

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: September 9, 2018
Sermon Title: The Power of Forgiveness
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Scripture Litany

Litany: Our Promise to You

Leader: We promise that our love is patient and kind, it is not arrogant or rude, it is not irritable or resentful, our love does not insist on its own way. (1 Corinthians 13)

Congregation: We promise that our love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things . . . our love never ends. (1 Corinthians 13)

Leader: We promise to love our neighbor as ourselves . . . to love one another . . . to live in love and live in God. (Matthew 19:19; 1 John 4:7,16)

Congregation: We promise to do justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly with God . . . we promise to let justice roll down like the water, and righteousness like an overflowing stream. (Micah 6:8; Amos 5:24)

Leader: We promise to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the lonely, to do for those in need as clearly as we would do for Jesus. (Matthew 25:34-36)

Together: Holy God, as we begin our new Church year we promise to walk and not faint, to run and not be weary (Isaiah 40:31)
to fight the good fight (2 Timothy 4:7)
to weep with those who weep, to rejoice with those who rejoice (Romans 12:15)
to seek peace and pursue it (Psalm 12:15)
to forgive even as we are forgiven. (Matthew 6:12)

Leader: We promise to hate what is evil; cling to what is good; be devoted to one another; to honor one another above

ourselves; to keep our spiritual fervor; to be joyful in hope,
patient in affliction, faithful in prayer; to live in harmony with
one another. (Romans 12:9-16)

Most Sundays, the 9 o'clock worship is only a tiny bit different from 10:30. They get the full choir; you don't. But today, your experience is totally different, beginning with the obvious. At the 10:30 service we'll have 250 to 300 people, the entire Sunday School kids parade in at the end, and then everybody goes outside for hamburgers, hot dogs, ice cream, and games!

They also get to hear the first performance by our newest musical "Artist in Residence," Carolyn Lauf, singing a very, very powerful song about faith, doubt, and prayer, called "Prayer" by Sam Smith. And the choir has prepared two upbeat hymns to capture the joy of starting the new Church year. That's really the motivation for making this Sunday special: it's after Labor Day, it's almost autumn, kids are back in school, some are off to college, vacations are over, and our Church is operating at full speed. But this year an opportunity dropped into our laps that reshapes the 10:30 service and that I want to bring to you.

On June 17, 2015, a 21-year-old young white man walked into a legendary African-American Church in Charleston, South Carolina, for Bible Study. That young man, Dylann Roof, sat through the Bible Study, and when they got ready to close with prayer, he pulled out a gun and killed nine people, horrifying all of America.

Beginning the very next day, members of Emanuel Church, survivors of the massacre, family of the victims, shocked Americans even more with their steadfast call for forgiveness. It shocked me, and I'm in the business of forgiveness!

Three people from that Church are touring the country to bring their message of forgiveness to all of us willing to listen. And two of them will be with us at the 10:30 service. Dr. Rose Simmons, whose father was murdered; and Polly Sheppard, who survived the massacre. Alida and I will interview both of them as our Sunday sermon. They are here to talk about their commitment to forgiveness.

So you're missing the barbecue, the bouncy house, the ice cream truck, the folk singers, the choir, and 100 kids parading into Church! But you and I can still force ourselves to think about forgiveness. I say, "force ourselves" because forgiveness doesn't come easy. Even when we are the guilty party, it's not easy to ask for forgiveness. That's a big step, to be humble enough, self-aware

enough, sometimes guilt-ridden enough to say face to face, person to person, one on one, "I'm sorry, I was wrong. Please forgive me." And forgiveness isn't easy when we're the victim, when something wrong or bad or hurtful was done to us, or even worse, done to our loved ones! To look at that perpetrator, that evildoer, that unjust person, to look them in the eye and say, "I forgive you." Well, there are a thousand thoughts that run through us, aren't there? Is that person worthy, contrite, truly sorry, repentant, changed, and back again to worthy? Are they sincere? How do we know they're sincere?

But forgiveness certainly is the bread and butter of Christianity. When you think about what we stand for, when you think about the central story of Jesus, the essentials are love and forgiveness. Love is the root. Forgiveness is the result. "For God so loved the world," the Bible tells us, "that he gave us his only son." And when the Bible says, "God gave us his son," it isn't just giving us the Jesus of Christmas; God also gave us the Jesus of the Cross. And on that Cross Jesus's most powerful teaching was his statement, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." With his dying breath, Jesus reached for forgiveness, not rage, not vengeance . . . forgiveness.

But that had been his essence all along. When he taught the disciples The Lord's Prayer, what's right in the middle? "Forgive us our debts, our trespasses, our sins. *As, or as much as* we forgive our debtors, those who trespass against us, those who hurt us with their sins. Quid pro quo. Forgive as you are forgiven."

