

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Proper 14, Pentecost 13, August 18, 2013, dedicated to the men, women and children killed in the civil conflict in Egypt, to Youseff, to Pastor Moses Freeman and the 13 people who founded St. Paul AME church in 1823 and to the members and pastor of St. Paul AME as they celebrate 190 years in Columbus, to the new members who join us on the journey of faith today, and always to the glory of God!

“Jesus is Protector and Hope”

Isaiah 5:1-7; Romans 5:1-5;

Luke 12:49-56

**(Part III of V in the sermon series
“What A Difference Jesus Makes”)**

I feel like I must reveal something today before beginning this third in the series, “What A Difference Jesus Makes.” While many people in or congregation have shared positive, personal stories of Jesus, others started their stories from a place of pain and distress.

They said they have often found themselves embarrassed or even ashamed of the way Christians portray Jesus. They feel like he is crucified “all over again” by TV preachers, so called pro-life activists and anti-gay activists, and others who trap Jesus into boxes of faith that are so extreme in relation to Heaven and Hell and based entirely on judgment of other people – that they feel suffocated and oppressed and unable to breathe such air. They feel such Christianity is hypocritical and cruel – not a true reflection of Jesus at all.

In some cases, this kind of Christianity has caused people to stay as far away as possible from church and so-called "Christians." In this form of Christianity, people have found it hard to find the real Jesus, the Jesus of love and grace; of justice and mercy because he is covered in the negative fog that such believers create. For a good number of people, it wasn't until they came to our church that they truly felt welcomed. Our strong and principled conviction which respects every individual on their faith journey has been like beams of sunlight bursting through the dark clouds for a number of people.

One member shared that that she loves God but struggles to relate to Jesus. She is also impressed by all the clear and personal relationships so many have with Jesus. But she herself doesn't feel this, although she desires to feel it.

I wrote these words to her this week:

"Thanks for your beautiful email. I hear your struggles loud and clear. I believe we all have different and special relationships with God - and God with us. Some of us feel more connected to God as Father/Mother - the creator of the universe and all that is herein. Others of feel a deep connection to the movement of the Holy Spirit - that prodding, moving, sensational love which comes in the wind, in a smile, in the blink of an eye. Others of us feel close to Jesus. He presents himself as "God with skin on." We see him often in the embodiment of others. So, within the Trinity, we relate to God differently. Sort of like how we feel about our parents, siblings, children and grandchildren. We have different relationships with each one. Sometimes we struggle with certain ones to "feel" a certain way toward them. But, we still love them.

"Some people REALLY relate to Jesus. I am one. But, it sounds like you are not one. I would say "stay open." Maybe he will come to you in a way you least expect and most need. If you are open to his movement, he will reveal himself. He may be doing that right now in the pure love and delight you feel for your granddaughter - and that is enough for now."

As we head into week four and worship life in our scaffold covered sanctuary, and as we await the return of Jesus in glass images and colorful expressions of faith and see his face in the 94 panels of leaded glass, do not lose heart. He is right here. He is with us. We need look no further.

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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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Jesus had a heart for the poor, for the downtrodden, for the forgotten, the forsaken and the lonely. G. K. Chesterton has written, “*A saint is one who exaggerates what the world neglects.*” By this definition, Jesus was definitely a saint. But, he was so much more – add Savior to Saint! He saw people as real. He looked into their eyes, into their hearts, into their minds – rich and poor; men and women; youth and children; prostitutes and Pharisees; Roman centurions and fishermen; believers and unbelievers – and when he saw them as real, he simply loved them – every single one.

There is no question in my mind that you “Get this!” Not only do you get it, you have taken this unconditionally love Lord into your hearts as well. One of you wrote to me, “*His open arms, his open hands. The lambs around him. The simple, flowing, welcoming clothing he wore. Better than any mother’s apron for a little one to go into the folds of his robes and feel safe and protected. . . . For me, those images translate into acceptance, love, and tenderness. Jesus is doing all this in a knowing way. Jesus really does know just how rotten everybody is, and yet he opens his arms to us.*”

But, even my child’s Bible picture of Jesus in anger throwing the money changers out of the temple, made me feel safe because it was Jesus as protector of the sacred. THIS, I understood as a child.”

“I think of the star. For me, the star is a huge part of the story of Jesus. It gives us mortals stuck here on earth the hope and direction for future time and future space.”

