

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
Rev. Howard K. Bell
Sunday, February 14, 2016
Forgiveness

Our focus for the Season of Lent during worship will be on forgiveness.

“Forgiveness means giving up the hope that the past will get better.”¹ I will give you a second to think about that. “Forgiveness means giving up the hope that the past will get better.” This quote comes from an anonymous author and is taken from the Renewing Life² program. When I shared this quote as a Renewing Life program facilitator, I generally added: “What if that is all that forgiveness means? What if forgiveness does not have to mean admitting wrong doing, or making amends, or even speaking words of forgiveness to the person or persons whom you have hurt or the person or persons who have hurt you; or even being repentant before God for our sins? What if forgiveness might simply mean moving forward in life without holding on to resentment or holding on to blame and shame, or holding on to the need to be right and for the other to be wrong?” I invite you to keep this quote before you as we continue on this Lenten journey together. Please also feel free to share your reactions with me after the service or in the coming weeks.

In addition to scriptural quotations and understandings about forgiveness, several important teachers have informed me and have assisted me in developing spiritual practices of forgiveness. Two people come immediately to mind: Stephen Levine and Edith Stauffer. Stephen Levine is a Buddhist and the author of a powerful Buddhist meditation titled “Forgiveness Meditation”.³ Edith Stauffer was a practitioner of a spiritually based form of psychology known as “Psychosynthesis”. She is the author of the book, Unconditional Love and Forgiveness⁴. Another resource that I found after deciding to do this series is the book: Forgiveness, A Lenten Study⁵ by Marjorie J. Thompson. I will be drawing from all these resources during my Lenten sermons. Information to access all the resources I have mentioned are contained in the footnotes in the manuscript copy of this sermon which will be posted on our church website by early this week. I encourage you to consider doing additional study and reflection on your own during this Season of Lent.

Now I am going to review and update you on the current tasks of our Interim Ministry Time – in part to demonstrate why I have chosen forgiveness as the topic of our Lenten worship – and in part because I think reviewing these tasks is important now

¹ http://www.pathwaysminneapolis.org/renewing_life/

² http://www.pathwaysminneapolis.org/renewing_life/

³ <http://livingdying.org/meditations/forgiveness-meditation/>

⁴ Unconditional Love and Forgiveness, by Edith R. Stauffer, PhD; Triangle Publishers, PO Box 1416, Burbank, CA 92507. © 1987 by Edith R. Stauffer, PhD.

⁵ Forgiveness, A Lenten Study, by Majorie J. Thompson; Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY; © 2014 Westminster John Knox Press

since we are entering into what could be our final three months together. If you are tired of hearing me talk about or preach about the Interim Ministry Time, “I ask your forgiveness” even as I feel called to proceed.

As you may recall, the first task of Interim Ministry is to look back into the congregation’s history. Rev. Dr. George Kimmich Beach identifies three phrases of a church’s history. He says, *“There is distant history, more recent history, and history hot from the griddle.”*⁶ Both in my one-on-one sessions with you and in the all-church forums we primarily addressed the more recent history and the “hot from the griddle” history that embraced the forty-two years of pastoral ministry offered by Rev. Joe Clay and Rev. Rosemary Rocha.

Rev. Beach says, *“The second task of interim ministry is to help the church discover its identity anew...The third task is to nurture and liberate leadership...The fourth task is to renew denominational linkage...And the fifth task is making a commitment to new directions in ministry.”*⁷

In regard to “discovering identity anew”, the Church Cabinet is currently finalizing the “we-will” statements developed by the congregation in small groups and in Boards and Committees. There will be an all-church forum on Sunday, March 6, following worship for sharing this work with the congregation.

In regard to “nurture and liberate leadership”, a significant portion of this work was completed when you passed new by-laws to the church’s constitution last April. These by-laws both reduced the number of persons required for all the Boards and Committees, but also had a couple of provisions allowing for a more-nimble approach to church governance. Therefore, your church leadership has been addressing what additional “tweaks” to the structure of church governance may be required immediately. Your Board of Stewardship has also begun the process of identifying new leadership for 2015 – 2016. Please give prayerful consideration when asked to serve – or even call a member of the Board and indicate your specific interest in a leadership role.

