Sin. Hurting other, being mean to others, sin is everywhere! Taylor Swift has an entire song whose title is simply “Mean,” (written about some music critic, who apparently said she can’t sing!). The song says “your words are like knives and swords.” (Sticks and stones can break bones, and names *can* hurt me). We can walk away, set a firm boundary, as Taylor had to do with this music critic.

But often we need to or want to keep the relationship, as with friends and family. So *forgiveness* in this life is essential, even though difficult, maybe *especially* for friends and family. Since much time is spent in close proximity, the chance of stepping on one another’s toes is great. The chance for “trespassing,” knowingly or unknowingly, is great! The need for forgiveness starts with small everyday things… just sharing a kitchen, a bathroom, a common living room. Accusations and blame can enter the picture quickly… Who left that souring milk in the back corner of the refrigerator? Who leaked and left toothpaste all over the sink? Not leave your muddy shoes at the door? What, did you grow up in a barn? Do you think only of yourself? Mean things can be said.

Like the proverb that you can’t put toothpaste back in the tube, we all have said or done things we wish we could take back. As Paul says, “All have sinned and fallen short of God’s way.” (Romans 3:23) Insulting words may seem like a small thing, but they really can have a big impact… Taylor Swift goes on to say, your words “knock me off my feet again, get me feeling like nothing, your voice, like nails on a chalkboard, calls me out when I’m wounded.” Jesus knew all about the power of words, for good or for evil, to uplift or to put down, saying in the Sermon on the Mount, “You have heard it said, You shall not kill, but I say to you that every one who *insults* his brother will be liable to judgment.” (Mt. 5:22). We remember also that the apostle James warned that the tongue can be like a fire, like a restless evil, full of deadly poison. (James3:6). So we watch our tongues.

Since alienation from others can start with small things, like a poorly chosen word, like encroaching on the space of another, we are

wise to practice apologies, saying we are sorry, for the little things, so that we might be prepared for greater issues that need reconciliation. Forgiveness is especially difficult in Jesus' teaching to love and pray for our enemies! (Mt 5:44), and to do good to those who hate you (Lk 6:27). But we know Jesus was not the only one teaching that. When Martin Luther King Jr. grew into a civil rights leader, he looked to the teachings of Ghandi in India about the power of nonviolent resistance. We see this morning that the Jewish Proverbs advise us to feed and give drink to an enemy when hungry or thirsty (Pvbs 25:21). Paul echoes Jesus also in challenging us to do good to those who mistreat us, to overcome evil with good (Rom 12:21).

Yes, it is human nature to hold onto resentment, to hold onto a grudge. But the hurt eats away at us. (Resentment we know means to feel again…. So we are feeling the insult and the hurt over and over again). Challenging but true, that when we hold onto a grudge, when we think continually of how we would like to retaliate and refuse to forgive, we wind up hurting ourselves! When we brood on the evil done, we let it hold us captive to festering anger and hate.

Another important reminder is that retaliation most commonly *escalates* violence and war; it does not stop the fighting. Whether personal or international, it is simply a reality that violence usually breeds more violence, and it can be a never-ending cycle of violence (easy to see in current "endless wars"). Martin Luther King said it well: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that." Somebody has to break the chain of violence, the escalating cycle of violence. Somebody has to say, Enuf is enuf! We have to let go of all the hurts, start with a clean slate by forgiving the past. How can there be a new day, a fresh start, a lighter step, without letting go of things in the past that drag us down? How can there be room for goodness and beauty, love and laughter if we let our mind stay full of resentment and anger?

At my recent music convention, we had the privilege of hearing from Otis Moss the 3rd, one of the foremost Christian preachers, a black preacher. I always like to hear black preachers, because it always amazes me how they can keep faith in a good and redemptive God with the history of slavery and ongoing oppression.

Let me share with you one of Rev. Moss' reflections on the church shooting at a black church in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015. I think many of us remember this hate crime well: A young man, Dylann Roof, walks into a Charleston church, was welcomed warmly into a Bible Study, but then proceeds to open fire and kill 9 church members. It's not only a modern day racist hate crime, but also an example of amazing grace, the amazing ability of some to forgive. The daughter of one victim said in court to the shooter, "I will never talk to my mother again. I will never be able to hold her again. But I forgive you and have mercy on your soul. You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people. May God forgive you, and I forgive you."

This did not excuse the mass killing, nor was it a plea to take away consequences (he still has 9 consecutive life sentences and a death sentence). Rev. Otis Moss followed in the footsteps of Rev. Martin Luther King, however, of looking at the highest ideals of forgiveness and nonviolence (or what I often call a form of "unilateral forgiveness." He quotes Martin Luther King, saying "Through violence, you may murder a hater, but you cannot murder hate through violence." Rev. Moss says "*anger, fear, and fantasy of vengeance chain us to our enemy, and we drag them with us wherever we go. We have already given victory to the darkness, because fighting our war becomes our whole world".* Moss goes on to say: *we have met Dylann Roof many times and we will meet him again many times. No death sentence will stop the disease of racism from being transmitted. Dylann Roof had been taught. He never finished high school but he received a full education in race hatred.*

What can stop such an endless war? What can break the cycle of violence? Only forgiveness. The survivors and family members of those

murdered by Dylann Roof offered him forgiveness, not because he deserved it, not because they were ready to forget, not to absolve white people for the long history of racist violence, *but to get free, forgiveness to liberate themselves!* They chose not to accept the role he tried to force on them as perpetual enemies in a race war. He could not make them waste their lives in seeking vengeance.

With wisdom and compassion, Moss continues: "*Even those people who commit demonic acts are not wholly demons (*and I hear echoes concerning the authoritarian and cruel Hitlers of this world*). Roof was born into the world, like the rest of us, someone's baby. The hope of his mother and father was not to raise a mass murderer. His racist training went against his spiritual nature, as I could hear when he said his confession … that When he walked into the church and sat down to share in Bible worship, he explained he 'could hardly go through with his terrible plan, because he said everyone there was so nice to me.' In that statement I hear the lonely, frightened, horribly confused and damaged young man still wishing for love… a young man who let himself get swallowed by the monster of racism. I sense the unextinguished light of the divine in him, despite it all."*

I believe, as Moss does, that there is a divine light, or at least a divine spark, that seeks to live and grow in each and every one of us. It starts with words, words that teach us to be good and kind. Then it involves extending Grace to all, prayers for all, knowing we all have shortcomings, knowing we all were born as innocent babes, in need of care and love. All faiths of the world teach us to love our neighbor, and Jesus goes even further, telling us to love and pray for our enemies. Amen.