We recently changed the choices on our pages in the Book of Joys and Sorrows. This was prompted by a request from member, Merridy McDaniel. She told me that not every significant event in life is a joy or a sorrow, and went on to tell me, “Recently, my daughter made her profession of first vows as a cloistered Passionist Nun at the monastery in Ellisville, Missouri. This was certainly a joy for her and her Catholic community. It was neither a joy nor a sorrow for me. For me, it was something to accept, a living daily affirmation of our 4th principle. Not every death or entry into hospice care is a sorrow. Often, these transformations are met with profound relief and gratitude; certainly that was the case with my parents, who had lived long, fruitful lives and were ready to let natural processes take their course.” Thanks to her advice, you can now check a box called “other” and write in that other feeling.

And my response was, yes, we need a box for other emotions, other states. What about a candle of bafflement? Or fear. Melancholy. Hope? Rage? Acceptance was perfect for her situation, but what about rage about the state of the world? There is plenty to rage about right now. I think most of us who are even a little awake experience that feeling of rage or anger right now while children separated from their immigrant parents can’t even be found to be reunited with families, the killing of unarmed black people continues, clergy sex abuse and cover-ups that never seem to end – rage. The Brett Kavanaugh hearings and accusations against him which keep raising the issue of sexual violence and violence against women in this country – and the survivors who have said ‘me too’ – yes, we need a box on that little form to express rage, and we’ve added it.

Lies move among us, below, above. When we are raging, needing to mend, show us o spirit how to befriend. Show us how to forgive. To all who live, show us forgiveness that we may live.

Though forgiveness may seem to be about responding to someone who has hurt you, like the people of Grudgeville, we learn that forgiving another really lightens our own load – it is a part of our own healing. Often, the grudges we carry really only hurt us – not the object of our resentment and hate.

In the story of Grudgeville, we have this village of people carrying around their old grudges. People who have been burdened so long, they don’t even remember how to say “I’m sorry” or “I forgive you.” It takes a stranger visiting them to remind them of those very special words. I like the image of the burdens because is correctly places them on the back of the grudge-holder, not the offender.

When explaining this to children, I use the example of a friend who hurt you. Maybe she’s borrowed something that was yours without asking, and then say, even worse, she broke it. Maybe it was your favorite toy or electronic device. So you’re mad at your friend, and you hold a grudge against her, and you don’t want to forgive her, even after she’s apologized and said those important words, “I’m sorry.” But you’re too mad to say the important words of “I forgive you.” – it’s too soon, it’s too upsetting, you’re not ready. If she’s said she’s sorry, and meant it –she took the burden off her back, but you’re still carrying the load until you can come to a place to say the words, “I forgive you.”

It seems simple and children can understand it and frankly, generally do it better than adults – I think because they’re more in touch with their feelings along the way, but as we get older, grudging can get to be quite complicated. Like Seth’s situation with a co-worker. He got triggered by the accusation that he wasn’t being a team player. And he checked that box “rage.”
When we are raging, needing to mend, show us o spirit how to befriend. Show us how to forgive.

Forgiveness, in my opinion, is really about healing. And Seth credits his co-worker with helping him understand his core value of being a team player. Through that insight, he finds gratitude – and its kind of hard to hold a grudge against someone when you are feeling grateful.

It’s kind of hard to hold a grudge against someone when you are feeling grateful. I told Seth that would preach, am I right?

He says he still kept his guard up around this coworker. He knew this guy could trigger him. But he learned to be grateful also.

I like the story of Grudgeville because though it may overstate the ease of forgiveness, it explains why it is that when we forgive, we are really lightening our own load.

Forgiveness can also be a complicated process. It doesn’t always end with the words I’m sorry or I forgive you. Sometimes there isn’t a clear offense – a wrong that was done, that toy that was stolen and broken. Sometimes we don’t agree about what even transpired. Sometimes we pick-up the grudges of our group, or our work, or our ideas, or increasingly our political affiliation – and we fail to meet the person on the opposing side – to see beyond their baggage and their position, and take some risks together.

The problem of those heavy grudges we carry is that the load weighs us down. We can’t straighten our backs to see the face of another and get to know them.

But if we start doing some things together, anything – just spend some time together – if we do it with intention and integrity – we eventually have to set aside our baggage if for no other reason than to help each other with the task at hand, we can glimpse the other person in a different way. Sometimes this can lead to those important words, I’m sorry or I forgive you, and sometimes it doesn’t need to. Life is bigger than the grudges on our backs. So much bigger.

Life is an adventure in forgiveness, said Norman Cousins. Because we bump into each other, we trigger and get triggered, if we spend any time at all in the world, we meet with conflict, disagreement, the stuff from which grudges are grown.

I want to go back to the Brett Kavanaugh hearings. Dr. Christine Blasey, a research psychologist and professor of statistics at Palo Alto University, has accused him of sexual assault when they were both in high school.

It was last fall that the #metoo movement went viral, though the campaign had begun a decade before. I have preached more about being a sexual assault survivor here in Vancouver more in the last year than I did in the full 15 years I served in Lansing, MI. The few times I did mention it in Lansing, I always had someone in my office the week following to talk about their experience. The most surprising visit was from a man in his 90’s who had remembered an event in his life from WWII that he needed to process. It’s clear where that phrase #metoo originates. Because you share, and others say, “me too.”

