

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
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Petey Crowder  
The Pioneer and Perfecter of Faith | Hebrews 12:1-3**

Hey, good morning! We are starting a new series called Jesus Outside the Lines. It is based on a book written by Scott Sauls who is a pastor in Nashville. We will have Scott with us in a couple of weeks and he's going to preach on this topic. We gave this book away on Christmas Eve, one per household, and if you didn't get one there are some out at the Welcome Desk. After the service we would love for you to stop by and get a copy so we can all be reading it together throughout the series. The idea of Jesus outside the lines is based on what it would look like for us to follow Jesus in all the places Jesus goes but that we are tempted to stay away from in terms of relationships. In our world what often happens is we see the other, we see them, we see us, and then we see inside and out—we see our side and theirs—and we are tempted to draw lines. When we draw lines, we unintentionally put ourselves in places where we imagine that God loves us so how could He possibly love them? And yet time and time again in the gospels we see that Jesus doesn't play by those rules. Jesus goes outside the lines, across the lines, and loves those who others might think unlovable. And we all have people in our lives who we, at least on some level, act like they're unlovable. So, we want to take a journey over the next several weeks, all the way through the Lenten season, where we ask good questions about what it would look like for us to follow Jesus outside of the lines. This morning in particular we want to ask: why Jesus? Why Jesus? Why do we imagine that Jesus would have something unique in particular to say to this cultural moment? We think that as we wrestle with what that means to us—how Jesus matters to each and every one of our lives, then we might start to imagine how Jesus would then matter for others, and matter for our conversations, and matter in the ways we live in the world as Christ followers. The question we are asking this morning is, "Why does Jesus matter?"

To get into that we are going to look into a text in Hebrews chapter 12. If you have your Bible you can go ahead and turn there. We're also going to read it together responsively up on the screens—I'm going to read the parts that are not in bold and then together in unison we will all read together the parts that are in bold. Please join me:

<sup>1</sup>Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, **let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.** And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, <sup>2</sup>**fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.** For the joy set before him he endured the cross, **scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.** <sup>3</sup>Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, **so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.** [Hebrews 12:1-3]

The author of Hebrews is writing to a group of people who have lived under the Jewish sacrificial code and the book of Hebrews is his attempt to help them understand why that code, that religious system, has now changed because of Jesus. So, much like us, they are hearing this as people who are wrestling with and trying to understand: what does it mean for Jesus to matter in light of what is going on in our world today? And he said they were surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. If you go back one chapter to Hebrews 11, the author lists a whole bunch of God followers throughout history who have run faithful races, who have remained faithful to God throughout the course of their life, and he lists a lot of the challenges they had. And we know there are a lot of challenges in our world today that cause divisions and lines. We know it happens on a national scale and an international scale, and we know that it happens locally—in our relationships and our workplaces; even in our local schools we see the effects of the divisiveness that is happening in our world. So why do we imagine that Jesus would matter? There is nothing under the sun that is new. The challenging times we face might be a little different, but challenging times have always come. Throughout history during challenging times the church has always, always, always returned to Jesus. Therefore, for us to consider what it would look like to live faithful lives in our world today, we should return to Jesus and understand why Jesus matters for us today.

The first thing I want you to see is that the author of Hebrews tells us that Jesus matters because sin clings so closely. He says, "...let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us." He imagines that we are in some kind of running race, and yet something continues to try to trap us, to trick us, to wrap us up, to weigh us down. We want to be faithful, yet there is something that weighs heavy on us, and he calls that thing sin. Now, if you're like me, and some of you will be—some of you won't, that's fine—if you're like me, when you hear the word "sin" it doesn't always sit well with you. I think of images of street preachers with signs condemning me for sins, even though they don't know me. I think of fiery pastors, screaming at me in my youth about being a sinner. The word sin does not conjure up good images for me. Even for us, the Ten Commandments seem to be the epitome of: *here's a list of rules. Do not violate them or you will make God mad.* Even the Ten Commandments are not about a list of rules to break or keep. Instead they were ways that God gave His people to learn to live in right relationship with Him and right relationship with each other. Sin is not about an arbitrary list of rules that we might break and make God mad. Sin is relational disfunction. Sin is a relational problem all the way through. The word for sin in the Greek in this text in Hebrews is often translated as an archery term. It means to miss the mark. So, you're shooting a bow and arrow, you're aiming at the target and it doesn't hit the bullseye. It misses, it misses, it misses...it's off. It doesn't do what it is intended to do. That's a perfectly accurate way of translating, but another way of translating sin in this context is to exclude oneself. To sin is to take oneself out of right relationship or out of a social context and to isolate or exclude yourself. We know deep down in our gut that sin is a relational issue. We experience the effects of it all the time. When we find ourselves scrolling through Facebook, scrolling through Twitter, watching the news, listening to the news, talking to others about what's going on in our world today, we don't just hear *that's a bad idea*—we think *that's a bad person*. Right? They disagree with us. We don't like what they've

