

Sermon- Bridge Back Home. March 11, 2012, UUAC.

On the news they call him a gunman, but in photos he looks like a child, and I am mystified that this kid could kill anyone. In the pictures the local news took from his Facebook page he stands outside shirtless, ribs protruding through thin, child's skin. A pale and hairless face, he must weight about 100 pounds soaking wet. In one photo he poses holding tight to a big teddy bear with a red heart between its paws. He looks like a kid with an awkward haircut, the boy down the street you might hire to cut your grass while on vacation, the kid who might deliver your newspaper. As I continue to click through the internet photos the story changes. Police cars, ambulances, fire trucks outside of a high school. Teenagers, wide eyed and pale, evacuating. And finally, parents and children clutching each other, desperately, crying, in the school parking lot.

I don't know why TJ Lane walked into a rural Ohio high school last week and began to shoot. Growing up he saw he dad beat up his mom, his dad try to suffocate a woman he later married, he saw both his parents lose custody of him, his dad went to prison. His classmates describe him as an outcast, as bullied. He didn't even go to Chardon

High, where the shooting took place, he went to a special school for at-risk teens. Officials describe him now as confused, scared, and troubled. I don't know why he ended of lives of three students, and injured several more.

This month our theme is Community: the Practice of Encountering Others. Because we spend our whole lives learning to live together in community, trying and failing and trying again at being together. And some days, days like last Monday, when a child killed 3 other children in the Chardon High School cafeteria just outside of Cleveland, it seems that as a society we have failed at being in community all together. So many failures- a child who saw abuse, domestic violence, with perhaps untreated mental illness, had easy access to a gun, killing other kids, for no discernable reason. On horrible days like this I wonder if we humans would be better off living in isolated caves, or yurts in the forest, and just staying away from each other.

How can a community continue after a day like this?

Demetrius Hewlin was one of the boys shot last week. Demetrius loved football and exercising, and family said he was always laughing, joking

around, happy. But Demetrius' real legacy, what folks will remember in the years to come, is that of radical forgiveness.

Demetrius' mother, Phyllis Ferguson, was interviewed by ABC news soon after her son died, and she said that if she had a chance to talk to TJ, to speak to the boy her killed her son, she would tell him she forgave him. She forgave him. Phyllis Ferguson said that she always told her son that until you have walked in another person's shoes you don't know what their life has been like, and that forgiveness is divine.

Wow. Talk about radical forgiveness. TJ Lane is so hated in Chardon, Ohio that he wore a bulletproof vest to his court hearing. It is not safe for him to walk from a police car into a building without being surrounded by guards. But Phyllis Ferguson, a mother whose son died by TJ's gun, forgives him. Why? Because forgiveness is divine.

The power of forgiveness is what holds communities together- the ability that we humans have to forgive the big and small slights of our neighbors is why we don't have to live isolated lives in the woods.

Forgiveness is a bridge back home, a return to the spiritual practice of living in community.

Think of the story Bev and I just read- think of all the spiritual weight you would carry if you never forgave your children, your parents, the people who run into you in a crowded hallway, the woman who cut you off in traffic. How do we know to do that? How do we know to forgive?

For me the Bible is not a historical record, but a collection of myths, of wisdom stories put together by an ancient group of people who created some stories, recorded the things they saw, and borrowed this and that morality tale from the other tribes they encountered. That is why the Biblical story of Job is found in so many traditions, that is why the virgin birth is a repeating motif in many legends. The stories were repeated orally for hundreds of years, and then written down a repeated for 2 thousand years, because there is wisdom in them, wisdom that parents and teachers and holy leaders felt was worth passing on to the children they loved. They thought the stories would encourage young people to be brave, to be resilient, to be moral and good citizens.

And perhaps the most radical of these stories is that of Jesus hanging on the cross. Jesus the political prisoner, killed for his convictions. The situation is expected- Jesus of Nazareth has been boldly protesting the occupation of his homeland by the Romans. Under occupation the Jew's

were second or third class citizens, and didn't have many rights. Jews who cooperated with the Romans, who applauded the occupation, were treated better than those who grumbled, and those who outright protested were killed.

So unlike the shooting at Chardon High School, it was no surprise when the Roman authorities arrested Jesus and sentenced him to death. It was tragic to the many activists who followed Jesus, but it wasn't a surprise. What was a surprise are the words attributed to Jesus while he hung, dying in agony, on the cross. The crowd was mocking him, and people were busy dividing up his belongings for themselves. And according to the story Jesus said- forgive them, because they don't know, they don't understand what they are doing.

