

“Crossing the Great Divide”
a message by Twila Rhodes
Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.
July 25, 2010

Matthew 6: 5-15 [NRSV]

Little Nan prayed to God saying, “I bet it is very hard to love all of everybody in the whole world.” There are only 4 people in our family and I can never do it. I know for me loving people is a hard thing. I should say loving people unconditionally is a hard thing. I have been going to church all my life. I have worked in this church for 4 years now and I often find myself asking similar questions. I go off at the mouth when I should keep it close, and often keep it shut when I should be screaming from the roof tops. I loose my temper and take out my anger on the wrong people. Even though I know better I do things that I often shouldn’t. And I have just recently realized I do not in fact know it all. I tell you this not because I am under the delusion that you think I’m a saint but so that you know that I need to be a part of this conversation. That I am still developing and forming and I need to hear and be heard .

Jesus said, When you pray, pray like this " 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. We pray this prayer every week and every week I simply recite it, I stopped listening to its meaning and I’ve stopped making my words mean anything, it is simply something I do. And when I began writing this sermon I simply went through the motions. I said this should be easy I can bang this out in no time. Don’t ever say God doesn’t have sense of humor, because as I thought those very words a huge block went up in front of my brain. I was stuck I couldn’t get past the scripture, every word I wrote was meaningless. If this was a time before computers the papers I would have thrown away would have filled this congregation. I really needed to take the time and really hear the words that were written so long ago, to understand them

and make meaning out them. Now whether I got it right or not I guess that's for you to decide. Like I said earlier I'm not perfect but I try my best.

At the end of the prayer Jesus adds a little tag line at the bottom that for some reason or another we often over look. For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. Now this was the part of the scripture that I was really trying to ignore, or manipulate to make it say what I wanted to it to say. My initial thought was okay but if we don't forgive all the time it won't be that bad. Maybe he didn't mean it the way it came out. Apparently I wasn't the first one to feel this way. We found later on in Matthew where Jesus is yet again talking about the importance of forgiveness, and Peter just like I did felt that Jesus couldn't possibly mean what he said so he asked Jesus if my brother sins against me how many times should I forgive him up to 7 times. I mean Peter was really trying to get Jesus to make it as clear as possible what he meant, and Jesus replied not 7 times but up to 77 times. Jesus is telling us over and over again exactly what he wants us to do and that to forgive, always, there is no limit.

The topic of forgiveness is everywhere in the bible, it shows up in many ways. Not just in the Jesus' teachings. We are told to love our enemies; Love your neighbors as your selves. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you, and so on and so on. They are all about forgiveness.

Jesus we all agree was a Jew and growing up he read the Torah and he listened to the Rabbi's teach from the Torah. There is a story about a most revered Rabbi, Rabbi Hillel. One day a pagan approached him and promised that he would convert to Judaism if Hillel could recite the entire Torah to him while standing on one leg. Hillel responded "What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor; the rest is commentary. Go and learn." So if this message is so clearly outlined through the whole bible why do we have such a hard time with it? If it is as in one Rabbi's opinion the central theme of the Torah then why is it we are fast to disregard it?

I know why forgiveness is hard for me. And maybe it is the same for you. But to forgive means to open your heart up again. Risk getting hurt or taken advantage of, or even possibly be changed. So instead of forgiving we tend to compartmentalize. We take this action that has angered us and we store it away, and let it sit there. Now most times the transgressions are so small that suppressing them does nothing. Sometimes the small ones build up and before you know it you're angry over nothing. And then there are the big things. The things that cause so much pain and heartache that not even 20 years of therapy could help. Someone once said that suffering and forgiveness go hand and hand. And when there is suffering there is often anger and hatred.

Now hate is such a dirty word. I hate using the word hate. It reminds me of an the effects of an Earthquake. The big ones, they leave gapping holes and mass destruction and it's not just centralized it spreads out and fast. Then sometime after the after shocks happen leaving more damage. The place is never the same again. Even after people have come together to clean up and repair, some things are lost forever.

There's a great scene from a movie that came out in 95' called "Nobody's Fool." It's about a working man named Donald Sullivan. Everybody calls him Sully. He's about sixty years old, and spent his whole life in the same town. When his parents died, he inherited their house. He never moved in. Instead he left it alone. It was the house where his father beat him as a child. So he has left it alone, and every day he drives by to watch it slowly fall apart. One day he takes one of his friends, a builder, through that broken-down house. The builder says, "Sully, you could have saved this place. You could have fixed it up a little bit, rented it out. You could have sold it and put the money in your own pocket. Instead you stick it to your old man. What's it been - - thirty, thirty-five years? You still keeping score? Well, here's the good news: you won." Meanwhile the house is falling down . . . we don't do anybody or ourselves any good by holding on to anger, hate, hurt. When we do, we leave no room for love, compassion, forgiveness. When we hold on to these feelings we hurt ourselves so much. We cause unneeded stress and worry to our lives and we let the good things slide right on by.

When we as Christians hate our brothers and sisters for whatever reason, when we hold on to our anger and resentment we close off the path to God. DC Talk has a great quote on their Jesus Freak album. They say “The greatest single cause of Atheism in our world today are Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips and deny him by their actions.” I love this quote because it reminds me that I can talk about Jesus and forgiveness and love all I want. But when I’m driving down the road and someone cuts me off and I start yelling and cussing banging my hands on the steering wheel and acting like a fool, am I really showing God’s love.

I’m sure you’ve all heard the saying Love the sinner hate the sin. I use to say that figured it was the right thing. But who am I to hate anything. To judge my brothers and sisters for the things they do when I myself have just as many sins. I think back to the times when I would say those words and wonder who did I hurt? Who did I block the path for?

