

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 12/26/2022

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

ONE AT ONE – *Every day this week beginning on Tuesday, December 27, you are encouraged to pray for one minute at one o'clock. This week, give thanks to GOD for the gift of JESUS who shares GOD'S love for all people. Praise GOD for humbly becoming one of us and for serving us and for giving the possibility of a full and meaningful life in response to GOD'S love.*

From time to time, the question arises, “Why did JESUS have to die?” In many cases, this question has a broadness behind it that wonders, “Why in the scope of human history did JESUS have to give up HIS life on the cross?” But sometimes the question reflects a curiosity about the circumstance of that time, as in “Why did they want to put JESUS to death? After all, HE didn't do anything wrong.”

This second form of the question is valuable because it has tremendous implications for us and for our lives. Part of the answer is that the religious leaders of JESUS time believed that only GOD could forgive (imagine living in a time when no one forgave each other because that was too godly a thing), so JESUS, by forgiving others, was claiming to be GOD. And that was heresy and deserving of death.

But there's another part implied in JESUS forgiving that I think really helps to explain the more personal motivation for “getting rid” of HIM. Many people knew then as they know today that they/we are sinful people. We have failed to live as GOD wants us to, and treated others not as we wish to be treated, and have often worshiped other things besides GOD. Basically, we are sinful people, and as such, we know that we are in need of forgiveness. For those who lived in JESUS' time, HIS forgiveness was such a tremendously welcome message. That made HIM popular with a lot of people, especially those had been told by the religious leaders that they were sinful. Some had even been told that their sin was so great or so innate to who they were that they could never be forgiven. Like Samaritans who were sinful because they had Assyrian ancestry. Or prostitutes for whom prostitution was the only way to avoid, well, starving to death. Or lepers who must have done something wrong or else GOD wouldn't be punishing them in this way. (That kind of message is never given to anyone today, right? Or is it? And by whom?) So, for these people who were being told they could never be forgiven and never be worthy of GOD's love, JESUS saying they were forgiven was powerful and gracious and deeply welcomed.

But there were also those, like some of the religious leaders, who believed they had never sinned. Or at least had never done anything that bad, or certainly not as a bad as “them” (pointing at those people they believed were clearly sinful). And there were those, like some of the religious leaders, who believed they could easily earn their forgiveness with just a few small sacrifices. And there were those, like a lot of the Jews, who believed that, because they were descended from Abraham, they were already protected from GOD'S judgement because GOD had chosen them to be GOD'S special people. So, when JESUS starts forgiving people, it confronts them with the possibility that maybe they aren't free from sin or judgement and that maybe they need it, too. And when you believe you haven't done anything wrong, you don't like to be told that you are in need of forgiveness. So, the best thing to do is to get rid of the ONE who keeps bringing that up and confronting you for your sin.

As I've shared, when I'm asked how I am, I often reply, “Better than I deserve.” And usually, there's a chuckle and I'm told that this isn't really true. That, then, opens the door to first confessing that I am a sinner, deeply in need of GOD'S forgiveness, and second, that I am blessed that I have been forgiven and given the life I have today. And in doing so, I often have the opportunity to talk with the other person about GOD'S forgiveness and love for them. Sometimes, this conversation happens with someone who also has been told by the church that they are so sinful that GOD could never love or forgive them. I sort of get a feeling about how JESUS must have felt when HE could tell someone else that they were forgiven, and see the look on their face when they

hear that good news. There are plenty of people today who have been given messages of condemnation and judgement, rather than messages of love and grace. We need to work to change that. We do that by first recognizing that we are better off than we deserve, and then claiming the blessing of GOD'S forgiveness for us that gives us the life we have. And then, we look for opportunities to tell others about the forgiveness and love that GOD has for them as well.

In CHRIST'S love,
Pastor Jeffrey