

“The Way of the Cross”*

Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 116:1-9; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 15, 2024, dedicated to our newest members, to the teachers and students of First Church who begin a new year of study and learning together, to the people of Springfield, Ohio, especially the Haitian Refugees who are having to endure the horrors of racism and judgment and to all who work with refugees and immigrants as they make their way into our nation 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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When was the last time you looked at yourself in a carnival mirror? The distortion we see comes from the physics of sight. We see a person in the light that s/he reflects back to us. Obviously, this process depends on our eye as well as the light coming from the other. For example if you have astigmatism your corneas are shaped differently so that your uncorrected vision is distorted. There are all sorts of reasons for distorted images. This junior-scientific information will end here – but it might illumine today’s Gospel.

As Jesus and his disciples are walking along the mountainous path into Casearia Phillippi, Jesus asks what they think of him. The question – “*Who do you say that I am?*” Perhaps his question comes from his need to understand

how they really feel about him. He might also be setting up a teaching in which he gets his students to struggle to express their own answer and then draws them into dialogue. Both of these possibilities deserve a little closer exploration.

The first portrays Jesus as a vulnerable human being seeking assurance from his friends. We've rarely given any attention to the idea that Jesus is desirous of our love, but this incident seems to reveal something unexpected about our relationship with God is about to happen. In our worship we have calls to worship, invocations, blessings, intercessions, thanksgiving and praise. But, rarely do we talk just about LOVE. How often in prayer do we simply express our love? While we know that all the above-mentioned types of prayer spring from love, we don't always mention love when we articulate our prayers.

We aren't saying, "*O my God, I love you so much!*" or "*Jesus, I love you more than anyone!*" Thinking in human terms (as Jesus would have), we realize that humble people often feel embarrassed or even put off by praise or adulation. It's OK to thank them, or to ask forgiveness from them because those all contribute to a living, growing relationship. But our most basic emotional need is for love; admiration can emphasize the differences between us. Think about the possibility that Jesus may have been revealing a human AND divine desire for love when he asked, "*Who do you say that I am?*"

Another possibility is that Jesus is inviting the women and men who walked with him to go into their own depths = to explore what they really believe. To ask, "*What do you think of me?*", draws both the questioner and the questioned into vulnerability and intimacy. Seen in that light, Jesus' question may have been an invitation to grow in their relationship with him.

When Peter responded, "*You are the Christ,*" he was speaking from his own point of view. He based his perception of Jesus on his own hopes and his own expectations. If we were to describe Peter's answer in terms of the above-listed types of prayer, he might have been blessing, proclaiming his faith or expressing thanksgiving or praise. But he did not say, "*You are the one we love.*"

You are the one that we follow.” Peter recognized the greatness before him, but his expectations distorted his perception of who Jesus was and was becoming.

Peter’s next response led Jesus in turn to order him, *“Get behind me, Satan!”* *“You are the follower in this situation,”* Jesus continues, *“Don’t try to tempt me into being something I am not!”* Saying that, and warning the disciples about coming events, reveals how deeply Jesus was rooted in the attitude described by Isaiah in today’s first reading, the Third Song of the Suffering Servant. Jesus exemplified what the servant said: *“The Lord opens my ear that I may hear; and I have not rebelled.”*

Jesus rooted his identity in his relationship with His Father, and thus he was in line for all the rejection that humanity directed at him and at God. Peter and the gang didn’t want to understand this — even though Jesus said it at least three times. They imagined and preferred a Warrior Messiah or a Weapon-wielding Liberator who would vanquish their enemies, wipe them out and overwhelm them with his strength and power. Like the Carnival mirror, their vision was distorted. Their hearts were not seeing the light Jesus reflected, but instead their own circus-mirror image of who they wanted him to be.

Jesus changes the view. He fills all of the roles they have in mind, just **not in the way** they have in mind. His example liberates others from fear. His example liberates others from every kind of fear. He reveals his victory, his strength and power by demonstrating that no assault against his reputation or even his life could make him turn back or shame him.

