

Midnight Mass**A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation****By The Rev. CJ McGregor****Delivered on November 7, 2021**

Our message this morning is titled *Midnight Mass*. I wonder if some of you remember attending a mass or a service at midnight on Christmas Eve. I was usually in bed by eight o'clock on December 24th and dragged out of my bed about 11:15pm to get dressed and rushed to church for midnight mass. It was a tradition to go to mass, return home, and then allowed to open gifts from my grandmother. As I was writing this message, I discovered it may have been less of a tradition than it was bribery. Let's keep the kids quiet and cooperative by bribing them. Do any of you remember something like this? Good, but that's not what we are going to be talking about today.

Midnight Mass is a mini-series on Netflix that I binged watched in one sitting. Binge watching Netflix seemed in vogue over the last two years. I normally wouldn't have watched something like *Midnight Mass*, but the series combined profound questions about spirituality and horror. A wonderful mix! It's the type of show that will sooner make you teary-eyed over a discussion about the afterlife than jump off your couch from something going bump in the night. Almost the entire series takes place on Crockett Island, a fictional hamlet 30 miles off the coast of New England with dwindling economic prospects. The island's main source of income, fishing, has been decimated by a coastal oil spill that taints the waters. With just 127 residents, a number that only gets smaller as better opportunities beckon elsewhere, Crockett and its predominantly Catholic population are desperately searching for a little hope. Then the mysterious Father Paul shows up after the island's elder monsignor develops symptoms of dementia on a sabbatical to the Holy Land. Or so Father Paul claims. The priest's arrival coincides with the sudden emergence of strange—one might even say biblical—phenomena on the island. The possibility of a divine power working through Father Paul reinvigorates the island's faith: It doesn't take long before most of Crockett's residents are attending his sermons, hoping for a miracle of their own.

The other characters bring a more clear-eyed perspective to the bizarre happenings on Crockett—their reactions are filtered through the prisms of atheism, science, and Islam, which in some corners of the island is demonized. *Midnight Mass* depicts both the joy and desperation that comes with wanting to believe in a higher power, and in being chosen for something greater than ourselves. There is one thing that kept me engaged with this series. That is the underlying theme discussing the human need for forgiveness. Nearly every single character in *Midnight Mass* has a clear issue with either needing to be forgiven, needing to forgive someone else, or needing to forgive themselves.

It's a human need to seek forgiveness, and refusing to forgive is clearly shown as a hindrance to the series characters' personal growth. Even if they're still angry, forgiving is powerful and can help relieve one's own guilt and grudges. Receiving forgiveness is just as important because people will typically punish themselves far worse without it. At the same time, the meaning of *Midnight Mass*'s ending reveals that simply asking for forgiveness isn't enough. If people

really want to move forward because they feel poorly about how their actions affected others, they have to make true and earnest amends.

For the religious and secular alike, forgiveness is powerful, and the struggles on either side wrack one's brain and hinder personal progression. For many, forgiveness is a driving force in why people seek religion in the first place. Guilt, remorse, and anger are emotions that are extremely difficult to get rid of on our own, so many believe they can alleviate these feelings if they are forgiven by God. Just asking God to forgive isn't enough, it has to be done with personal intent and true meaning. For the secular, to truly move on from guilt or anger over a situation, there has to be some sort of contrition for one's actions or a true act of releasing blame in one's heart. Forgiveness is one of the hardest actions for human beings to grapple with.

Forgiveness is one of the really difficult things in life. The logic of receiving hurt seems to run in the direction of never forgetting either the hurt or the hurter. When you forgive, some deeper, divine generosity takes over. When you can forgive, then you are free. When you cannot forgive, you are a prisoner of the hurt done to you. If you are really disappointed in someone and you become embittered, you become incarcerated inside that feeling. Only the grace of forgiveness can break the straight logic of hurt and embitterment. It gives you a way out, because it places the conflict on a completely different level. In a strange way, it keeps the whole conflict human. You begin to see and understand the conditions, circumstances, or weakness that made the other person act as they did.

Forgiveness is really difficult because it can feel counter intuitive to voluntarily release the anger or resentment that we hold when we have been hurt. We don't really want to forget the hurt. We want to hold the hurter in a place of bitterness. I suspect that each of us knows what it is to be hurt so deeply that we refuse to forget or forgive -- the risk of further injury is too great. But, when we hold so tightly to our pain, or our righteous indignation, we incarcerate ourselves in a prison of endless suffering. A sweet grace comes to us when we can truly step out of our prison of pain and engage in deep forgiveness. It is then that we can begin to see the other person as a fellow human being. If we can open our hearts to the one who has hurt us, we can perhaps understand -- not condone or erase or make acceptable -- but simply understand the underlying conditions, circumstances, or weakness that made the other person act as they did. If we can go there, where the broken and flawed humanity is, then we may be able to forgive and be free from the chains that were holding us. It is a holy grace that comes over us in that moment and we are free.

We also have difficulty forgiving ourselves. Forgiving yourself is essential. There is a tendency in all of us to hold ourselves more accountable than we do others. Perhaps you have been one who can justify forgiving others, even for a terrible offense, yet you find no justification for forgiving yourself for an equal or lesser offense. Perhaps you believe that forgiving yourself is not even a consideration because you think you must hold yourself in a state of constant remembrance, lest you forget. Perhaps you believe there is a price, some form of life-long penance that you must pay. Forgiving yourself is not about forgetting. It is about not bringing the offense up to yourself in negative ways. Forgiving yourself is simply letting go of what you are holding against yourself so that you can move on. Life is full of choices and every choice we make will either take us in a positive, life-giving direction or rob us of the opportunity to be a life-giving individual. Forgiving ourselves does not let us off the hook, it does not justify what we have done, and it is not a sign of weakness. Forgiveness is a choice that takes courage and

strength, and it gives us the opportunity to become an overcomer rather than remaining a victim of our own scorn.

To be really good at something requires ten thousand hours of practice. Forgiveness is a spiritual practice that requires ten thousand hours, or the rest of our life. Each day forgiveness must be prayed for and struggled for and won. Each day. Every day. Buddhist nun and teacher, Pema Chodron, is simple and blunt in her teaching. It is inviting in its simplicity of presentation and it is infuriating in its difficulty of practice. She says, “There is a simple practice we can do to cultivate forgiveness. First we acknowledge what we feel—shame, revenge, embarrassment, remorse. Then we forgive ourselves for being human. Then, in the spirit of not wallowing in the pain, we let go and make a fresh start. We don’t have to carry the burden with us anymore. We will discover forgiveness as a natural expression of the open heart, an expression of our basic goodness. This potential is inherent in every moment. Each moment is an opportunity to make a fresh start.”

First acknowledge the hurt and all the feelings we have about it
Then forgive ourselves for being imperfect and human.

Then we let go of the pain.

Then we make a fresh start.

Then we can begin to have an open heart.

Then we begin again.

Then we begin again.

May we remember the importance of our practice of forgiveness. May we take time, critical time, to give and receive forgiveness and to restore ourselves, each other, and the world.

May you feel the sweet release that comes from forgiving others. May you feel the balm of being forgiven and of forgiving yourself. Each and every day, may we say as part of our spiritual practice, “We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.” And so, the take away this morning is to forgive into freshness, to let go, free yourself, and begin again.

May it be so.