

“Jesus and the Way of the Cross”

John 18:1-19:47

VIII of IX in the Sermon Series “Jesus”

Jeffrey Window panel “Christ suffered for us”

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From the Pulpit

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John 18:1-19:47

A meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Good Friday, March 29, 2024, as we gather at the foot of the cross this sermon is dedicated to Grace Glaros and Claudia and Jaime Glenn and to all who have suffered the pain and loss of loved ones 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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He committed no crimes. He did nothing wrong. He was without sin. He never should have been executed – just as no one should ever be executed.

He came to deliver and save all people. His method was teaching and healing. His way was justice with peace. **His message was Pure Love.**

When soldiers and betrayers and the fearful religious establishment came for him, he told his followers to put down their swords. He taught us to do the same.

When they beat him and tore his back with whips of nails, he prayed for them. He taught us to pray under such derision. When they mocked him, he absorbed the hatred and derision. When we are mocked and hated, he teaches us to absorb and not engage the hate.

When they nailed him to the cross, he cried to his Father in the midst of his pain. He taught us to pray to our Father in our toughest times. And out of his loneliness and agony, he asked for God to forgive. He taught us to forgive in the same way. And stretched out on the crucifying tree, he cried out to his Father, “Into your hands I commend my spirit.” He teaches us – in the end – to give ourselves to God.

After being manhandled by torturous, cruel people, he finally, in the end was carefully handled by women and men who loved him all along. No matter what our fate in life, he prays for us to be cared for by gentle loving hands in death.

Christ suffered and died for us. That’s what the window and story say.

Dr. Paul Brand understood suffering. He was a Christian missionary and hand surgeon who worked for years in Vellore, India. His patients were mostly men, women and children suffering from Hanson’s disease, more commonly known as leprosy. So few people would approach and touch the people with leprosy, that he often worked alone. He often found himself looking at their hands – their missing fingers and toes – sometimes finding his patients missing all their digits.

He once said, *“Palm readers look at your hands and tell your future. I look at hands to tell your past. I can tell your trade and your character from your hands. I love hands.”* Reflecting on Christ’s hands, Paul Brand reflected, *“There were the hands of the small boy, the hands of the student of scripture holding a brush or stylus, forming letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Then there were the rough hands of the carpenter, gnarled with broken fingernails, bruised from hammer, and saw. Then there were the hands of compassion – of the physician, the healer – touching the eyes of the blind, the diseased and needy. Finally, there were the crucified hands – driven through with spikes at the center of all the bones, tendons, nerves, blood vessels, and muscles.”* (Phillip Yancey, *Where is God When it Hurts?* Zondervan Press, Grand Rapids, MI, 1977).

The crucified hands were the hands of our disabled Christ. With his crucified hands, he identified with all who were themselves disabled and carried the marks of suffering and pain. With his feet, also driven through with spikes, on the cross our Christ was bloodied, beaten and disabled from the top of his head to the soles of his feet.

Jesus suffered and died for us. Our disabled savior suffered – for us. See from his hands, his head, his feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down.

In his ground-breaking work, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Dr. James H. Cone shakes the conscience of America to see the link between the crucifixion of Christ and the crucifixions of upwards of 10,000 African-American men, women and children from the Southern lynching trees of America.

Like Jesus, blacks were publicly humiliated, subjected to the utmost indignity and cruelty. They were stripped in order to be deprived of dignity, then paraded, mocked and whipped, pierced and derided and spat upon and often tortured for hours in the presence of jeering crowds for popular entertainment. Lynchings were meant to terrorize Black Americans, just as Jesus' crucifixion was meant to scare the living daylight out of his followers (James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Orbis Press, Maryknoll, NY, 2011, p. 30).

Most all of these victims of lynchings were killed by practicing White Christians who would lynch on Saturday night on the town square and show up on Sundays at the church on the same town square proclaiming the greatness of God and their love for Jesus in their all white churches. On those same Sundays, their Black “sisters and brothers” in Christ were in worship “down the road,” off the main drag and weeping for their tortured and crucified loved ones who were still hanging on the town square tree.

Dr. Cone quotes New Testament Scholar Paula Fredrickson, as she writes: *Crucifixion was the Roman form of a public service announcement: Do not engage in sedition as this person has, or your fate will be similar. The point of*

*this exercise was not the death of the offender, as such, but getting the attention of those watching. Crucifixion first and foremost is addressed to an audience (Paula Frederickson, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity*, New York, Vintage, 2000, pp.233-234).*

As Dr. Cone continues, “the crucifixion of Jesus by the Romans in Jerusalem and the lynchings of blacks by whites in the United States are so amazingly similar that one wonders what blocks the American Christian imagination from seeing the connection” (Ibid).

Jesus suffered and died for us. See from his hands, his head, his feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down. Our lynched Lord suffered – for us.

Our disabled and lynched Lord suffered the brutal penalty of death by the executioners of his time in his state. It still happens today. Executions continue to this day. People are disabled unto death by executioners across the globe. Whether in the United States or elsewhere, they seek to instill terror in all who witness their crucifying acts. They can wear the executioners garb of ISIS or the prison uniforms of state prison guards around our country.

The cross and the lynching tree are cut from the same wood and the same mentality of terror and torture unto death. They are meant to disable and cause fear in all around. While they do disable, through the power of Christ they do not cause us to fear. Rather, they empower us for living lives of love and justice, and overcoming the evil of this world with the hope of God’s saving power for life!

Whatever it is that disables and causes you suffering – your state of mental health, your conditions of physical challenge and pain, your attitude about other people, your willingness to turn away from evil and wrong in this world, I pray today that our Suffering Savior – crucified and soon to be Risen – would hold you with his torn-in-two hands, that he would walk with you as he barely moves with his disabled and disfigured feet, and that he releases you from your mindset that looks backward and thus misses the

forward movement of healing and resurrection from the dead. Our disabled, lynched and suffering Christ loves each and every person on this planet. In his suffering, he embraces everyone.

Christ suffered and died for us.

See from his hands, his head, his feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down, did er' such love and sorrow meet, or thorns compose so rich a crown?