Jennifer Ozekie-Watts writes, *“When I hear Jesus I immediately think of peace and security, like I probably felt as a child when I would sleep next to my mom and smell her scent. This has made a difference in my life. As I learn more about Jesus and make him a part of my life more consistently, I gain direction. Each moment of my life that requires some thought or decision is just easier to navigate. When he isn't at my core, life is just more challenging.”*

The theme of protection is deep and strong in your understandings of Jesus. In times when it would be easy to only see the world as unsafe and insecure, for many of you, Jesus changes all of that.

Teresa Polo writes: *“For me, Jesus equals being comforted, being uplifted and being safe.”*

Lisa Dean echoes Teresa's words: *“I feel safe when I think of Jesus. He gives me a sense of security knowing he is always there, when others say they're going to and are not. He keeps his promises.”*

Dr. Janine Wilson added this beautiful image, *“He is safety in the dark, when death and fear overwhelms.”*

But the sense of security, protection and safety that Jesus offers is not only for us. One parent, who has struggled mightily in relation to her own daughter, writes: *“When she has not spoken to me for almost 2 ½ years, I give her over to the care of Jesus to guide and to guard, even though she says she no longer believes in him. Jesus still believes in her.”*

The parable in which the shepherd of the flock of 100 goes after the one sheep gone astray is a powerful story of protection and love. People feel that strongly in their lives. I encourage you to take a good look at our insert this morning. It is the image of the Good

Shepherd, which can be found in our Gladden Chapel. Look into these eyes of intimacy and love. The kindness here is powerful. The protective hands surrounding the lost sheep speak of the protection and love Jesus offers each one of us in our struggles each day. We are never left alone. He is always there beside us – to strengthen, to hold and to uplift us. He is also the protector of those who we can no longer protect ourselves (if we ever truly could). It is this which gives us hope!

A friend of First Church and a visitor to worship has gotten into the spirit of this sermon series. Her name is Jennifer. Her background is Catholic but in recent years she has struggled with the lack of protection her church has offered the little children and the way they have treated people with whom they disagree. She wrote to me:

“When I was a little girl, I would rush to be on time to Sunday School. As I would walk down the hall I would pass paintings of Jesus. Jesus with the lambs, Jesus at the door and my favorite Jesus on the road to Emmaus. I always felt such COMFORT in his name. I still do. I have always felt STRENGTH in his name. His comfort and strength has always given me hope. The hope that all will be ok if I just trust in him.

“In the dark days after my husband left me and my five children, I really needed that strength that hope, and I received it. Just like the painting Jesus at the door says, ‘If anyone knocks and hears my voice I will come in.’ Thank goodness he did. I could not have done it alone. I still have that child like faith of Jesus I know I always will.”

Comfort, strength and HOPE. Hope is a central part of the message of Jesus. Our own Wally Giffen wrote that *“hope and gratitude”* are the two essential things that Jesus has given him that have made a difference in his life.

In *Les Miserables*, Victor Hugo writes of a hope that does not disappoint us: *“The word which God has written on the brow of every man is hope.”* And poet, Emily Dickinson adds on to hope:

“Hope is the thing with feathers, that perches in the soul, and sings the tune without the words, and never stops at all.”

To our poets Wally, Victor, and Emily, let us add the voice of the Apostle Paul. For Paul, hope is Huge! He writes this powerful testimony to faith and hope in Romans 5:1-5:

*“Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we^a have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have obtained access^b to this grace in which we stand; and we^c boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³And not only that, but we^d also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵**and hope does not disappoint us**, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*

The preeminent Christian theologian writing on Hope in the past 100 years is Jurgen Moltmann. In his ground-breaking book, *A Theology of Hope*, Dr.Moltmann writes:

“If it is hope that maintains and upholds faith and keeps it moving on, if it is hope that draws the believer into the life of love, then it will also be hope that is the mobilizing and driving force of faith's thinking, of its knowledge of, and reflections on, human nature, history and society. Faith hopes in order to know what it believes. Hence all its knowledge will be an anticipatory, fragmentary knowledge forming a prelude to the promised future, and as such is committed to hope. Hence also vice versa the hope which arises from faith in God's promise will become the ferment in our thinking, its mainspring, the source of its restlessness and torment.”

I pray that as you step out into this week, you may find yourself embraced by our Lord of Love. May his strength and comfort, his protection and grace, his hope and gratitude hold onto you.

May our Good Shepherd enfold you in his arms and endeavor

to hold you close as he loves you into more life and greater hope.
Amen.

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