Forgive them.

These words are even more powerful to me because I doubt that they came from the lips of Jesus. He was alone, high on a cross, and the people below were either desperately mourning or mocking him while they divided up his stuff. No reporter was present. No one tweeted the event. So it is even more powerful that these are the words that the

storytellers, the believers, put on his lips. That generations of tellers put a call for forgiveness on the lips of their hero while he was dying.

Jesus, the hero of the story, is saying- forgive them- don't attack, don't seek revenge. Forgive them, because they don't know what they are doing.

Almost these exact words came from the mouth of Phyllis Ferguson shortly after her son died in Chardon. When asked what she would say to TJ, the boy who killed her son, Phyllis said: "I would tell him I forgive him because, a lot of times, they don't know what they're doing. She went on to say that they taught Demetrius that forgiveness is divine. She ended by saying "Until you've walked in another person's shoes, you don't know what made him come to this point."

Forgiveness is divine. Forgiveness is divine and it is also so very earthly, in that it is something we have to practice over and over again. People say "How can Phyllis Ferguson forgive her son's killer? Is she in shock, in denial? Is she crazy with grief?" Maybe. I can't imagine so readily forgiving the person who took away someone I love so dearly.

But I would also bet that Phyllis has been working on the spiritual practice of forgiveness for many years, and that her forgiveness skills are very developed. I would bet her ability to forgive is like the ability of a concert pianist who practices scales for five or six hours a day. She is a master forgiver.

I want to make clear that forgiveness does not mean excusing bad behavior. If someone is hurting you forgiveness does not mean allowing them to continue. Abuse is never okay. Forgiveness does not coincide with my least favorite Biblical aphorism, that of 'turning the other cheek.' Turning the other cheek means letting someone hit you again. That is not what I am advocating.

The first step in forgiveness is recognizing that someone has hurt you and that hurting you is not okay. It means acknowledging that you have been wronged and taking steps to make sure it doesn't happen again. It might mean not staying in relationship with the person who hurt you- it might mean never speaking to them again.

Then, forgiveness asks that we accept that as humans we err.

Forgiveness means remembering, perhaps with some embarrassment,

all the times we have erred and been forgiven by others. Forgiveness means releasing all the hurt and anger we are holding in our bodies, our hearts, and moving on.

Perhaps you have been thinking about forgiveness this week because of the controversy surrounding conservative commentator Rush Limbaugh's apology to Sandra Fluke. On his syndicated radio program Rush criticized a young woman, Sandra Fluke, who spoke before a Congressional panel regarding the need for birth control pills to treat common ailments like ovarian cysts. Rush called her many misogynist names over the course of 3 days, heartily implied that she was a prostitute, and demanded she put explicit videos of herself online for him to see. When he began to lose advertisers over his lambasting, he offered an apology online, saying that "my choice of words was not the best."

Should Sandra Fluke forgive Rush? That is up to her. What is important to remember is that forgiveness does not mean letting go of accountability- if Rush is to be forgiven he has to stop using misogynist language, he has to quit distorting Fluke's words. Forgiveness does not mean that he is allowed to continue hurting her.

Forgiveness would mean acknowledging that Rush is a human, and that as humans we make mistakes. Forgiveness would give Fluke an opportunity to release the burden of anger from her heart and mind.

Phyllis Ferguson realized that TJ Lane was a human, really, just a boy. A boy who had seen more trouble than many people see in a lifetime, a boy whose motives she could never really understand. And Phyllis Ferguson knew that TJ Lane would not hurt her anymore, that he was in police custody, that he may be in prison for the rest of his life.

So she forgave him, because like her, he is human, and as humans we err. She forgave him even though she will never hold her teenage son again, never again laugh with him over the dinner table, never again watch him toss the football in the yard. Phyllis Ferguson forgave him because it removed one of the burdens that weighs heavily on her heart.

The spiritual practice of forgiveness is not easy- so few worthwhile things ever are- but it is what makes life in community possible. The story of Jesus forgiving his tormentors has been told for thousands of years, to give strength and hope to those who find forgiving hard, for all of us who struggle to forgive the people that hurt us.

And now the story of Phyllis Ferguson, a woman who lost her bright, happy, teenage son, and forgave his killer, can serve the same purpose. As we leave this sanctuary today I hope you will carry Phyllis' story with you, as I do, to use as sustenance in the hard work that is forgiving. Because only through forgiving can we live in community together. Forgiveness is divine.