said; they are so wrong. And the sin starts to mean that it's not just us against that idea, it's us against them. Sin haunts our relationships. Where in your life is sin haunting relationships? Think about the way you relate to your parents, the way you relate to your kids, the way you relate to coworkers and roommates and classmates. How is sin entangling or threatening to entangle and weigh heavy and disrupt? Sin clings so closely that it entangles us, it malforms us, and then we walk out into the world—into classrooms, into workplaces, into families—entangled in sin, entangled in fear, entangled in hatred, entangled in selfishness, entangled in isolation, entangled in pride, entangled in lust. Some of us might even find ourselves entangled by things that were meant for our good. We can be entangled by pursuits of comfort and security; we spent four weeks in January looking at how wealth and consumption can entangle us. Our pursuits of the perfect family and the best life for our kids can entangle us. Pursuing the perfect career at all costs can weigh us down, and what we find is we are not just putting ourselves up against a set of rules and breaking them, we find ourselves breaking relationships, hurting people, all in the name of self-preservation, selfishness and the pursuit of things which we think we need but in the end cling to us and entangle us. And the author of Hebrews imagines that there is only one solution for this relational problem, for this sin that clings so closely, and he says that it is to fix our eyes on Jesus, that Jesus is the only solution to the malformation. Author James K. A. Smith, in his book *Awaiting the King*, talks about the Godfather problem. I hope this analogy is not dated, but *The Godfather* is a series of movies about a mob family, about a crime family with a mob boss, and what you see is that they do the things mob families do, and yet they also go to church. They go to Confession. They take Communion. They have their babies baptized. How is it he asks, that one family could spend all of their time out in the world doing the things that mobsters do—eliminating enemies, living with vengeance and violence and hatred—and then walk into church on a regular basis and say the historic confessions of the church...confess to believe in Jesus, take Communion, sing and pray, hear the Word preached—how is that possible? I don't think any of us are mobsters. If you are, I apologize. Yet what we find is we can come in week after week, sing and pray and listen and take Communion, and are our lives transformed? What I want you to see is Jesus matters because Christianity without Christ is powerless.

Fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. You see, the reason the Godfather problem exists is because Christianity, going to church, singing, praying, taking Communion...these things in and of themselves do not form us into the way of Jesus. It is only out of a relationship with Jesus that we are formed into the way of Jesus. Christianity without a relationship with Jesus lacks transformation and it lacks power. Our lives are shaped and changed and transformed by and out of relationships. We know this is true instinctively because when we get good news, what do we do? We call someone, we tell someone. *Hey dad, I got a job. Mom, it's a girl. I'm getting married.* In the same way, when we get bad news we want to share it with someone because we want someone to carry the burden with us. We live and breathe and operate out of relationships.

I was once in a room of...I'll call them very Presbyterian people. We might be Presbyterian, but we're not all *very* Presbyterian. I was in a room of *very* Presbyterian people...like one thousand of them. The presenter was asking questions to try to get people to identify what had been the most transformative and meaningful spiritual experiences of their lives. So he asked lots of questions and made some statements to help them, for several minutes, process what had been the most meaningful part of their spiritual journey. When he got them to the right place he asked them to stand up if what they thought of was a book. No one stood up. He asked them to stand up if what they thought of was a person. Everyone in the room stood up. We know, for some reason, that even the most academically, mentally geared people in the world—Presbyterians—know deep down that we live not out of books, we live out of relationships. Relationships transform us. If sin is a relational problem, it needs a relational solution. It needs a relationship with Jesus. Part of the reason why the practices of Christianity will be meaningless without Christ is because when we pray and sing and take Communion and hear the Word, we are rehearsing and practicing a relationship with Jesus. Therefore, when you don't have a relationship with Jesus, things might end up being meaningful in some way, but they aren't transformative and we don't live meaningful, transformative, powerful lives changed by Christ. Likewise, collectively as a church we can't live a powerful and meaningful story, and our story will be irrelevant to the world in which we live.

The third thing I want you to see is that if Jesus doesn't matter to the church, the church won't matter to the world. Verse three says, "Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." Consider him who endured. So in all the trials of life, if we don't focus on Jesus, if Jesus isn't what we are moving towards, then we will have nothing meaningful to move forward with. Without Jesus we can't shed the sin that clings. We have no power for a transformed life and we will be irrelevant to the world. Without Jesus we will have nothing meaningful to invite people into. It's tempting in the world in which we live to jettison Jesus. I know that sounds counterintuitive, but churches are doing it every single day. To jettison Jesus for the sake of being relevant, to jettison Jesus for the sake of being a little more palatable, because Jesus can be messy. He can be challenging. He can invite us to do things that are hard. And so we can say *Oh, we're so warm and welcoming and nice and friendly. That's who we are. Or, we're the people who do all kinds of good in the world. We do all kinds of justice—we stand up for all these issues. We give all this money. Oh, look at our amazing building that we are making even better. We are such good people. We live good lives. People should want to be like us. God has blessed us richly.* We can think all these things; all these things can be good and true, and I'm not bashing any of those things, but what I'm telling you is that without Jesus they will ultimately be meaningless in the world. They will be meaningless. Without Jesus we have nothing meaningful to invite people into. We can be as welcoming and nice and loving as anyone, and yet without the transforming power of Jesus, we will be boring. We can be amazingly moral people who do good works, and yet without the transformation of Jesus, we will be judgmental. We can give away all kinds of money to causes around the world, we can march, we can stand up for people—we should do those things—and yet without the transformation of Jesus we will just become burned

