

“Jesus and Forgiveness”

Psalm 51; Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; II Corinthians 5:20-6:10;
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

I of IX in the Sermon Series “Jesus”
Jeffrey Window panel “Go and Sin No More”

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From the Pulpit

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Inspired by The Jeffrey Window, which tells the story of Jesus and our faith in him, beginning today and continuing through Easter Sunday, March 31st, our theme for this season will be “Jesus.” We will experience this in worship each Sunday at 9 a.m. and 11 a.m. and in small groups in late February and March – some held in homes and some here at church in which we will read and study together Henri Nouwen’s book, *Following Jesus: Finding our Way Home in an Age of Anxiety*,” I encourage you to join in worship each week, to join in our small groups, and to go one step further and engage prayers to “Jesus” and meditations on Jesus in your daily discipline of prayer and reflection during the 40 days of Lent.

For example, who is Jesus to you? How does he impact your relationship with God and others? How do you talk with him, walk with him, and follow him as his disciple? Many more connections are possible with Jesus – through writing and music and more. Here we go... Into Lent 2024.

Please join me as we step into our series on Jesus ... Today, our window panel is “Go and Sin no More” as Jesus forgives the woman caught in adultery.

“Jesus and Forgiveness”

Psalm 51; Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; II Corinthians 5:20-6:10;
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 12:05 p.m. and 7:00 p.m., Ash Wednesday 2024, dedicated to Joseph and Cecilia Jeffrey, Grace Glaros who turns 16 today, Bob Kutschbach, Joel Mathias, and John Parsons on this Valentine’s day and their birthdays, and always to the glory of God!

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

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I reflect on Jesus all the time. Sometimes all day long...

I wonder, what was Jesus thinking? What was moving his heart to action? What were his motivations for the teachings he gave, the healings he performed, the miracles and the message? How did he do it? Why did he do it? What was he doing? Who was Jesus of Nazareth? And in the words of “Jesus Christ Superstar,” *“why did you choose such a backward time and such a strange land? If you’d come today, you could have reached a whole nation, Israel in 4BC had no mass communication.”* Don’t you get me wrong – I only want to know! Yeah. Why? Jesus? Why?

In the middle of all these questions a woman who is caught in adultery is dragged before us. Found in John 7:53-8:11 (and in the panel above our

heads), there on the Temple Mount, the crowd calls for her stoning to death because of her sin. In the midst of the murderous roar of the crowd, Jesus kneels down. He writes something on the ground with his finger. And the crowd turns on him and pummels him with more questions. He stands and asks, “who among you is without sin? Let that person cast the first stone.” They are all sinners and they know it. They leave. Jesus and the woman are left alone in this public place. He asks her, “Woman where are they now? Has no one condemned you?” She answers, “no one sir.” And he replies, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way and from now on, do not sin again.”

“Go and Sin No More.” Forgiveness.

What is it about Jesus? While John the Baptist preaches to sinners. And other spiritual healers, like Hanina ben Dosa exorcise evil spirits from them, Jesus identifies with them. He goes out of his way to mix socially with beggars, tax collectors, prostitutes, adulterers, the poor, people with disabilities, and the blind. The scandal of this in his times was immense. He knew that. He knew exactly what he was doing. He chose over and over again to identify with those who everyone else had rejected because he loved them and forgave them – ALL.

How about you? Who do you identify with? Do you seek out the forgotten and forsaken ones, or do you join the crowd and pick up stones (verbal or physical) and cast the stones when the atmosphere is building for judgement? Do you join the crowd or silently grant your approval, or do drop your stones, knowing your own sin and walk away?

Better yet, do you, like Jesus engage with the person or persons who everyone else was pointing at or threatening and stand with them because they are forsaken, forgotten, and unforgiven?

One year ago, as we entered a season of Forgiveness, I said on Ash Wednesday, “**Forgiveness is not too hard to understand. But it is surprisingly easy to misunderstand.**” Forgiveness is not something you have

to accomplish or deserve. Forgiveness is always present – although we don't always recognize it or accept it. Forgiveness is part of the Present moment every moment of every day. It is the Divine Face of God which our Divine Love offers each of us. Forgiveness is a fresh start – a new beginning. This is always true no matter what has happened, is happening, or even what might happen. Through forgiveness, an option for a fresh start and a new beginning is offered to you and me and everyone in this very moment.

Forgiveness takes from the past moment and presents hope for change in the present moment. The past is real. It cannot be changed. But our relationship to that past can be changed. The first change we may need to consider is our memory of that past. We have forgotten the real past. What memory we do have of the past are memories of what we thought was real at the time, but our thinking was always limited. It was always a mix of somewhat true and somewhat flawed.

