

# “Jesus and the Agony of Prayer”

Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21

V of IX in the Sermon Series “Jesus”

*Jeffrey Window panel “Shall be a House of Prayer”*

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From the Pulpit

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## **“Jesus and the Agony of Prayer”**

Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21

A baptismal meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 10, 2024, Lent 4, this sermon is dedicated to all who have died from COVID-19 in the past four years, to Thompson Scott Bukach on his baptismal day, to Graham, Aaden and Aidan as they celebrate their birthdays this weekend, to Rylan and Henry as they celebrate their seventh birthdays this week, to my grandfather the Rev. Hugo Kellermeyer who baptized me into Christian faith 66 years ago today and always to the glory of God!

Today is a special day in the life of our faith and in the season of Lent. Lent IV has another name – Laetare Sunday. “Laetare” (Le-ta’- ray) comes from the Latin and means “Rejoice!” Also called “Mothering Sunday,” it is a day honoring mother churches – the church where one is baptized and becomes “a child of the church,” celebrated since the Middle Ages in the United Kingdom, Ireland, and some Commonwealth countries in Roman Catholic, Anglican and many Lutheran traditions. On Laetare Sunday, Christians have historically visited their mother church or Home church. Thank you Josh for sharing this with me and all of us.

Today for the first time we are wearing rose colored stoles – which will stay with the church and be worn on this Sunday and the third Sunday of Advent each year – in which also we celebrate Joy – as

we light the pink candle in the advent wreath and remember Mary, Jesus' Mother.

Today, I would like to pause before beginning the sermon. Today marks the fourth anniversary of our Church Council meeting for the very first time virtually. Some of us were in Parish Hall, the others online as we decided to move to virtual livestream worship for the following Sunday. Peter Murray said, "I can help. He has been helping ever since. Thank you Peter and thanks be to God!" Let us pause in prayer to remember the millions and millions of people who lost their lives to Covid-19. Let us pause to give thanks for the life we still have. We have all been changed by Covid-19. Let us be in silence to reflect and pray.

Today's window is "Not My Will but Thine," found in the center-left medallion in the middle band of the Jeffrey window. Let us pray...

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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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*"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son . . . for God sent the son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him"* (John 3:16,17). "Rejoice, O people! God loves you! God gave God's only son for You! God gave his son to **the entire world** (not this church, not The Church, not Columbus, not Ohio, not America, but to **the entire world**), not to condemn the world – but to save the world!"

Somewhere, between the beginning of Lent and this day; somewhere between the beginning of each of our lives and this point, somewhere between the ecstasy of new life and the agony of death, we have forgotten or many lost track of what an absolutely amazing gift we have in the love of God for us through our savior, Jesus Christ.

It's good to be reminded of this, today – by John and his gospel. It is also good to remember and rejoice in the truth that God is not in the business of condemning us, or condemning the rest of the world. While others may want to play God and manipulate the words of God for judgment over grace, God is about the business of loving us and saving – the world!

### **But, what does God's loving and saving business look like?**

John 3:14-15 tells us that life in God's love – through Christ – is uplifting and eternal. Like Moses' serpent in the wilderness, Jesus is lifted up – both on the cross and in the ascension into glory – and in this lifting, belief in God's sacrifice and glory are given shape and form and eternal life is offered.

**Uplifting and eternal – are central elements of God's saving love.** I have seen the uplifting and eternal nature of God's love so often become manifest in the love, through suffering and pain, that people share in difficult and tumultuous times.

While I sometimes wish that I could wave a magic wand over the world and make pain, and agony and suffering love disappear, I am also aware that so much is experienced in the immensity and intensity of suffering love which would be diminished and even unrecognizable without it. To suffer in love for the one whom you love, in the midst of their suffering, is to live life to its holiest. You have told me this. You have shown me this. And you have embodied this, and you didn't learn it from me or somebody else – you learned it from Jesus. You have learned it from those who have followed him and shown it to you.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, a scene depicted in the panel or medallion of the Jeffrey Window today, Jesus cries out to God, *“let this cup pass from my lips, but even so Father, thy will, not mine be done.”* Jesus is sweating blood, we read. He is anguishing as he cries all alone before God. His disciples were supposed to be with him while he prayed, and they have fallen asleep – not once but twice. He is all alone – crying to God to please let this pass. And do you remember what happens? There is absolute and utter silence. God doesn’t speak to him this time. He is met with the silence of God – which is deafening because he knows there is only one path forward – and that is through the cross.

We see him in his sweating blood, in his anguished cry, we see grace, twisted by pain, but embraced by love. We see a peace which passes human understanding, growing from the depth of the agony of suffering.

I often think of love coming from pain. So often in the paintings of Vincent Van Gogh, you see the struggles of this anguished artist to show us beauty and color in this world of ours while feeling such pain and inmost torture is almost inconceivable. He suffered emotionally and mentally his whole life; Vincent Van Gogh portrayed such vivid beauty outside himself.

