

Greeting is Psalm 130: “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; O Lord hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared. I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning. O Israel, put your hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.”

Our first hymn is #185 from the Green book, “Amazing Grace”

The first reading is from the writing of the great twentieth century Quaker thinker, Rufus Jones. “George Fox and his early followers went forth with unbounded faith and enthusiasm to discover in all lands those who were true fellow-members with them in this great household of God, and who were the hidden seed of God. Our Society thus arose from a series of mutual discoveries of men and women who found that they were making the same spiritual pilgrimage. This is still our experience today. Even at times of great difference of opinion, we have known a sense of living unity, because we have recognized one another as followers of Jesus. We are at different stages along the way. We use different language to speak of the Truth and to express our discipleship. The insistent questioning of the seeker, the fire of the rebel, the reflective contribution of the more cautious thinker – all have a place amongst us. This does not always make life easy. But we have found that we have learned to listen to one another, to respect the sincerity of one another’s opinions, to love and to care for one another. We are enabled to do this because God first loved us. The gospels tell us of the life and teaching of Jesus. The Universal Light known inwardly, is our guide. It is the grace of God which

gives us the strength to follow. It is forgiveness which restores us when we are oppressed by the sense of falling short. These things we know, not as glib phrases, but out of the depths of sometimes agonizing experience.

Membership, therefore, we see primarily in terms of discipleship, and so impose no clear-cut tests of doctrine or outward observance. Membership implies acceptance of responsibility and a sense of commitment. It implies a willingness to be used by God, however imperfect we may feel ourselves to be as messengers. God will not miraculously deliver us from the trials of temper and temptation, pettiness and pride, which are a part of human nature. In our worship together, and as we learn together in a Christian community, the light will help us to overcome the limitations of our nature, to become more fully the people we are intended to be. Not as though we had already attained, either were already perfect, but we follow after ... forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, we press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God.”

From Colossians 3:12-14 “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity”

From Matthew 18 “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times”

Our second hymn is #191 in the Green book “If I have Wounded Any Soul Today”

Joys and Concerns---then music interlude

Dear Friends—May we all be forgiven and may we all be deeply able to forgive, and be able to trust and believe that forgiveness truly happens and is complete. The love that binds us together in perfect unity can only thrive in the constant nurture and true compassion of forgiveness. Let us find the compassion and love that allows us to forgive ourselves. In that forgiveness, let us all release the held breath of fear, the fear of being accused or being wrong or being found out, of being shamed. In forgiveness, we release that held breath of trepidation and inhale the breath of life. We pray to have the Light within illuminate every corner of our lives, more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning. Shine on us the redemption, the release, the peace, the forgiveness of the forgiven that will be our shield, our confidence, our access to what lies within. Bless and keep the storm ravaged and the tempest-tossed. Amen.

Our next hymn is #268 “Knight Without a Sword”.

Children may now head downstairs for time with each other, to nurture each other with lessons and play in community.

Message: Many of you may have noticed that the New International Bible, the English translation I prefer that is no longer all that new, renders the verse in Matthew as Jesus advising Peter that one should forgive an offending brother seventy-seven times, though in a note it does say “or seventy times seven”. The point is, of course that while one might be able to keep track of seven times, no one could sensibly keep track of seventy-seven or four hundred ninety such incidents. The more interesting note in the translation for me is that it mentions that some manuscripts do not have the words “against you” in the first part. “If your brother sins (against you), go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall

I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times”

In the context of today’s message, I’d also like to consider, and I don’t think it is at all out of character for the Peter of the New Testament, to frame a question about a brother when it is really about himself. “I have a friend who is wondering...”. What if the brother is yourself. How many times are you willing to forgive yourself for your mistakes, your sins of omission and commission? How helpful is it for someone else to forgive you if you cannot forgive yourself? We need both, we need to face up to both with one another and with ourselves and to forgive in both instances. Apology and restitution may be part of the equation of forgiveness, but in the end, we need to find equilibrium to allow access to light again, to allow hope, to allow love.

We opened with the hymn “Amazing Grace” written by a wretch, John Newton, a slave captain who was astonished that forgiveness was possible. The nature of forgiveness, however, is that it is not deserved. The wrong was done. The past has happened. That will not change. So much of the etiquette of forgiveness is really so that we can forgive ourselves for what we have done, to rebalance our relationships. That is easier to do if we apologize and if the people we have offended forgive us. The idea that God, the essential power of the universe, can forgive us is a comfort as well. That is the beauty, I think of Psalm 130 with its haunting repetition.

“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; O Lord hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared. I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning. O Israel, put your hope in the

Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.”

The desire to be forgiven can only be fulfilled if we ourselves are forgiving. The story of Stephen, the martyr from the book of Acts, in our second hymn is one where there are no transactions to the forgiveness, no tradeoffs nor expectations, just faithfulness to the inner light, the flame in the heart. We can speak our truth and listen to the truth of others. We must not be hard on ourselves. The world is hard enough. As in Colossians, we can approach each other with compassion and love. Stephen forgave his oppressors before they physically crushed him, and in so doing his spirit transcended the physical limitations, the impossibility of where he found himself in the world. Individually, we ourselves may never face or live up to such a high demand or example, but we can also testify and exemplify collectively, as a community of faithfulness.

As humans and part of our changeable, fallible world, we will always find the ways that we fall short of our ideals and of the demands of Spirit. We are also, ourselves, capable of renewing those demands, of voicing those demands and keeping them at the forefront. Learning from our mistakes, from our failings, is a way that we honor and forgive ourselves and build our strength. Having the humility to allow ourselves to see and hear our errors and know our need for forgiveness is another means by which we let ourselves forgive.

Those who do not forgive themselves and do not forgive others can end up building walls that hide the light, that block out the hope. In forgiveness, we stop competing to prove who was right or where wrong occurred first. This forgiveness is what is so remarkable about our modern saints, Ghandi, King, Mandela—when there was so much that did not deserve forgiveness, yet it was there. It is a way to peace, to joy, and to right living and hope for the future.

It is also a way of interpreting the world. An “old testament” view of the world may see retribution in natural disasters and unfortunate or even deadly occurrences. There is a long-held traditional belief that hurricanes, like the ones this week, come from all of the souls of those who perished at sea during the Atlantic slave trade and that’s why they hit at exactly the areas of the cruelest slavery. Lincoln himself speculated in his second inaugural address as to whether the civil war was a just punishment for slavery so that every drop of blood drawn by the lash would be paid for by one drawn by the sword. This search for old testament eye-for-an-eye logic in history and world events is a way of telling the story, but it is a way that omits, evades, and in some cases makes impossible forgiveness. That is not what King, Ghandi, Mandela and others did, and it is not what we are called to do.

Meanwhile, the calls for justice and equity in the world are real and true and are not to be diluted nor waved away with forgiveness. That is again why the fundamental forgiveness I see is in forgiving oneself while letting one’s life speak and testify to the Truths one sees and knows. Let that of God come forth, and forgive yourself when the world does not always do so, make that investment in the universal spirit, in the hope to come, then resume the struggle.

Our closing hymn is #269 in the Green book, “Let Your Light Shine”

Closing: Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us”