

“The Beginning of Forgiveness: Reconciled and Restored”

Palm/Passion Sunday

*Matthew 21:1-11; Philippians 2:5-11;
Mark 14:43-Mark 15:47*

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March 25, 2018

From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Palm/Passion Sunday, March 25, 2018, dedicated to Zaydan Shahid Paracha to celebrate his baptism, 3/24/18, all the young leaders of “March for our Lives” from Parkland, Florida and worldwide who inspired millions of people to march yesterday to say “Enough is Enough” against gun violence and always to the glory of God!

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(Part 7 of 8 in the sermon series, “Forgiveness”)

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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One week with two parades, one death march and one way of Forgiveness. The “Way of the Palms” and the “Way of the Weapons” are parades that greet us today – Palm Sunday – as Jesus and the Romans make their entry into Jerusalem. The

“Way of the Cross” is the death march of Good Friday as Jesus carries the heavy wood of his crucifixion up the “Hill of the Skulls” – also known as Golgotha or renamed by Christians as Calvary. It is the way of the cross that shows us how to completely embrace of the Way of Forgiveness.

We get “The Way of the Palms” – in which we participated this morning in the parade of palms from the cold outside on the front steps of First Church into the sanctuary. It was a way of celebration – a way of sheer delight as children led us to worship and songs of joy guiding our steps.

On the first Palm Sunday the peasant procession started on the Mount of Olives, passed through the Kidron Valley and entered the East Gate of Jerusalem. Mounted on a donkey – who had never been ridden before – the peasant of Nazareth came into the city with a crowd of followers, disciples and well-wishers.

“The Way of the Palms” was made possible because of **“The Way of Jesus.”** The common men, the common women and the children of the First Century loved Jesus. He was a working man – a carpenter. He worked with his hands. He made sense when he taught and preached. He listened to them. He listened to women and children and men who no one else seemed to listen to or care about. He spoke their

language. He approached the “unapproachables.” He touched the “untouchables.” He healed people in the power of God’s healing touch. Is it any wonder that he was well-loved, cheered and celebrated when he came from the peasant’s world and entered the city through the city’s narrowest gate on a donkey?

At the same time Jesus was entering from the east, Pilate and the Roman army was entering the largest gate, the Jaffa Gate, on the west side of the walled-city in a military procession. It was **“The Way of the Weapons.”** Like Jesus, Pontius Pilate had also come the north. But, everything else was unlike Jesus. Pilate came with the Roman Garrison of Caesarea to show Rome’s Imperial power and the Roman theology of Might makes right. This was the standard procedure at Passover. The Romans would descend on the Capital City to show the Jewish people - who were celebrating their liberation from slavery in Egypt - that Caesar ruled their lives with the boot of occupation and with weapons of war as their true Gods. Jesus led with love. The Romans led with fear.

This parade was as spectacular as Jesus’ parade was unspectacular. There was cavalry on horses, helmets and on horsemen and infantry, spears and swords, armor and shields, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on all this metal and gold, banners celebrating their victories in war, the sounds of marching feet, creaking of leather, clinking of bridles on

impressive war horses, beating of drums, and the swirl of dust as silent onlookers beheld this impression display with curiosity, awe, resentment and fear. “The Way of the Weapons” was the way of fear and oppression. There was no joy in the procession or the welcome of Pilate and his imperial army.

Through a week of challenge, turmoil with Jesus teaching and turning over tables in the Temple, challenging the powers that be for their injustices in religious life and civil life, through prayer and teachings in other communities, and then a last Passover supper, an arrest, a trial and beatings - the ways of the palms and weapons would ultimately lead to **“The Way of the Cross.”**

In the way of the cross, a heavy-footed carpenter would carry his wooden crossbeam to his own execution. And in the way of the cross, winding through the same streets of Jerusalem he had ridden through in praise, the power of Roman might would come face-to-face with the power of God’s mighty Son and our Savior. The two powers would crash into each other on Calvary and there the Centurion, the leader of the Roman Execution battalion, would declare **“TRULY THIS MAN WAS THE SON OF GOD!”**

Through all of this most holy of weeks, we learn the “Way of Forgiveness.” On the cross, he forgives. He asks God, his “Abba” his daddy to forgive everyone in the world – proclaiming, they don’t know what they are doing. He forgives the executioners. He forgives the terrorist crucified beside him and welcomes the man to paradise.

He shows a new way of forgiveness. There is no prerequisite for repentance in Jesus’ forgiveness. That is what we want. We want scores settled. We want contrition of heart before we grant others our forgiveness. We get angry when someone says something or does something that ticks us off. We expect them to apologize. We expect them to return to us with words that make it possible for us to say, “I Forgive you” or “I accept your apology.”

But, that is not the way of Forgiveness in Jesus the Christ. He forgives the person who has faith or no faith; the one who kneels with tears falling or simply meets him from a sycamore tree. He forgives before we say a word. He forgives before we realize or acknowledge the magnitude of our sin and brokenness.

Like the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus throws dignity to the wind and rushes out to meet us. Filled with compassion, Jesus embraces while we sit back. He rushes in

while we hesitate. He speaks with love while we “zip it” for self-protection. As he faces the end of life, he brings a new beginning to all who witness his crucifixion and all of us – through time – who practice tit-for-tat forgiveness. He shows us to simply forgive with no strings attached.

Jesus’ way leads to reconciliation and restoration. Our way leads to further separation.

I really, really struggle with this. I want justice my way. But, the Jesus way of justice is different. His is centered in love and manifested in restoration. Let’s be honest, our way is not working in this world. We want retributive justice not restorative justice.

BREAD (Building Responsibility Equality and Dignity) has been working with the Juvenile Courts for years now. We want to see teens restored to community, not criminalized and ostracized. One student at a time is given a chance to talk things out and not shout it out or shoot it out. In the name and spirit of Jesus, Justice must become restoration or we will all fail.

Yesterday, 5-10,000 marched in downtown Columbus in solidarity with the 500,000+ in Washington DC (more than came for Mr. Trump’s Inauguration just 14 months ago. We had members and marchers in both places. We shouted out

the message – “Enough is Enough.” We called for a new way in America with our guns and the culture around our guns. Having Gun Rights does not mean that we allow for the Right to Use our Guns in Violence toward others. We have to create a way to control gun violence.

In just ten days, some of us will be in Washington to commemorate the 50th anniversary of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination. Over 1,500,000 Americans have been killed by our own way of the weapons since that fateful day, April 4, 1968 when a nonviolent man was killed so violently – just three days before Palm Sunday.

We need to end the war on ourselves. In the name of self-defense, we have witnessed the destruction of life in one household, one community, one state through the years. We need a spirit of forgiveness, Jesus’ way of forgiveness to guide us forward. We don’t need more bullets and more guns. We need more books and more graduates. We don’t need teachers armed against their students. We need educators and parents who embrace their kids and seek to show them a new way, a better way to live and forgive.

In a moment, we will once again here the story of the Passion of Christ. Listen to this story of the way of the cross – the way of forgiveness. Then, apply it to your life, to your family, to your school, to your neighbors, and to your workplace relationships. May restoration, experienced in the way of forgiveness, lead us to life. Amen.

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