

**AN END TO AMENDS:
Have We 'Acted Affirmatively' Enough?**

A Sermon by Fritz Hudson

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So,

- in the middle of an hour probably overcrowded with words and other sounds, and
- in the middle of a week (if yours was at all like mine) probably even more overcrowded with movement and tasks,

we've just spent perhaps 60 full seconds in stillness, in silence. We do so every Sunday, of course, almost always with no questions asked. Today, though, I'm going to ask a question. I'm going ask: How have we spent those seconds? What was their product? Or what could they produce, for us, if well applied?

In many houses of worship, of course, such a time would be filled with prayer, petitions to some cosmic strength. In our house though for every time there are multiple options, choices. A sermon title from some church newsletter sticks in my mind: "Prayer? Meditation? Introspection? A Short Nap?" Our silent seconds could house any of those. However, the most deeply rooted tradition from which we draw our strength, the tradition of the Hebrew people, urges upon us a particular use for our stillness at this time of year.

We are approaching Rosh Hashannah, the head of the year – followed by the 10 Days of Awe that lead to Yom Kippur, the day of atonement. And the task of this time in tradition is to reflect on our year past. It is to find in our hearts the injuries we may have caused others, as yet unconfessed, unrecompensed. It is to make those wrongs right - to make amends. In the Torah, the Lord commands Moses "Say to the people of Israel, when a man or a woman commits any of the sins that (people) commit by breaking faith with the Lord, . . . , he or she shall confess the sin which has been committed; and he or she shall make full restitution for the wrong, adding a fifth to it and giving it to the one whom he did the wrong." (Numbers 5:5-7)

As a nation, we've been trying to fulfill this spirit in a particular way now for the better part of five decades. Almost immediately upon assuming our nation's presidency in 1961, John F. Kennedy issued an executive order mandating that projects financed with federal funds "take affirmative action" to ensure that hiring and employment practices be free from racial bias. In 1965 President Lyndon Johnson's executive orders brought affirmative action to require that preferences be given to women and racial minorities in public work to bring their participation into line with their proportion in the total work force. At first we were clear that such preferences were recompense for the wrongs done by white men to women and racial minorities for generations. As the years have passed and the legal civil protections against continued discrimination have more firmly established, however, such preferences have raised stronger and stronger objections. Court tests in the 70s and 80s brought the Supreme Court to narrow their reach and restrict their purpose. In 1996 54% of the voters of California voted to amend their state constitution to provide that "The state shall not discriminate against, or grant preferential