That’s because as a society we’re braver now. Confessions of victimhood is generally met with stunned silence.
“In 1997, wrote Sandra Garcia in the NYTimes, “Tarana Burke sat across from a 13-year-old girl who had been sexually abused. The young girl was explaining her experience, and it left Ms. Burke speechless. That moment is where the Me Too campaign was born.

“I didn’t have a response or a way to help her in that moment, and I couldn’t even say ‘me too,’ ” Ms. Burke said.

“It really bothered me, and it sat in my spirit for a long time,” she added.

Ten years after that conversation, Ms. Burke created Just Be Inc., a nonprofit organization that helps victims of sexual harassment and assault. She sought out the resources that she had not found readily available to her 10 years before and committed herself to being there for people who had been abused.

And she gave her movement a name: Me Too.” – said the article in the NYTimes.

I think I was careful not to talk about my own experience of rape too much in Lansing because I knew how misunderstood the subject of sexual violence is. The man who must not be named, who holds the highest public office in this country tweeted such complete misunderstanding this week, when he wrote that a sign of the truth of a charge would be immediate reporting. It’s rather like he’s unaware of the whole clergy sex abuse scandal in the Catholic Church. So there’s a failure of understanding.

– and also, I didn’t preach about my own experience because I didn’t want to make it all about me – remember I began my ministry in Lansing and was just finding my ministerial authority. The topic of sexual violence is tricky and brings up a lot of “stuff.” And, over those years, I continued to do a lot of personal work, healing work. It’s one of those life experiences that heals only over time and with great effort. I only rarely feel healed enough to talk about it publicly.

But what’s happened over the last year is women who talk publicly embolden other women to talk publicly – and here we are, a research psychologist, recounting a painful high school experience that, of necessity, informed the unfolding of her life, and has the potential to shape the future of this country.

And to be clear, just because I believe this research psychologist, doesn’t mean the truth is simple or easy or that my opinion is accurate. Because of my personal experience, I tend to believe the survivor first and then try to unpack the particulars. I also do believe that people are falsely accused of horrendous acts on a regular basis, and so try to keep an open mind. I find it easier to believe the research psychologist than the judge in this situation because of what is at stake for each, but that is my opinion. I know no more about the particulars that you likely do, from what we read in the news.

In an article in the Washington Post by Jessica Contrera, Ian Shapira, Emma Brown and Steve Hendrix – about Dr. Blasey, they write:

Quietly, she garnered a reputation for her research on depression, anxiety and resilience after trauma — telling almost no one what she herself had endured.

“I have lived with that story my whole life,” she said in an interview with The Post before her name became public. “I’ve moved on. I have done wonderful things and have a great career and a great community, and have done a total reboot living in California.”
Rather than speculate about her experience, let me tell you about mine. As much as I wish to know what my life would be like had I never been raped, I am grateful for so many things which transpired as a result. It put me in touch with a pain I had never experienced before, but which millions of people know first hand. I believe that has made me a better person and a better minister.

To be clear, there was a time in the process of healing where I did not feel such gratitude, or any for that matter. I am not grateful it happened, but I am grateful about what I have learned, to those who helped me grow, and many choices in my life which would not resulted had life circumstances been different.

Forgiveness is not as simple as those five wise words offered by the stranger. But those words do reflect the basic movement that begins healing. “Life is an adventure in forgiveness,” declares writer and editor Norman Cousins. This spiritual practice is manifested in our relationship to the Source of Peace, in our perception of self, and in our dealings with others.

Depending on your personal theology, forgiveness will take a particular form. For some, it is an entirely human endeavor – a process of repairing relationships that have been broken, or healing the hurt in oneself caused by a broken relationship. For others, God is present in that healing, that moment of grace, when we find the power to lay down a burden or grudge.

However your personal theology informs your practice of forgiveness, it is a practice worth practicing. And life, I assure you, will continue to offer all of us plenty of opportunities to forgive and be forgiven. Life is bigger than the grudges on our backs.

If you want to see the brave, look for those who can forgive,” we read in the Hindu sacred poem The Bhagavad Gita. “If you want to see the heroic, look at those who can love in return for hatred.”

Last week I mentioned an elder who used to say while greeting folks after worship, “you are loved.”– words as magic as “I’m sorry,” and “I forgive you.” In fact, they are the heart out of which the 5 other magic words can grow. I don’t think it matters if you are loved by another person or loved by God; what matters is that you know you are loved. Forgiveness grows out of that love. When we know we are loved, we can forgive ourselves and others – we can let go of those burdens of resentment and hate and the desire to hurt in response to being hurt.

“Since nothing we intend is ever faultless,” writes David Augsburger, “and nothing we attempt ever without error, and nothing we achieve without some measure of finitude and fallibility we call humanness, we are saved by forgiveness.”

**Benediction**

We are invited to lay that burden down. Life is an adventure in forgiveness. Let the adventure begin!

* Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form.