

*A baptismal meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 5, May 2, 2010, dedicated to the memory of my pastor, the Rev. Dr. John Touchberry, and to Aarav Peter, his parents Pavan and Malini, and paternal grandparents Bishop Elia Peter and the Rev. Dr. Navamani Peter on Aarav's baptismal day, and always to the glory of God!*

## **“Risking Compassion”**

### **Acts 11:15-18; John 13:31-35**

We find an interesting mix of texts today in our readings for the fifth Sunday of Easter. John 13:31-35 is the portion of Jesus' farewell discourse and prayer offered just before his arrest and death. He is preparing his disciples for his coming death and his rising in glory, really a message crafted for the early church. Acts 11:15-18 concludes a two chapter story in which Peter and Cornelius are both converted, Cornelius and his household (including infants and children) are baptized and Peter's heart and mind are changed from seeing faith in Christ as "for Jews only" to welcoming Gentiles and non-Jews into the family of followers for Christ.

Listen now for the conclusion of this conversion story:  
Acts 11:15-18.

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our rock and our salvation.*

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As a freshman at Macalester College, I thought Steve Shapiro and his dog Moses were the coolest guys on campus.

Steve was funny, engaging and he wore a baseball hat everywhere – into class, into the dining hall and even into meetings with President John B. Davis. Meanwhile, Moses also wore a kepa (or a head cover) on top of his furry head and he caught every Frisbee thrown well by any human at any distance. He was also the Alpha Dog on campus. In addition, Moses had a homemade satchel, sown by Steve, in which he carried his Frisbee everywhere. He was armed and ready to fetch at all times. However, he loathed people who could not throw a Frisbee.

Steve was an Orthodox Jew from Brooklyn, N.Y., in the middle of the Twin Cities in Minnesota. Turns out, he wore the baseball hat as a head cover to honor God while following all the laws of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. He lived his faith with joy and he was cool. He named his dog Moses to remind him of God's great lawgiver. Whenever he whistled or called the great deliverer's name aloud, we were all reminded that not only could Moses lead his people from slavery to freedom, but he could also catch a Frisbee running full speed at 50 yards on the commons outside Old Main! Steve and Moses were cool.

Peter was cool, too. Like Steve, Peter was trying hard to live his Jewish faith to the fullest. He wanted to glorify God as a faithful Jew AND a follower of Jesus. That was working pretty well for him until he started having repetitive dreams and night visions of angels, four footed creatures, reptiles and birds – all in the air. Through his dreams, Peter was led to Cornelius, an Italian Gentile, a Roman centurion (a military officer) who was having identical dreams about 50 miles away. Cornelius' dreams were driving his deep desire to be baptized (along with his household) and join the Jesus movement. One problem. Cornelius was uncircumcised, which was unacceptable to a faithful, Jewish, Jesus man like Peter.

However, dreams have a funny effect on the leaders of movements! In the twinkling of an eye, through these dreams and corresponding visions, the leader of Jewish Christians and

the seeking Gentile Centurion meet and everything – I mean everything – changes!

As Peter puts it in Acts 10:34, *“Now, I truly understand that God shows no favorites.”* **In other words, God is the coolest of all!** God leads us to and through change. As we come upon seemingly insurmountable challenges and odds, God leads us through. As we encounter our fears and life’s greatest transitions, God guides us to have no fear of anything. The God who plays favorites with nobody, shows us to take on the seemingly impossible dreams of our lives and trust God to guide us through – as opposed to running from and mocking God.

John 13:31-35 adds to this understanding. As Jesus faces his impending death, and seemingly impossible odds mount against him, he teaches his disciples a new commandment – to love one another. He says to them, if you tell the truth, if you are faithful in following God’s Word, and if you continue to Love one another as God has loved you, all things will work together for good, with those who love the Lord!

Love is an action not simply a feeling. This is where we often get lost in love. We sing the love songs instead living the love actions. Jesus says love one another through the actions you take on behalf of your beloved ones.

On this day in which we celebrate the baptism of Aarav Peter and the holy communion, both in Christ’s name, we remember once again that our faith is a faith of love in action. We promise to walk with Aarav as he lives and grows in Christ Jesus. But it is our action of his behalf that will speak louder than words. We promise to remember Christ, when we receive the eucharist in his name, but our words, commitments and convictions are lies if we do not follow him in love.

Where there is great need, great action is required. In this way, love risks compassion. If we truly love one another,

we take compassionate risks on their behalf. That goes for friend or stranger.

Tomorrow night, we have a great opportunity to risk compassion and put our love in action. I know you have read newsletter articles, seen bulletin inserts (today), heard presentations, heard Rev. Wilson last Sunday, received emails and received face-to-face invitations to the Nehemiah Action tomorrow night at Vet's Memorial Auditorium, 300 W. Broad St., beginning full agenda at 6:45 p.m. We end at 8:30 p.m. - guaranteed! We will put love into action.

Over 3,000 people – over 150 from our congregation alone – will deal with issues facing our community and the response of over 50 Jewish, Christian and Muslim congregations to take action for youth at risk, housing needs in a marketplace that is foreclosing on homes much faster than it is closing on deals for new homeowners, and making things right for all those ripped off by payday lenders.

I need you to join me. We have commitments from a great number of people. If you have said you are coming, fulfill your commitment. If you are hearing this for the first time, be spontaneous and show-up at 6:30 p.m. to register with First Church and join the action of love.

Two weeks ago, at a presentation with 60 Muslim students at OSU, my friend and co-teacher in “The Children of Abraham” class, Imam Hany Saqr told a room full of graduate and undergraduate students that BREAD is the greatest interfaith work he has ever known in 25 years in Columbus. Why? Because BREAD puts love into action. He said, Jews, Christians, and Muslims – at best – talk nice to each other. But BREAD takes justice action on behalf of the poor and dispossessed.

It may seem like risky business, but love takes risks. Love acts justly. When we love like this, we can honestly say, “Our God is cool!” And what is our still-speaking God saying?

Our God says, “When my children put love into justice action, when my children risk compassion, my kids are really cool, too!” Amen.

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