Sermon: To Forgive is Divine, by John Tolley  August 22, 2010
First Presbyterian Church, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Christian Scriptures:
Luke 14: 1, 7-14

One Sabbath when [Jesus] went to dine at the house of a ruler who belonged to the Pharisees, they were watching him. Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he marked how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, "When you are invited by anyone to a marriage feast, do not sit down at a place of honor, lest a more eminent person than you be invited by the host; and the one who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give place to this person' and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, "Friend, go up higher;" then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and who humbles herself will be exalted."

He said also to the man who had invited him, "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."

Luke 12: 54-56

He also said to the multitudes, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, 'A shower is coming'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky; but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"

"To err is human, to forgive is divine." I've always been comforted by this aphorism. I must admit that I identify more often with the consolation of my humanness in error, than I glory in the divinity of my forgiveness. I learned in the preparation of this sermon that the first time western language records this sentiment is when the Roman stoic philosopher, Seneca the Younger penned, "errare humanum est; perseverare diabolicum:" "to err is human; to persist is of the Devil." And then Alexander Pope, in this eighteenth quatrain proclaimed:

Ah, ne'er so dire a Thirst of Glory boast,
Nor in the Critick let the Man be lost!
Good-Nature and Good-sense must ever join;
To err is human; to forgive divine.

There is a parallel in my mind between these Roman and English musings and the words attributed to Jesus in our readings from the gospel of Luke this morning. In the first scripture from the lectionary for today, I hear Jesus cautioning us to be humble, not assuming that our place in the world is one of honor, but one of humility. We are human after all, and our judgment at times can be faulty. Our pride can be called out and we indeed might feel public shame, or at least embarrassment. But if, as Jesus challenges us in the second reading, we use our minds and, as Pope adds, "our good nature and good sense," to properly interpret our situation, our chances of appearing foolish or "of the devil," are far reduced!
Forgiveness is a primary theme running through the story of “The Laramie Project,” the drama now in rehearsal in our theatre. The play documents the struggles of the citizens of Laramie, Wyoming in the days and months following the death of Matthew Shepard in October of 1998. The young Shepard was a gay college student at the University of Wyoming and was murdered in what has become, perhaps, the most publicized hate crime of the last quarter century. In writing about the play and its initial performance in Denver, M. S. Mason, art editor for the Christian Science Monitor, explained, “. . . while there have been public outpourings of support for victims’ families, the communities have suffered too, and the reactions have often been angry and confused. . . . Denver’s regional theatre has addressed the issue of Shepard’s murder more thoughtfully. The Denver Center Theatre Company produced “The Laramie Project,” a play compiled, created and performed by the New York based Tectonic Theatre Project. It has helped viewers put hate crime in perspective.”

First Presbyterian Theatre has at the heart of its mission a dictum to create art that sheds light on social problems, and by so doing, offering the audience participants opportunities to wish and to work for change in the culture that is more reflective of the church’s faith values. While reading for the service this morning I was delighted to return to your “First Presbyterian Church Drama Program Statement of Purpose”. It was first written in 1973, the year before I started my tenure here as Drama Director, and revised in 1978. This quote struck me as particularly relative to this production:

Drama is one means to reassert the terrible importance of each human soul. Art and religion, twin manifestations of the creative human spirit, must seek to arouse and repair our ability to dream dreams splendid enough to create a world more consistent with our divine image. It is the business of the church to ask its members and society at large those questions which they would rather not answer, so that they may be free to act on the answers that raise themselves. Endless repetition of the same questions and the same answers will not suffice in a world troubled with new questions and searching for new values. . . . The church is only ready for religion, only ready for drama, when it can open itself to the implications of dramatic revelation – when the congregation can accept the world of imagination and can risk being excited, risk being frightened, risk being changed. Such risk is near the very heart of the Christian message.”