He took up his cross and through his sacrifice – gave the victory. He meant what he said, when he told them over and over again – *“take up YOUR cross and follow me.”* We need to remember who this guy was. He was the son of a Nazarene carpenter. And he built the crosses that the Roman Empire used to crucify people in his village when he was growing up. Jesus constructed the crosses that circled the hillside of Nazareth and thousands of people were crucified as he was growing up. When Jesus says, “take up your cross,” it is

not a metaphor. It is not a figure of speech. He is calling people to lift the cross and carry the burden of that cross just as he did throughout his life – particularly as a child growing up. So when he tells us to “take up your cross and follow me,” he is seriously declaring that what we need to do to sacrifice for others, too. The Way of the cross is truly to feel the love which Jesus extends to us, with which he embraces us so fully that we would mirror that to others – not in a distorted way like the carnival mirror – but in a clear way – like the mirrors we look into each day. He wants us to see him love expressed in our love.

The Gospels always aim to alter our perceptions – so do the rest of scripture, too. Discipleship carries no insurance policy. Following Jesus is a risky proposition. It turns everything upside down and inside out and offers us the costly freedom to learn to love God as God is – all powerful in love and life – and always bringing beauty and creativity to life.

Someone who carried the cross and sought mightily to reflect God’s love was Jesus’ younger brother James. James was the second born to Mary – or as some like to say – the firstborn to Joseph and Mary. He didn’t follow Jesus throughout his ministry but became a believer after he saw his brother rise from the dead. He later became the first bishop of the church in Jerusalem.

In his letter to the church, James digs into the importance of mirroring Christ – so much so that our words match our actions. He begins by honoring teachers but reminding everyone that teaching is not for everyone – because teachers make a living with their tongues. The tongue speaks many words. The tongue can do great good, and it can do great harm. The tongue is small – like the rudder of a ship – but as the pilot uses it – it guides the soul and the body. It can direct or misdirect the body. Or a match, he says, can light a small fire for cooking or warming the home, or it cause a blaze that rages through the land (especially dangerous in a desert region like James’ or in a region like ours that is experiencing a draught). His warning was – watch out for what a fire can do. The tongue is capable of blessing and cursing. It

can belittle, mock, abuse, curse, intimidate, or even wage war – destroying everything and everyone in its path. Or it can heal – it can bring love and acceptance and new hope to life. The tongue is a powerful little tool.

I would extend the tongue to social media today in which words, AI photos, taking a picture from one place and weaving a destructive story about another place and people fits the definitions of a tongue out of control. We have seen the abusiveness of this sort of thing 45 minutes away in Springfield, Ohio. Someone making things up and lying on social media has set a community and now a nation on fire and on its ear against the Haitian community in Springfield – but moreover – against immigrants and refugees everywhere. What starts as an unkind word against a neighbor has turned into a raging fire against all people who talk different and look different.

I might add that Ericka Lee, the woman who started this firestorm about Haitian immigrants stealing and eating people's pets admitted to making things up and told NBC News "It just exploded into something I didn't mean to happen." Really Ericka? How often have we seen this happen? It happens in neighborhoods, schools, and it happens in churches in churches – too.

In James' words, this is why Ericka Lee should not be a teacher. But, like it or not, we all know Ericka Lee is a teacher – and so are each one of us in our families and communities. Like Ericka, we are all teachers of our children and grandchildren; our neighbor's children and grandchildren and our church's children and grandchildren. Each of us is a teacher – and they are watching us and listening to us all the time.

So take a look in the mirror – not a carnival mirror – a regular one. What do you see? Do you see, looking back at you, a person who is joyful, speaks thoughtfully and kindly and reflects to others the best of who they are? Do you see a disciple who carries the cross – or someone who carries a grudge? To do see love looking back or something else? Speaking with kindness matters. Carrying the cross matters. Loving one another matters. And as we love and as we see Christ more clearly, we'll learn to follow him rather than the contorted illusions we see in our carnival mirrors. Amen.

* Some of the material for this sermon was drawn from Sr. Mary M. McGlone's reflection on the lectionary in National Catholic Reporter for September 15, 2024.