out and make no difference. We can have an amazing building, and yet if we don't have Jesus we are inviting people in to nothing. We can have the most entertaining children's ministry and youth programs and yet we can send students right back out the door to be transformed, not by Jesus, but by the forces at work in the world around them. Without Jesus we have nothing powerful and meaningful to invite people in to. We're not compelling unless Jesus is transforming our lives individually and our life together. If Jesus doesn't matter to us, our faith won't matter in the world. Jesus is our hope and our future. He is the pioneer and the author and the beginner; He is the perfecter, the finisher, the fulfillment, the completion. Notice that the writer of Hebrews doesn't say Jesus is the pen and the paper. It would be so much easier if he was, if Jesus were just these religious tools at our disposal to make our lives what we want them to be. But he doesn't say that. He says that Jesus is the author, the pioneer, the perfecter. He desires a relationship with you, a relationship with you where the sin doesn't cling and where He has defeated the power of sin and death and hell that has no power over you. You can walk with Jesus and finish the race and walk it with perseverance because your eyes are fixed on Him and he is the one who has started your faith and He is bringing it to completion Himself.

What would it look like for us to live in the world as if sin had no claim on us? What would it look like for you? Where in your life do you need to let go of the sin that so easily entangles? Where is it tripping you up? Where is it causing you to live with others with brokenness and not out of the love of Jesus? What sin in your life do you need to let go of?

The second question is: What would it look like for you to live as if the relationship you have with Jesus was the source of every other relationship that you have? That you lived out of having a close ongoing relationship with Jesus? We have talked about how relationships transform us and change us. The people we are in relationships with change the way we live. I've thought about this in terms of my brother. I've told many of you that I have a twin brother, an identical twin. He and his family came up for Thanksgiving, and we ran a race at Lake Harriet and I beat him. [Picture shown] That's why I'm holding up the one finger. We are the only siblings, just the two of us, and we did everything together. We played football and baseball together, we had the same schedules, the same classes, the same youth activities, and then when we turned sixteen, we both drove to school separately every single day without fail, even though we had the same schedule. This is spoken like someone who has never paid for gas, right? The thing was, I had a shadow. I had a twin brother who was always there; I was never alone in social situations. We were always around each other, and I look back on that fondly and favorably, but as a teenager I didn't love having a built-in tattletale. Someone that could easily run to mom and dad and tell anything I did or said that I shouldn't have. So I found myself, over time, making decisions based on *well, my brother is there so he will tell if he sees me doing something I shouldn't* and so I would make decisions that way. Now, what I learned was that this wasn't about guilt or worrying about getting in trouble. This was about having a relational presence in my life that reminded me of who I was, and I made decisions based on that. Now it's a simple analogy—what I want you to see is when you have a relationship with Jesus and Jesus

is transforming your life, then you operate in the world, you make decisions, you treat others out of that relationship. It is an ever-present reality, this desiring for you to run the race with perseverance.

I heard an amazing story this past week of a CPC member who was flying from Boston back to Minneapolis. She was sitting by a man, just sitting in her seat reading the Jesus Outside the Lines book, and the man beside her started to ask her about it. They struck up a conversation and she told the man about Jesus and about the book and about what is going on at CPC. It turns out he was a sports radio host flying in for the Superbowl. Wednesday night he shows up at CPC to a men's Bible study just because this woman had shared with him about CPC and had invited him. Now, I think that's an amazing story because it shows that Jesus mattered to her and she crossed the line. It's not until Jesus matters to us that we can start to imagine how Jesus might matter to others. It's not until Jesus matters to us that we can start imagining how Jesus might matter to the divisive issues that our world faces. For us as a church, our hope is that each and every one of you know the transforming love and power of a relationship with Jesus and that you would be formed to walk into the world and to show others the love that you have—so that Jesus would matter to them. It's not until we know the transformation of Jesus in our own lives that we can faithfully walk across and outside the lines and run the race with perseverance.

Let us pray.

Holy and loving God, we thank You for who You are and how You love us. We thank You for the ways in which You have come to us when our sin is clinging so close, when it so easily entangles. You have loved us all the way through death and resurrection so that we may experience new life and abundance in You. I pray for each and every one of my friends here in this room—that they would know what it means to have a relationship with You. That they would know what it looks like to practice it and rehearse it and to live it out in the world. And for all the stuff that is weighing heavy on us, that we would give those things over to You. As we approach Your table, may we shed the sin that clings, may we confess honestly the brokenness in us—that we need You oh so much. Let us come with open hands and open hearts, trusting that You are greater than anything else there is to offer. We love You and praise Your name—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit. Amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*