

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
Rev. Howard K. Bell
Sunday, March 13, 2016
God's Forgiveness

Thank you for the personal support you have offered me, over the past few weeks, during a time of my saying goodbye to my close friend and UCC Clergy colleague, Rev. Jay Thomas (Tom) George. Tom died on February 26th under home hospice care. Tom and I shared many things, including the same birthday. Tom was born within thirty miles of my birthplace in Southwestern Pennsylvania, He had been married and came out as gay, as I had been married and came out as gay. In 2003 he had recently completed his Privilege of Call process just prior to my completing my Privilege of Call process. My Committee on the Ministry advisor also was Tom's Committee on the Ministry advisor. Our advisor is the person who suggested to me that I read Tom's theology paper and talk with him in order to update my own theology – it had been thirty-five years since I had studied theology or even engaged in professional theological reflection.

Tom and I became very close friends having frequent lunches together, being roommates at the Minnesota Conference UCC Annual Meeting, being founding members of the Open and Affirming Team in the conference, and sharing many similar passions about care of the dying; compassion and care for persons during the grieving process; and social justice concerns, particularly for lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender persons. I am most grateful for Tom's presence in my life and the many ways that he taught, guided, mentored and supported me over the last thirteen years. I share now a story with you where Tom continued to teach me about forgiveness even after his death.

Here is my story. As long as I had known Tom, he had been dealing with chronic health concerns. Over the last couple of years, he frequently talked about the plans he was working on to pre-plan his memorial service. He asked me to do a reading. However, he continually forgot to provide me with a copy of the reading. As his health declined, he finally delivered it to me. The reading was a prayer by American Trappist Monk, Thomas Merton found in Merton's Book, Thoughts on Solitude. I gave the prayer a quick read and did not fully grasp its significance or meaning. I assumed I would have time to study and review it when the time came. Due to my own busyness I did not even consider that the prayer might be of use to me, to Tom, and/or to our relationship prior to Tom's death.

During the week following Tom's death, I pulled out the reading. I read it over several times, even practicing reading it out loud. The meaning continued to evade me and I wondered how it had been so important to my friend, yet I could not seem to grasp its meaning in a personal way. When I read it aloud I kept stumbling over some of the phrases. Finally, it occurred to me that since it was a prayer, I should try praying it rather than reading it. Suddenly, the meaning hit me like a thunderbolt. I am going to pray it now:

"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I

am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”¹

The key phrase in this prayer for me is Merton praying to God these words: “*I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.*” What a powerful statement of faith! In the same way that I began this Lenten sermon series on forgiveness with the question, “What if, ‘Forgiving is giving up the hope that the past will get better’ is **all** that forgiveness means;” I now ask “What if, ‘the desire to please God does in fact please God’ is **all** that is required of our faith?” Both are certainly simplistic phrases, but phrases with great power and meaning.

I believe that our lives would be richer if these two phrases are allowed to reside in our hearts and our minds and remembered throughout our lives. Then we all might be able to sincerely pray with Merton: “Therefore, I will trust you always...I will not fear...you will never leave me to face my perils alone”. What more does God require of us? What more do we require of God?

I am grateful to Tom for introducing me to this prayer. I have regret that I failed to grasp its meaning for Tom and for me when Tom was still alive. We could have prayed it together, discussed it further and I am certain that he could have enriched its meaning for me. I also regret that I had not grasped the meaning of this prayer during the time that I visited Tom in hospice care. I might have been able to bring him comfort by praying it with him and for him. I ask for forgiveness from both God and Tom for my failures. It is the prayer that gives me confidence in God’s forgiveness. It is the beauty of the relationship I shared with Tom that gives me confidence in Tom’s forgiveness.

Tom was a person who always had more concern for the other than for his own needs. This reality of our relationship was brought home for me during Tom’s eulogy – which was preached by the same person who had served as our Committee on the Ministry advisor. The words of the eulogy helped me to understand that the basic nature of the relationship I had with Tom, was very similar to the way Tom related to all of his friends and to all those with whom he had contact. Tom never wallowed in pity over his conditions, but always sought to listen to the concerns of others. He was one of the most effective listeners that I have known.

Turning to today’s text, from the Gospel of Luke, maybe we can even imagine that the uninvited dinner guest might have had had this thought in her mind: “*I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.*” Might this phrase help us to understand the uninvited guests’ actions? The scripture reads: “*...a woman in the city, who was a sinner...stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the*

¹ <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/80913-my-lord-god-i-have-no-idea-where-i-am>

ointment." (Luke 7: 37-38) This uninvited guest did not concern herself with social protocol. She did not even need to confess the sins for which she apparently was well known in the community. All that she did was to express awareness of having been forgiven - through her tears -and she sought to please Jesus by offering him the hospitality that he had not been offered by the Pharisee who hosted him.

Our text tells us that Jesus was able to read the mind of the Pharisee. Jesus knew that the Pharisee was both condemning the woman for her sins and also condemning Jesus for appearing to not know that the guest was a known sinner. Jesus demonstrated his knowledge of the Pharisee's thought, by telling the parable of the two debtors. In this parable the difference in the debts was only ten times a small debt of fifty denarii. Yet, the Pharisee clearly knew the correct answer to Jesus' question: *"Now which of them will love him more?"* (Luke: 7: 42b) The Pharisee answered: *"I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt."* Jesus proceeded to not only affirm the correctness of the answer, but also to draw a direct parallel between the Pharisee and the uninvited guest. Jesus concludes today's text with these words for the Pharisee: *"Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little."* (Luke 7: 47)

Biblical Commentator, Verlee A. Copeland, explains the power of today's text in this way: *"...Today we hear about God's graciousness toward the sinner who was considered unworthy to be in Jesus' presence. She becomes the forgiven one who is exalted for her faith... Jesus casts an ever-widening net to catch the people of God... Jesus draws a circle around people previously standing at the margins, drawing them inside... This gives us great hope that we too may be a part of God's continuing story."*²

It is my hope that this Lenten season, we have become more familiar with the power of forgiveness; more open to forgiving those who have harmed us; more willing to ask forgiveness from those whom we may have harmed; and more aware of God's great gift of forgiveness to each of us. May our Wednesday Lenten series, also have strengthened our awareness of those presumed to be outside our circle; and strengthened our willingness, like Jesus, to cast an ever-widening net. May it be so. Amen.

² Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word - Year C, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Proper 3-16).