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CROSSING THE BRIDGE TO FORGIVENESS
First Unitarian Universalist Church-Linton Street
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It is great to be back-in Cincinnati and, once again, here at First Unitarian! Thanks to my many good friends, I have followed the journey of this congregation for many years. And, it has always struck me that your congregation's story is one so worthy of emulation. As an outsider, I see your story as one of consistently embracing the challenge of your minister to cross thresholds and embrace transformation by making tough, but concrete choices: The choice to face up to the sin of exclusion and racism in your congregation's past; the choice to serve the community as an urban church and make that decision tangible by raising the money to renovate this house of peace, love and service.

Greater Cincinnati could learn much from you. It could learn the power of forgiveness and reconciliation and of redemption-all three of which are required if individually and collectively we are to have hope of transforming ourselves into a people and a community of peace and service.

Everyday we make choices that separate us from our God, our neighbor and ourselves. But, everyday we also have the choice to create a new narrative of new relationship by putting aside the worn out life story of regrets, rationalizations, excuses, and self justification of the wrongs, the failures, the slights and the hurts. They no longer have to bind us in and to the past.

But, how is it that this happens? I believe it is through grace. (The wonder of the word Grace!) Like any gift, however, the one on the receiving end has to be open to receiving it. And so as we think about reconciliation in our lives and in the life of our community, we also must think about repentance and forgiveness. It is through repentance that we open ourselves to transforming power of grace.

Now, many sophisticated, experienced people-like me, maybe you, start squirming at the mention of words like repentance, forgiveness, and sin. We are much more comfortable talking about our neurotic tendencies or the effect of group dynamics on individual behavior, than we are about sin, and repentance, and forgiveness. The discomfort is understandable. Some people and organizations use these words to further marginalize the already marginalized. I am not using these words as wedges to separate and marginalize, rather I am using them to describe the profound opportunity we have when we are willing to courageously face ourselves, own up to our actions, and turn away from those things that separate and divide.

Repentance is not regret over the past, although we often feel regretful. It is the desire to change our direction. It is a change of heart. It is a letting go of self-deception, projection and self-justification and taking responsibility for our choices and actions. It is conversion- the turning away from those things that isolate, separate, and alienate, and the turning to relationship with that which we linguistically refer to as “God” and to each other. It is the cracking open of our hearts and our lives to the grace that is ever present.

“Forgiveness is a relational stance of accepting the inherent worth of another person even after judging the wrong action.” (To Forgive is Human, McCullough, Sandage, and Worthington) With repentance comes the opportunity of forgiveness. Justice and mercy kiss in the act of forgiving. The offense is not exonerated or forgotten. Punishment or reparation may even be required. But the mutual humanity of each party is affirmed.

Ironically, the great obstacle to reconciliation is the inability or unwillingness of we who have sinned to seek forgiveness. We can apologize; we can explain our actions or lack thereof; we can justify our bad behavior. Whatever we do, still leaves us in charge, in control. It leaves us in known territory.

Forgiveness is the threshold we must cross into the unknown territory. In repentance and forgiveness, we are turning away from patterns and behaviors that are the fabric of our identity. We are letting go of practices and patterns that might have once allowed us to survive, but now just alienate us from one another and our community. And, we are giving the power to another to say yes or no. All without a clue as to where it will all lead.

Crossing the threshold is an act of both faith and hope. You have chosen to cross many thresholds and so understand why it is so difficult for the larger community to walk across the threshold of forgiveness and be reconciled. God only knows what exactly is on the other side! And God only knows that in this community we want to know exactly what is at the end of any journey before we are willing to set out on it! That might be why we keep retracing our steps and so often find ourselves back where we started.

Einstein said that you cannot solve a problem with the same consciousness that created it. Or as they used to say in political circles, “A paradigm shift is required.”

People of faith and the churches in our community have a very special responsibility to bring about reconciliation among people divided by prejudice and bias, and by history and the ignorance of history. We know that sin-those things that dehumanize and divide, is social as well as personal. We believe that change and redemption are possible for ourselves and for our communities.

First Unitarian is a model of courage, commitment and community for the larger community. Your journey of remembrance, forgiveness and reconciliation is one that testifies to the larger community that all things are possible with faith and hope.