One painting named “The Disposition,” has always moved me deeply. The Disposition depicts the scene at the foot of the cross following the death of Jesus. His body has been disposed from the cross to the earth below. As the dead body of Jesus lies at the foot of the cross, John, the author of today’s Gospel text is beside him, having just washed his body of blood. Jesus’ mother, Mary is looking on, but close at hand. Her face is terribly twisted in pain. Her body is turned halfway toward him, halfway from him – meaning that she can barely look at her son, but she must look at him. And she can’t stand what she sees. In the distance, you see several people including the shadowy figure of Peter, hiding from all of this – in their pain, in their denying it, in their abandoning Jesus in his time of crucifying death.

For those who have stood by the cross – and thus stood by him in his suffering – there is intense pain, but their pain is Holy Pain. For those who have denied him, tortured him or abandoned him, the pain is different. It is the Pain of Guilt. It is the pain of dispossession.

**Uplifting and eternal are elements of God's saving love.** Such love is often experienced in the pain of dispossession. And honestly, it is what we do in the face of the cross and at the foot of the cross which the matters most.

To experience God's uplifting and eternal love, we have to go to the cross. We have to abide at the cross. We have to take time at the foot of the cross or the foot of the bed of a loved one who is suffering or the side of the bed with someone who is suffering, and we have to witness the agony of the soul, the suffering of the other – and we must abide there. We must come to the hard places and be still, be present.

The ones who teach us about the saving love of God, are the ones in our lives who show us in their suffering how to love God, how to praise God and how to be of service to others.

Hilda Miller showed me how to love. Hilda was a member of my first church. Her only son Gene was born in a home birth, so at 88 years old, Hilda had never been in a hospital. When she went into Cleveland Metro General Hospital in 1987, she never made it out. They kept finding things wrong with her. She said to me once, "Why do they keep finding things wrong with me?" Mostly it was cancer that had spread everywhere. Nevertheless (and we know that God is always in the nevertheless), she kept praising God. She said to me, "*Tim, I don't understand why, but I understand that God loves me and that is enough for me. He has put me here to die – but, as I die, I will share his love with everyone single person who comes through that doorway until the day I am gone.*"

In her agony, Hilda shared her improbable praise and brought me to tears.

Hilda Miller, like so many I have come to know at foot of the cross or the side of their bed, reached a point in her battle for life, in which she cried out to God something like this:

*“Lord, you’ve been in my actions, you’ve guided my life, and walked with me through all I have encountered. Now be with me in my dying, lift me up and carry me in your arms into the heavenly dwelling place that you call home. I can no longer care for my family, Lord. I hate that anything bad would ever come to them. So, I leave them in your hands, in the hands of those whom you send as angels of mercy and love. Help them accept your presence in their lives, however you choose to make your love manifest. Amen.”*

Jesus said it his way – *“Father, please let me live. But, if it is your will that I die, may your will be done.”*

### **At the heart of today’s gospel is GOD’S UNDENIABLE, UNCONDITIONAL LOVE.**

Mother Teresa of Calcutta once wrote of John 3:16 – *“The Good News is that God still loves the world through you. You are God’s Good News. You are God’s love in action. Each time anyone comes in contact with us, they must become different and better people because of having met you. You must radiate God’s love.”*

Listen to this verse, unpacked by phrases and listen to its powerful message of love: **“God...God so loved . . . God so loved the world . . . God so loved the world that God gave . . . God so loved the world that God gave God’s only son... God so loved the world that God gave God’s only son, that whosoever believes in him ... God so loved the world that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.”**

It is all about love. God loves the unlovable and the unlovely. God loves the lonely who have no one else to love them. God loves the man who has no love for God whatsoever. God loves the woman who lives in God’s presence continually. God loves the graceless and the graceful. God loves the haters

and the hated. God loves the one who has never given a thought to God and have no clue how to lift a prayer. And God loves the one who seeks God and prays without ceasing. God loves the one who is angry at God and God loves the one who is content in God. God loves the one who spits at God and the one who smiles at God. God loves you just the same as God loves me. As St. Augustine wrote: *“God loves each of us as if there was only one of us to love.”*

As we head into final days of Lent, having been filled with the joy of Laetare Sunday (and held by the memories of Thompson’s beautiful baptism).

Let’s bear in mind, there are some things that will always be. For example, on this day, your smartphone will always figure out how to “Spring forward” even though you will never figure out how that happened. There will also be things that will be said and done to you that you will not understand. There will always be misunderstandings. There will always be words spoken to you that do not reflect the love of God. There will always be someone spreading tales about you to others. There will always be unkindness and there will always viruses. There will always be wars. There will always be rumors of wars.

But there will always be something else. There will always be the unconditional love of God! So remember this even more – God’s deep and broad love is uplifting and eternal and will always be there for you. And Jesus – will also always be there for you – in the agony of prayer, in the dark night of your soul, and he helps us to rise from ours – whether it is one more minute or 50 more years. God’s love is a rising love. He will always rise from his suffering and reach out to help us rise from ours. He will show the joy of living. In Jesus, our Risen Savior, he will point us past the grave and to eternity – through Love.

Can anyone ever love us more than this?



