgiveness further, Longbottom wrote, **“When we choose to forgive someone we in reality give two gifts. We give a gift of grace to the one who wronged us. They did not earn it and they do not deserve it ... it is a gift of grace.”** The Conference Minister continued, **“We also give a gift to ourselves. The by-products of carrying anger and bitterness in your heart are hypertension and heart disease.”**

Longbottom asked, “In your marriage, or any relationship for that matter, has your loved one ever wronged you? Maybe it was a harsh word, a mean action, some sort of neglect ... did you nurse a grudge or did you at some point forgive?”

Anticipating the response of some, Longbottom shared, “Well Reverend, that’s all very well and good, but that lets people off the hook.” The Conference Minister gave his reply, “It may be counter-intuitive, but I do not believe forgiveness lets people off the hook. On the contrary, when we give the gift of forgiveness to ourselves and to another, we place them in the hot seat of their own conscience. We put them in touch with the best part of their own humanity.”

Longbottom explained what this all means and concluded, **“Christ came that we might experience the abundant life of love, joy and peace. These things only come to those with forgiving hearts. If you have ears to hear, hear this ... do yourself a favor ... be a forgiver.”**

Forgiveness is a major part of our focus for today. Picking up from where the Conference Minister left off, there were some folks, who did themselves the favor of being a forgiver in a very shocking context a few years ago. Do you remember how a number of the family members of those, who were murdered at the Emanuel AME Bible Study, responded to the white racist, who killed their loved ones? Yes, they forgave him. They did not tell him his actions were right or that they approved of his violence, instead, they overcame his hate and death with grace – forgiveness – the New Life in Jesus Christ.

Our Scripture Reading is a difficult one to read or hear because of its injustice toward Jesus. However, Jesus responded to the oppression he was experiencing and the death, which was about to be inflicted upon him, with the extraordinary words and plea to the Divine Parent, **“Forgive them, Father! They don’t know what they are doing.”** Amazingly, Jesus not only asked God to forgive his executioners but he also put forward an argument

for such leniency! They didn't know what they were doing – does anyone know completely what he or she is doing when they harm someone else to benefit themselves or their desire for revenge, hate, or violence? Why did Jesus ask for God to forgive them? Perhaps, we get a glimpse at why when the Scripture continued to report the conversation between Jesus and the two criminals, who were being crucified with him. One of them was actually transformed with compassion – love for the plight of the innocent Jesus! To which Jesus replied, ***“I promise you that today you will be in Paradise with me.”***

Jesus came, in part, to announce God's Radical and Extravagant Agape Love and Invitation for us to accept God's Forgiveness and Live the New Relationship with our Divine Parent and one another. We don't do anything to earn this Agape Love – Forgiveness – Grace. We are to live it! Another way of putting this opportunity is to remind all of us that we are God's Children' – citizens of God's Kingdom and we are called to live as citizens of the Fulfilled Kingdom, even though it is not yet totally present! **Fully experiencing the Reconciliation and Agape Love, which comes in the New Relationship with God and the Fulfilled Kingdom, we live out our receiving of undeserved forgiveness and our giving undeserved forgiveness to others.** If the people of God don't follow the teachings and practices of forgiveness shown by Jesus Christ, the Son of God, then we shut ourselves off from that New Relationship with God and one another – from the total benefits of Citizenship in God's Kingdom.

Jesus indicated the great importance of forgiving to our New Life in Christ when the Risen Son of God appeared to the original disciples on that first Easter night. **John 20:22-23 reported, “Then he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive people's sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.’”** The Risen Christ was not merely giving the disciples power to use against their enemies. He gave them the power and authority to be the Children of God – the Body of Christ – the Universal Church through God's Self-Giving and Sacrificial Agape Love and Forgiveness, as well as, the calling to be the Divine Parent's Agents of Love and Forgiveness to all people, especially those, who experience the oppression of suffering and broken relationships.

Marcia McFee, the developer of the “Roll Down, Justice!” Lenten Worship Series has said, **“Each time someone is baptized, the whole church body gathered also makes vows. One of the things we promise is to be a community of love and forgiveness. Each day we must choose between letting the difficult things about life create resentment in us or allowing the work of forgiveness to make way for love.”**

McFee went on to write, “Our song of justice this week was written as a response to a modern-day act of forgiveness that reminds us of the power of Jesus' forgiveness, even on the cross.” The modern-day act of forgiveness she was referring to was the forgiveness shown by the families of the victims of the mass murders at the Emanuel AME Bible Study.

Forgiveness is crucial to, any, and all relationships, so it should not surprise us that it is critical to our New Relationship with God and the relationship we have with all of God's Children. Most of our experience of forgiving and being forgiven is in our family relationships. Agape Love and Forgiveness enable families to overcome our failure to know what we are doing, when we sometimes hurt or harm one another. Forgiveness enables our reconciliation and new life in our family relationships in the face of brokenness and alienation from one another. The Body of Christ – the Church, including this part of the Body of Christ, is a special relationship – the Family of the Children of God. Like our human families, this Church Family is built on Forgiveness, the Continuing Forgiveness of one another, and Sharing of that same Agape Love and Forgiveness with new participants in our Church Family. In this context, we provide tremendous support and encouragement to all of our Church Family when we share this message of forgiveness with one another. **Turn to someone near you, and say this to her or him, “You are forgiven”. “You are forgiven”.** Let's not just dream of being a church, let's be a loving and forgiving community – let's be Family – Forgiven and Forgiving! Amen.