Even though this production of “The Laramie Project” focuses on the social prejudices of homophobia, that fear rests in a larger reality of a divided nation. The genius of the play, produced in the Spring of 2000 first in Denver then in New York City, is that it immediately identifies the prejudices alive and well in this small Wyoming town: class prejudice, education inequality, economic divisions, religious differences, gender roles and sexual orientation. As the town confronts Shepard’s murder, all these all other misgivings about difference complicate the struggles of individual citizens to understand the tragedy. It is the theatre company, conducting over 200 interviews with these same citizens, that begins to break down the isolation of the various prejudices. Conservative religious leaders begin to dialog with young, social radicals. Members of heterosexual families meet and exchange ideas for the first times in their lives with gay men and lesbians yearning to feel safe in their hometown. Artists and ranchers, teachers and bartenders sit shoulder to shoulder in churches and courtrooms forcing new meaning out of broken dreams. The drama is not fiction in the sense that most theatre performance is created from the mind of the playwright. The words of this script are the words of the people of Laramie, Wyoming; the actors’ portrayals are of living people, not imagined characters. Theatre performed so close to reality helps underscore the point that Laramie could be any town in any part of the country. Wherever we live in these great
United States, the story is our story. Again, from M. S. Mason’s article quoted above, the writer concludes: “...a genuine optimism about human goodness pervades the piece – a recognition that evil is not beyond remedy if we, as a society, are ready to renounce hate.” But before we can renounce hate, we have to name it and “ask those questions we would rather not answer so that we are free to act on answers that raise themselves”, as the Statement of Purpose reminded us. In this speech from the play’s second act, a university student reminds us that perhaps the first step in a process of forgiveness is to forgive ourselves. These are the words of Zubaida Ula, a Muslim student, read by Abi Hobbs from the cast:

And it was so good to be with people who felt like crap. I kept feeling like I don’t deserve to feel this bad, you know? And someone got up there and said uh – he said um, blah, blah, blah, blah and then he said, I’m saying it wrong, but basically he said, c’mon guys, let’s show the world that Laramie is not this kind of a town. But it is that kind of a town. If it wasn’t this kind of a town, why did this happen here? I mean, you know what I mean, like – that’s a lie. Because it happened here. So how could it not be a town where this kind of thing happens? Like, that’s just totally – like, looking at an Escher painting and getting all confused like, it’s just totally like circular logic, like how can you even say that? And we have to mourn this and we have to be sad that we live in a town, a state, a country where crap like this happens. I mean, these are people trying to distance themselves from this crime. And we need to own this crime. I feel. Everyone needs to own it. We are like this. We ARE like this. WE are LIKE this.

So, it was in the midst of these thoughts in this rehearsal process that I began to questions my assumptions about the divinity of forgiveness. I have for a long time understood that forgiveness does not always, nor perhaps should it ever, include forgetting. We don’t want to continue to fall short of the glory of God over and over again because we refuse to remember. But is forgiveness in essence mercy? And does mercy granted necessarily demand forgiveness? These are some of the questions “The Laramie Project” raises, and none more poignantly than in the statement made by Dennis Shepard, Matthew’s father, at the trial of Aaron McKinney, one of the boys convicted of the murder. The prosecution left the decision of implementation of the death penalty to the Shepard family, and this is how they responded in a transcript from the trial. Michael Young, (Luci Foltz), from the cast of the drama shares these words of Dennis Shepard:

My son Matthew did not look like a winner. He was rather uncoordinated and wore braces from the age of thirteen until the day he died. However, in his all too brief life he proved that he was a winner. On October sixth, 1998 my son tried to show the world that he could win again. On October twelfth, 1998 my first born son and my hero, lost. On October twelfth, 1998 my first born son and my hero, died, fifty days before his twenty-second birthday.

I keep wondering the same thing that I did when I first saw him in the hospital. What would he have become? How could he have changed his piece of the world to make it better?

Matt officially died in a hospital in Ft. Collins, Colorado. He actually died on the outskirts of Laramie, tied to a fence. You Mr. McKinney with your friend Mr. Henderson left him out there by himself, but he wasn’t alone. There were his lifelong friends with him, friends that he had grown up with. You’re probably wondering who these friends were. First he had the beautiful night sky and the same starts and moon that we used to see through a telescope. Then he had the daylight and the sun to shine on him. And through it all he was breathing in the
scent of the pine trees from the snowy range. He heard the wind, the ever-present Wyoming wind, for the last time. He had one more friend with him. He had God. And I feel better knowing he wasn’t alone.

Matt’s beating, hospitalization and funeral focused worldwide attention on hate. Good is coming out of evil. People have said enough is enough. I miss my son, but I am proud to be able to say that he is my son.

Judy has been quoted as being against the death penalty. It has been stated that Matt was against the death penalty. Both of these statements are wrong. Matt believed that there were crimes and incidents that justified the death penalty. I too believe in the death penalty. I would like nothing better than to see you die, Mr. McKinney. However this is the time to begin the healing process. To show mercy to someone who refused to show any mercy. Mr. McKinney, I am going to grant you life, as hard as it is for me to do so, because of Matthew. Every time you celebrate Christmas, a birthday, the Fourth of July remember that matt isn’t. Every time you wake up in your prison cell remember that you had the opportunity and the ability to stop your actions that night. You robbed me of something very precious and I will never forgive you for that. Mr. McKinney, I give you life in the memory of one who no longer lives. May you have a long life and may you thank Matthew every day for it.

