Love and Forgiveness
A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

*It is not enough to know that love and forgiveness are possible. We have to find ways to bring them to life.* -- Jack Kornfield

On March 13, 2015, Pope Francis did an unusual thing. He declared 2016 as a special year in the Catholic Church...he declared an Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy.

In the Papal Bull that followed in April, he gave two reasons for this special Jubilee Year. One was to honor the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council, and the other was to emphasize the importance of mercy. The church needs to be more open, he said, and there is a need to understand the importance of “mercy and gaze upon it.”

Like Buddhist teacher, Jack Kornfield, he wants to bring forgiveness to life. Like Tara Brach, he wants more open hearts and more acceptance.

Bringing love and forgiveness to life requires us to get close to the pain. All of our pain. What we need is to get closer to one another. We need to “gaze upon mercy” as a concept and as we see it play out in our lives and in the world.

When we keep our distance - from one another, from our own pain, and from the pain we share as human beings on this planet - when we keep our distance, we cannot understand when is needed....what is possible.

Honestly, I hated to see that photo on the front page of the newspaper that showed the small boy who died on the beach while trying to find a safe place to be. He was labeled a refugee. Labeling can provide distance and a narrative that we think we understand.

But to get close, we’d have to remember his name, and know how many siblings he had, and what he loved to eat for breakfast. We have to think how mercy, forgiveness, and love might have saved his life. We have to feel the pain of his death.
To move toward forgiveness, wherever it may be needed, to practice mercy as Pope Frances is asking us to do, as the Buddha instructed centuries ago, as every religious leader I know speaks about from the heart, calls us to love mercy as the text of Micah 6, verse 8 instructs:

*This is what Yahweh asks of you: Only, this, to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*

Our ability to love mercy, our ability to forgive is a measure of our humanness.

There is a book that is selling at Starbucks and I think it is the common read recommended by the Unitarian Universalist Association this year. This book is about the crisis of the prison/industrial complex in America. It is about the moral compass of our nation, and why we acquiesce to being so quick to put people in jail, and so slow to find solutions of reconciliation. It is titled, *Just Mercy*. The author is Bryan Stevenson.

In the introduction, titled “Higher Ground,” Stevenson writes about his first visit to a death row inmate in a Georgia prison. He tells how scared he is and how unprepared he feels. He is a brand new intern in a legal non-profit where the mission is seeking justice for the inmates and working to spare their lives. The new young intern has no idea what to expect.

He has one hour with this person he’s never met. His job is to reassure the inmate that the organization is working on his case. And that he will not be executed within the year, that no date will be set during the next year.

Much transpires in the hour. Henry and Bryan are the same age and have much to talk about. They over stay their allotted time by two hours; the prison guard who comes to take Henry back to his cell is angry.

The guard treats the inmate roughly, humiliating him and hurting his body. Bryan gets more and more agitated upon seeing this and calls out to the guard to stop his unnecessarily cruel treatment. This only makes matters worse.

As he is being pushed through the door and into the cell block, Henry calls out comforting words to Bryan. And finally, with a last look backward, he begins to sing an old spiritual that Bryan remembers from his childhood:
If we are to do the hard work of forgiveness and mercy in whatever context touches our lives, then we must move closer to the pain, not further away.

Bryan Stevenson moved closer to the pain.

And we must stand on higher moral ground.

Whether we need to offer forgiveness to family members or close friends; whether we have inadvertently hurt a stranger or failed to be kind to a neighbor or a child or an elder; even if we ourselves feel the deep wound of an abusive parent, or a schoolyard bully, or a neglectful friend or partner, because we are human, there is need to forgive and to be forgiven. Because we are human, apology, turning the other cheek, grace or forgiveness do not come easy.

We are often shocked when we hear of forgiveness offered. Families of those killed in the historic African American church in Charleston, North Carolina spoke one by one to the young man who killed their loved ones.

Nadine Collier, whose 70-year-old mother was a victim, said, “you took something very precious form me. I will never talk to her again. I will never ever hold her again. But I forgive you, and have mercy on your soul.”