However flawed our memory is, the real past is completely gone, **and** the real past is already forgiven by our God of grace and pardon. A fresh start is at hand, perhaps that fresh start will include remembering more of the real past. And when we remember the real past, perhaps we will laugh or cry at how mistaken our views of that past have been. Such self-observation is good for our souls. I know it has been good for mine...

Hopefully, such a cleansing clears the way for a fresh start that is always open to us. That fresh start requires no admission fee. There is no begging necessary. There is no price to pay for this fresh start except the consequences of taking on this humbling new start for our lives. And it is always good to clear a path– to find a healing way forward.

The things we carry and the things we let go of and allow Jesus to heal, will determine a lot about how our lives move forward. Making choices between Forgiveness or Unforgiveness really matters. When we forgive, we set ourselves free from the demons of bitterness. It is that simple and that hard.

When Miami native Chris Carrier was ten, a former family employee abducted him, assaulted him, shot him in the head and left him to die in the Everglades. But Chris survived. In the years that followed he lived daily with the fears and insecurities of knowing that his abductor was still at large. Recognizing that living in fear and staying angry would never change anything, Chris found the strength to move on.

More than 20 years passed, and he received a phone call that changed his life again. The police called to tell him that an elderly man at a local nursing home named David McAllister, had confessed to being his abductor. Chris visited him the following day. He saw that David's body and soul was ruined by alcoholism, and now blind, he was facing death with only his regrets and separations from God and the people to keep him company and rot within him. At the end of their time together, David took Chris' hand and told him he was sorry. As he spoke, something came over Chris like a wave. As he said later, "no one should face the end without family, friends, the joy of life – or without hope. I couldn't do anything but offer him forgiveness and friendship."

And so it began. Chris would visit David as often as he could, usually bringing his wife and two daughters. They would spend hours reading, talking, and praying. As they did, the old man's hardness melted away.

If Jesus is real, if the cross and resurrection are not just historic happenings but present realities that move us, change us, alter our ways of being and interacting, then when we celebrate Easter (which should be every single Sunday!), the healing power of God's forgiveness is also real and at work in us and in our world ("The Power of Forgiveness," Johann Christoph Arnold, found in *Bread and Wine*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 2006, pp. 364-365).

So, let's try it. Let's try forgiveness.

Let's put on forgiveness. Wear it and see how it fits. See how it feels. Let's step into it and live in it. I say this growing out of a commitment I have

made – now 150 days ago. On September 17th, 2023, I preached a sermon on Forgiveness. Jesus said forgive 77 times or 490 times. I chose 490 because I am hardheaded and slow to learn. So, I needed to take Jesus' longer path to healing.

I am trying hard to practice what I preached. Since September 18, I have taken on a daily discipline of forgiveness. I am working at forgiving 490 days in a row. So, each day, I get up and I pray a prayer of forgiveness. I forgive people I feel have hurt me. I name them aloud before God. I pray through the specifics of things that cling to me. It is a powerful exercise. To forgive someone 490 days in a row (in my case until January 20, 2025) really touches deep the meaning and action of forgiveness. I have good days and bad days. But every day I am working on it. The grudges, the judgments, the memories, the fears, the insecurities, the stories I carry against certain people change and lessen each day. 490 days of forgiveness is Jesus' way of working on me. I commend it to all of you. The discipline of daily forgiving has altered my perception of so many things and so many people.

In the same spirit of Forgiveness, I ask your forgiveness for any words spoken (or left unspoken), any actions or lack of actions, any responses or lack of responses, I have said or done. Our time is winding down. I am sorry. I truly am. We have only 249 days left until my last service of worship on October 20. Please find it your heart to forgive me for any and all wrongs I have brought upon you as you have experienced or perceived them. I am truly sorry.

I am open to time together to sort through things that you carry that need to be dealt with before I am gone. Please don't carry them. They will hurt you in their unhealthiness. And they may hurt others – including the person who follows me.

As a commitment to my being open, every Thursday morning, beginning March 14 and continuing on the 25 Thursdays I am available until October 3, my office door will be open each Thursday from 9:30- 11:45am for you.

Whatever it is that you wish to share – good, bad, or otherwise – this is time for you.

As I close, I am reminded by these words from Dietrich Bonhoeffer that have a special place in my heart and daily prayers: **“Christianity IS forgiveness; nothing more and nothing less.”** To not forgive is not Christian. To fail to forgive, you fail to be the Christian you were baptized to be. To be unforgiving is to not follow Jesus.

As we step into 40 days of Lent, we will grow closer to Jesus. Closer than we ever imagined. Let's start right now. Let's start today. With the cross of Christ calling us to be truly who we are meant to be, may each one of us be forgiven and forgiving. As the window has said to us for 93 years – “Go and Sin No More.” Amen.