Thank you, Michael (Luci). As the director of this production, I struggle with the emotional tension Dennis Shepard so poignantly articulates. The family grants mercy, but cannot forgive. I understand that response, and in my role as a minister, I would have typically encouraged movement toward forgiveness so that the victims can begin to find some freedom from the nihilism of such trauma. But perhaps forgiveness is the wrong word for such heinous crime.

In my own family we have been struggling with issues of forgiveness and family members long dead who had no vocabulary to express their own heartache and disappointments in life. And it was my cousin, Alice, who suggested that the word "forgiveness" carries so much expectation, so many assumptions about "forgetting," that perhaps the word "release" would be more appropriate and easier for victims to hear. I understand it is a distinction made in the wisdom of several of the twelve-step programs. Perhaps to release those who have harmed us is a more realistic hope to heal our psyches.

In much the same way, the characters in “The Laramie Project” challenge those of us in the audience about the morality of the death penalty. The play does not tell us what to believe. It raises possible answers which provide us as the audience the opportunity to fine tune our own opinions. The two boys who killed Matthew Shepard, Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney, were either found guilty in trial or pled guilty in a plea bargain. The citizens of the town debate the appropriate fate of these boys:

MARGE MURRAY. Part of me wants McKinney to get it. But I’m not very proud of that. I was on and off, off and on. I can’t say what I would do . . . I’m too personally involved.

ZACKIE SALMON. Oh, I believe in the death penalty one hundred percent. You know, because I want to make sure that guy dies. This is one instance where I truly believe with all my heart an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

MATT MICKELSON. I don’t know about the death penalty. But I don’t ever want to see them ever walk out of the Rawlins Penitentiary. I’ll pay my nickel, or whatever, my little percentage of tax, nickel a day, to make sure that he
stays in there and never sees society again and definitely never comes into my bar again.

MATT GALLOWAY. I don’t believe in the death penalty. It’s too much for me. I don’t believe that one person should be killed as redemption for his having killed another. Two wrongs don’t make a right.

ZUBAIDA ULA. How can I protest if the Shepards want McKinney dead? I just can’t interfere in that. But on a personal level, I knew Aaron in grade school. We never called him Aaron. He was called A.J. . . . How can we put A.J. McKinney – how can we put A.J. McKinney to death?

MARGE MURRAY. And quite frankly I wanted to lash out at somebody. Not at Matthew, please understand that, not one of us was mad at Matthew. But we maybe wanted to squeeze McKinney’s head off. And I think about Henderson. And, you know, two absolutely human beings cause so much grief for so many people . . . It has been terrible for my whole family . . .

FATHER ROGER SCHMIT. I think right now our most important teachers must be Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney. They have to be our teachers. How did you learn? What did we as a society do to teach you that? See, I don’t know if many people will let them be their teacher. I think it would be wonderful if the judge said, “In addition to your sentence, you must tell your story, you must tell your story.”

Thank you, cast. Wherever your personal sentiments fall, the chance the drama gives to enter the minds and hearts of these individuals underscores the "terrible importance of each human soul", as the Drama Statement of Purpose proclaims. It opens space for human interaction; it exposes both the fear and the courage with which we each live every day; it allows us to see ourselves and the image of God in which we are all created in the eyes of another, another whose opinions may be quite different from our own. "The Laramie Project" offers the profound theological challenge that "two absolutely human beings [can] cause so much grief for so many people". There but for the grace of God and circumstance, go any one of us. We always have a choice to be a player in the divine creative process, or to be destructive in isolation. I hear Jesus calling us to choose creation in humility and use the wisdom given to us at our birth to discern our "present times". We must tell our stories. We must tell our stories.

I encourage you to see “The Laramie Project,” not only to support your theatre ministry, but to experience aesthetic religious witness at its best and most provocative. The play does not answer all these questions for us. But it does raise the questions with which we must grapple if we are to fulfill our mission as people of faith created in image of God. And isn’t that, in the end, the foundation of our religious quest? Not only to proclaim the truth we know in pride, taking the seat of honor at the banquet table, as it were. But in the humility demanded by Jesus in our earlier reading from Luke, immerse ourselves in the muddy waters of difference and diversity and struggle with creation. I believe it is that journey that is our sacred call, and we invite you to join us on our journey, making meaning out of broken dreams, imagining the Kingdom of God out of the chaos of life. We hold a promise: that we are created in love, redeemed in love, and by love we are forgiven. That should give us courage, people; courage to see the world as it truly is, courage to renounce and remedy hate, and courage to love in return. As we proclaimed earlier, in this way, “we can live with confidence and hope, in the assurance that we are forgiven and accepted by a power greater than ourselves”. May the living of our days show this confidence to the world, in God’s grace. Blessed be and Amen.