Like the Amish families who offered forgiveness after their daughters were killed in the school house, forgiveness came from those who were part of a religious community. Mercy came, one by one, from people acting on the tenet of their faith - that love is stronger than hate, that non-violence is a binding principle.

Our culture too often sells and panders to the opposite of forgiveness or mercy. Our movies, television, and music often promote revenge, retribution, an eye for an eye.

Almost daily we learn of new stalemates, new steps taken back rather than toward the pain in the world, new low bars are reached more often than higher ground is sought and tried for.
To find the higher moral ground requires us to step back and ask the hard questions: Who is responsible? Can unjust systems be changed? Can I change? How can we hold one another accountable? What might it mean to let go of anger?

Sometimes we get stuck in asking why:

Why couldn’t Donald Trump apologize to Carly Fiorina or to Jeb Bush’s wife?

Why can’t the County Clerk in Kentucky just quit her job, if her faith deters her from signing marriage licenses for all couples?

Why does the Pope feel that women need forgiveness for the sin of having had to choose an abortion?

Why can’t the European nations share the burden of the Syria refugee crisis?

These questions do not move us forward. They are not helpful questions, and they all have the same answer: because we are flawed, fallible human beings. We do or don’t do what moves toward forgiveness because we are human!

How do we get to higher moral ground, individually and as communities? How do we do more than survive as human beings?

I believe communities of faith help us to be more fully human. How we treat others is a foundation of all the world’s religions. Language of love rather than revenge, language of reconciliation rather than domination, language of empathy rather than advice, these are the languages taught in religious community.

The Ten Days of Awe in the Jewish year give people a clear path toward inviting more forgiveness into their lives. The 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous do the same.

Rather than keep a distance from those you may have hurt, the rituals of Judaism and the secular steps of AA encourage one to come closer, to seek out those you may have wronged or from whom you feel estranged.
To reach out and ask for forgiveness is not easy, but it is a human act of moral courage; a way of standing on higher ground.

Questions of forgiveness and mercy are not simple ones. How to stand outside the popular culture of violence and winners and losers is too hard to do alone.

Today, we bring our personal challenges around forgiveness and we hold them in our hands, curling our fingers around these stones - stones that represent stones in our hearts, stones that represent the potential to cast off regrets and mistakes and deep hurts.

Today, we stand hoping to reach higher ground, to do better next time, to let go of judgment. Today, we hope to love mercy, to offer and receive forgiveness.

What we ask of ourselves today is hard, as the stone is hard. What we ask of ourselves is within our power to change, as the stone is within our grasp.

Are you ready to forgive yourself?
Are you ready to forgive those who have hurt you?
Are you ready to apologize to those whom you have hurt?

Are you ready for love and forgiveness?

Can you do it alone?
Can this community of faith support you in moving toward loving mercy?

I'll close with this story of how a community, a tribe in South Africa, makes forgiveness more possible.

In the Babemba tribe, when a person acts irresponsibly or unjustly, he is placed in the center of the village, alone and unfettered. All work ceases, and every man, woman and child in the village gathers in a large circle around the accused individual.

Then each person in the tribe speaks to the accused, one at a time, each recalling the good things the person in the center of the circle has done in his lifetime.
Every incident, every experience that can be recalled with any detail and accuracy is recounted.

All his positive attributes, good deeds, strengths, and kindnesses are recited carefully and at length.

This tribal ceremony often lasts for several days. At the end, the tribal circle is broken, a joyous celebration takes place, and the person is symbolically and literally welcomed back into the tribe.

So you see, another blessing of religious community or tribe or kinship circle is the traditional ritual. Today, we will engage in an annual ritual, inspired by the rituals of Yom Kippur and the Days of Awe.

Today we will, in silence, use our stones to represent the pain and the possibility of forgiveness in our lives.

May we be among those who raise up a higher moral ground. May we be among those who offer acts of mercy, and thus add to the expansion of human kindness in our own lives and in the world.

So May It Be/Amen