In regard to “renewing denominational linkages”, we have benefitted greatly from resources provided by the United Church of Christ (UCC) both in its national setting and through the Minnesota Conference, UCC, as we have addressed Interim Ministry tasks and in all the work of the new Settled Pastor Search Committee.

In regard to the final task: “Commitment to new directions in ministry” Rev. Beech says, *“All the other tasks...build toward this final task. New directions in ministry means, for us,*

*recognizing our shared ministry, as well as recognizing the qualities of the professional parish minister we seek.”*⁸ In regard to “recognizing our shared ministry”, I do want to call

⁶ www.ucsummit.org

⁷ www.ucsummit.org

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attention to our “Lenten Series Souper Wednesdays” which begins this week on Wednesday evening. One important goal that emerged during the “living-into” mission sessions is to increase our ministries of outreach through partnering with other churches or ministry partners. The five topics and speakers whom your Board of Christian Education and your Board of Deacons have invited to present for the next five Wednesdays all represent potential outreach ministry partners. It is vital to have a large representation of membership in attendance to assist in this discernment process. Please plan to attend any and all of the sessions that you can. Again, I recognize how many things have been asked of all of you this year. For that “I ask your forgiveness”, yet I must continue to ask even more of you

The nearly completed church profile clearly demonstrates how the Pastoral Search Committee has addressed the task of “recognizing the qualities of the professional parish minister we seek”. The profile will be activated soon and the committee will begin the challenging work of reading ministerial profiles, interviewing the candidates and bringing forth their consensus candidate for vote by the Congregation, possibly by April this year.

For the hard work done by so many of you, could I get an **“Amen”**?

I chose the topic of forgiveness for worship during the Season of Lent, because of some of the conflicts and challenges that were uncovered during our review of church history – both the more recent history and the “hot off the griddle” history. Again quoting Rev. Beach, *“And of course, as with all stories, there’s not only the good news; there’s the bad news -- the unhappy memories, the unresolved conflicts, the painful losses.”* There were many joys shared and much good news to be celebrated during our history review. Please hear me say that I also believe that this is a very healthy church without significant current conflict. Yet, I witnessed tears of sadness and pain during one-on-one sessions. I heard stories of conflict in the past that may still have unresolved components to them.

According to Marjorie Thompson, the prelude to forgiveness is self-examination. She says, *“If we cannot see how our minds and hearts actually operate and how they resist the things that make for health and peace, we will not be able to admit what alienates us from God, others and ourselves. What we cannot acknowledge we cannot confess, and what we cannot confess, we cannot present for forgiveness and healing.”*⁹

In the name of self-examination, I am lifting up some of the conflicts that still may have negative residual effects on this community: the nursery school conflict in 2002; no longer being a neighborhood church; challenges of keeping youth directors; decision to exclude social justice language in the mission and vision statement; failure to support marriage equality; or others on the compiled list that you might carry in your minds and heart. I do not feel that it is necessary to re-engage these past conflicts in a direct way, but I do believe that we, as a community could benefit from exploring forgiveness in regard to these past events and the people whom we hold in our minds and hearts as having caused us pain,

⁹ *Forgiveness, A Lenten Study*, by Majorie J. Thompson; Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY; © 2014 Westminster John Knox Press. pg 13

harm and hurt. Please consider making your own private list as we move through the Season of Lent that you can bring into your mind when given opportunities during worship.

During this time for self-examination, may we, along with the psalmist in today's text, pray: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." (Psalm 139: 23-24)

May we also carry with us during the Season of Lent, the words of Jesus in today's text from the Sermon on the Plain: "Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you." (Luke 6: 37-38) May we be blessed with the gift of forgiveness. Commentator Charles Bugg, in speaking of today's New Testament text reassures us with these words:

"To answer hurt with forgiveness is plausible only because the Christ is our strength."¹⁰

Relying on the strength of Jesus, let us, during this season of Lent, courageously explore the possibility of forgiveness in our hearts both in respect to these communal events of conflict, but also conflicts we may have with one another, with family members, with co-workers, and with others for whom we care. May it be so. Amen.

¹⁰ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.