You all remember the shooting that took place in Pennsylvania in the Amish School house. Well of course Hollywood came a long and made a film about the shooting. But it wasn’t just about the shooting it was about the reaction of the families affected by this tragedy. It was called Amish Grace. Now I don’t know how fictionalized the story became but in a rather emotional scene the father of one of the young girls who was killed was talking to his youngest who had survived and she told her father that she hated that man and her father’s response was this, “I understand why you feel that way but hate is a very big, very hungry thing... with lots of sharp teeth. It will eat up your whole heart, and leave no room left for love. It’s hard to understand loving unconditionally. Hate is easy for us but loving that’s the hard one. But for God love is unconditional his grace and compassion is for us and when we forgive we allow others to see God love and compassion for them.

Everywhere you look there is something else out there trying to divide us. We divide ourselves. I understand we all think differently and believe in different things. I actually believe that’s a good thing. That’s how we learn by talking and being open to a conversation.

God calls us to forgive, to treat others as you would want to be treated. I know personally I want to be forgiven, so how do we go from theoretically loving forgiveness to loving it for real? I believe part of that starts here, in this group. Building a community of understanding and acceptance. We live in a time where it is easier than ever to be connected to one another all across the world. Internet programs have given us the ability to access information from across the globe in a manner of seconds. More and more schools are affording our students opportunities to learn and develop in other countries as early as middle and senior high school. The instantaneous access to occurrences around the nation has made our ability to organize more possible in hours than it used to be in days, and yet never before has it been easier to be divided. More and more in both business and educational circles conversations are being held screen to screen instead of face to face, it is entirely possible to work, travel, and even entertain one's self being completely dependent on machines alone, and if that doesn't make it easy enough more and more of our nation's media economy earns its capitol in ways that celebrate all the ways we disagree! We as a community have to be willing to forgive one another.

There was a point in my life when I thought that there were some things that were unforgiveable. I'm sure you have all had things in your life that make you feel the same. But I have come to realize that these are the things we must forgive. These are the things that have caused the most pain.

The authors of the book Blue like Jazz went to Reed College in Portland, Oregon. The authors were part of a very small Christian Club that met on campus and they tell of their experiences there. Reed college is known for it's lack of Christian Influence. Every year the campus throws a party that last all weekend, it is designed for students to get drunk and get high. The campus security shuts down any outside law enforcement and the students and even some professors let loose. One year this small group of Christians decided to let their friends and fellow classmates know that there were Christians on the Reed College Campus. After some talk and debate they decided that during the festival weekend they would open up a confessional booth, and receive confessions. The only catch was they themselves would be the confessors. And they did this. On Saturday night

Donald (the author) was the first in the booth. As he sat there he began to think that this was a bad idea, and just as he was about to get up and leave he had his first customer. The kid sat down and they talked. Donald began first by apologizing for the crusades, and the many genocides that were done in the name of Jesus. The kid sat there and said yeah but man you weren't there why are you apologizing. Donald said because I believe in Jesus and in God and their message is not one of hatred and death but of love and forgiveness. Donald then goes on to say that Jesus tells us to feed the poor and to heal the sick, I have never done much about that. Jesus said to love those who persecute me. I tend to lash out...He goes on talking about all the ways he's messed and the this student says it's ok I forgive you. They ended up talking for quite some time and during their conversation a line began to form and the other 6 members of this group were all busy giving confessions of their own. Donald said after that night we had students who began going to the local food shelters and helping out. They formed 4 different bible studies for people who didn't consider themselves Christians. See while it's important to forgive it's equally as important to ask for forgiveness from those whom we have wronged. By opening up and asking for forgiveness for not always living the way God calls us to live they were able to do a lot of good. We have to let God's light shine through us and sometimes that means doing things that aren't easy.

One of my favorite theologians Phyllis Tickle was being interviewed about her views on forgiveness. She discussed with them how when she is looking for inspiration, examples, or instructions on forgiveness, she doesn't turn to the saints long since dead, whether they were Christian or Jewish. She instead remembers a story about ordinary people women, girls, Jewish and Christian who by the spring of 1945 had been for many months forced into hard labor at Ravensbruck Concentration Camp just north of Berlin. Now camp rumor was, and you always believed camp rumor, camp rumor was that the Americans were coming from one direction and the Russians from another. And they knew that the allies were about to liberate them from camp. Any day now they would hear the battering of the walls and the rumbles of the tanks and the great horror would be over. But instead of the victory shouts of their liberators on that April morning in 1945 what the women heard were the shrieks of their companions and the gun butts of the guards rounding up

everyone still alive into the ovens. The camp must be emptied of all the inmates, nothing must be left. No one must survive to tell the story of this horrible place. But someone, some Jewish or Christian women just before they came found a scrap of a paper sack and hastily wrote upon it some words and stuck it in the a crack in the wall behind her bunk. It was found 3 days later by a Russian Solider. This is what was written on it: Lord forgive, not only those of goodwill but also those of ill will. But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted upon us remember rather the fruits we have bore thanks to this suffering, our comradeship our loyalty our humility, the courage the generosity the greatness of heart that has grown out of this. And when they come to Judgment lord let all the fruits we have bore be their forgiveness.”

I use to think some things were unforgiveable but God has the power and the mercy and the grace to forgive all our transgression no matter how big or small. By asking for forgiveness from not only God but from those we have wronged, and by continually working on ourselves we can start to cross this great divide that was started so many years ago, we can build a bridge for others to follow. But it starts here. May God’s light shine on us and through us so that we may allow others to know God’s unfailing love and his constant forgiveness. Amen