Jesus tells parables about forgiveness. In one, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the father forgives his son without hesitation, without question, without even knowing if the boy had truly changed. In another, the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant, Jesus offers a contrast and a warning. He tells of a king who forgives a servant a huge amount of money, only to have the servant turn around and threaten and abuse a fellow servant who owed him a pittance. The "unmerciful servant" ends up in jail, with Jesus concluding the parable with this very important phrase: "You must forgive from your heart." (Matthew 18:35) *You have to forgive from your heart.*

This kind of thinking permeates Jesus. These two extraordinary statements to "go the extra mile" and "turn the other cheek," both imagine a willingness on our part to swallow our pride, to resist revenge, and to take a surprising step forward.

When a mob brings Jesus a woman "caught in adultery," caught red-handed, no doubt about it, and the law was on the mob's side. They had the right, the legal right, the Biblical right, the societal right, the traditional right to stone her to death. But Jesus does two things. The Bible says, "He bent down and began to

write on the ground.” (John 8:7) He was buying time. He was doing to the mob what our parents and teachers did to us when they told us, “Count to 10.” Before doing anything, count to 10, “bend down and write on the ground,” take a deep breath, chill, all ways to lower the temperature and gain perspective.

And when it comes to perspective, Jesus then tells the mob, “Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.” In other words, sure, go ahead and kill her, she’s done a bad thing, and if you’ve never done a wrong thing, if you’re so good, so perfect, so wonderful in every way, go ahead, punish!”

Jesus did that repeatedly, inviting us to look at ourselves, to take stock, before we get all high and mighty, all holier than thou, all vengeful, all umbrage, all righteous indignation, all condemnation, all unforgiving. Because, Jesus reminds us, one day we may be in need of a little forgiveness, a little mercy. Maybe now, maybe sooner, maybe on Judgment Day.

Most powerful of all, Jesus carried this commitment to forgiveness all the way to the Cross, where forgiveness was no longer philosophical or theological or spiritual. On that day, on Calvary, it was personal. That tortured, beaten, Jesus had been laid down on a wooden cross, nails pounded into his flesh, and then hung there to die an awful death. In the midst of that, he says to God, “Father, forgive them.”

I started this sermon admitting it’s not easy. When I went away this summer to write, I was working on three writing projects: some new short stories, a “white paper” on our Church’s 300th anniversary, and an epic-sized essay on America. There’s a recurring theme in all of it, as there was in my last book of short stories, *Water into Wine*. The theme is that God’s love is greater, much greater than we dare to imagine, probably greater than we want to imagine.

I’m going to keep hammering this point home in the months ahead, in the seven years ahead, as we move toward our 300th anniversary. It is who we are. It is what we stand for. It is who Jesus is. It is what Jesus stands for. A love so extraordinary that it fuels a forgiveness even more extraordinary.

One of the points I make, and you’re going to hear this a lot from me because it really annoys me that there are people, so-called Christian people, who mock us, who mock me, who mock a Church like ours that stresses God’s “amazing grace.” That’s what love and forgiveness are: the very “amazing grace” everyone likes to sing about, but when we preach it and teach it, outside critics mock us for having a Christianity “l-i-t-e,” Christianity without substance, soft.

They want more hell from us, more judgment, more damnation, more fear. I’ve been confronted with this for decades, literally, since my very first year as a

pastor. It has come in every form: letters, emails, books, visits. The high point—or low point—was when two men wanted to take over this Church and change the message to more destructive, more threatening, more angry. And when I refused, they put a curse on me and our Church!

What's common about all these critics is that they view our emphasis on God's love, Jesus's forgiveness, and true "amazing grace" as wimpy, gutless, weak. That's the part that irks me. And my response is the same. To be a loving Church, a truly loving, forgiving Church, that isn't just the high road, that's also the hard road, that's the far more difficult road.

Seriously, is it easier to love, or to hate? To forgive, or hold on to a grudge? To turn the other cheek, or to fight back? To go the extra mile, or say, "I've had enough"?

Saturday afternoon I listened to a memorial concert for Leonard Cohen, the great folksinger. The final song was also the final song of his life, the last song he recorded just before he died. It's called "Darker," and it is his "tip of the hat" to faith, which was important to Leonard Cohen his whole life. But it carries this warning: "You want it darker? Kill the flame."

Jesus is the "Light of the World." Jesus talks about us as the Light of the World. That's why we are so committed to God's love, so real in Christ leading us to such Amazing Grace. To those who want it "darker," they'll have to "kill the flame." But not as long as this Church stands.

And so, in our 10:30 service, we'll have Polly Sheppard, who was there in that Church Bible Study in Charleston when a young boy, so filled with racial hate that he carefully killed nine Church people, her friends, her loved ones, one by one. And we'll have Dr. Rose Simmons, whose father, a Church pastor, was also one of the nine people killed, and somehow these ladies emerged from their sorrow, rose up from their grief, refused the mantle of hatred, rejected the voices of revenge, turned their backs on "an eye for an eye," and rose up to travel this country of ours, this "America the beautiful," visiting Church after Church with the Gospel of love.

A weak religion? Christianity "lite"? Spineless? Soft? No. They were remembering their Jesus, who in his darkest hour of deepest pain looked out at his worst enemies and forgave them.

He believed in something far greater than their curse, their nails, their weapons of torture, their evil desire, their hatred. He believed it in a time and a place and a Church and a God where love wins.