

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Ascension of our Lord Sunday, May 16, 2010, dedicated to Cindy Conn on her baptismal day, to all the new members, to Celia Harris Jeffrey who inspired this church long ago and inspires me still today, and always to the glory of God!

“Far Down the Future’s Broadening Way”

II Corinthians 9:1-19; Luke 24:44-53

On this Ascension of the Lord Sunday, I want to talk about the impact your great generosity will have on the future of this church. My sermon title has changed from Friday until today. Now it is, “Far Down the Future’s Broadening Way.” Please join me in prayer.

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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. Amen.

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One of the most remarkable women to grace this city and our congregation was Celia C. (Harris) Jeffrey. Born in West Galway, N.Y., the daughter of Joseph and Deborah Clark Harris came to Columbus as a young child. On her 17th birthday, October 2, 1866, Celia married Joseph Andrew Jeffrey and they walked together far down the path of life over 61½ years until Joe’s death at 92 in August 1928.

They had five children and a good life together. Life was

always good but always easy in the first 10 years of marriage. Then, on one afternoon in 1876, Joseph Jeffrey came across a most curious machine displayed in a storefront on High Street in Columbus, Ohio. The device was a model of a chain driven air-powered mining tool poised to revolutionize the manual-labor driven coal mining industry.

Joe approached the inventor, Francis M. Lechner, went into debt investing in the manufacturing of the machine, but soon turned a profit as the highly-successful Jeffrey Manufacturing Company grew in its operations. The rest, as they say, is history. Joe's company created, patented, built and ran coal mining equipment. In its heyday, over 7,500 people worked for Jeffrey Manufacturing Company. It was always said in Columbus that "Jeffrey was a good place to work."

Stepping back a few years, the Jeffreys joined our congregation in 1871. At the time, Celia was 22 years old and we were a mere 25-year-old congregation. For the next 56 years, 36 of those under the ministry of Dr. Washington Gladden, Celia Jeffrey left a lasting impact on Columbus, helping found Children's Hospital, the Westside Community House – later named Gladden Community House, the Godman Guild, the YWCA and hosting (at First Church) the opening meeting of the Motherhood League, a forerunner of the PTA .

In the early spring of 1929 and now a widow, Celia left this church a lasting legacy. She gave a gift totaling \$250,000 to build this building – a gift that today is worth \$3.1 million. This gift represented over 20% of the total cost of this magnificent building. Her note with the gift read, "May this gift serve as a challenge to the church to inspire us all to do our full share in making the dream of a beautiful and adequate church building come true."

Celia died on April 30, 1929, just a few weeks after sharing her generous gift of love with First Church. At the time of her death, Dr. Lichliter said many things. He

concluded, “The most memorable thing about Mrs. Jeffrey was her strong, uncompromising Christian character combined with a genius for friendship that made everyone love her who knew her.”

Celia never saw our building rise. But she made dreams come true upon its completion and dedication December 13, 1931. The Jeffrey Window in the Chancel was given by the members of First Church in thanksgiving for the Jeffrey family and dedicated in Celia’s memory. There in the highest glass of this incredible blue beauty depicting the life of Jesus, we find our Lord ascending into glory.

It is fitting to talk about Celia Jeffrey on this Ascension Sunday, almost 81 years after her death. Why? Because today, we are seeking to rise to new heights in our generosity and vision. Looming before us is our Capital Campaign, which seeks to raise \$6 million to do three things – buy and begin the development of the land adjacent to us on the west side, make just over \$1 million of improvements to our current building and send over a quarter of a million dollars to our missions throughout the city and across the world.

Through a feasibility study done last fall, we know we have the money within our congregation to reach our dreams and goals. But we also know that our gifts to this campaign will be largest single gift given over the next four tax years that most all of us will make in our lifetime. As Tom Stewart said, three gift-givers have already combined for \$1.1 million dollars of commitments. Thanks be to God! That leaves \$4.9 million as the opportunity, privilege and joy for the rest of us to raise! We need to remember that 96+% of us voted on January 31 to boldly step forward on this campaign. I expect 96% of us to respond in great investing enthusiasm when we are asked to give to “the Future’s Broadening Way.”

For a moment, let me speak to the 4% who voted “no” and others who abstained from voting in January. I know that 100% of us love First Church. Having heard directly or

through the grapes in God's vineyard some of you among the 4% don't believe this land acquisition is a wise investment or a good move for the church at this time. However, out of your love for the church, I am appealing to you to invest in the missions of our church (including Gladden Community House, the Good Samaritan Fund Endowment, Deep Griha, Back Bay Mission in Biloxi, Miss., our mission endowments, which have given tens of thousands of dollars to worthy missions over the years, and our camps at Templed Hills and Pilgrim Hills). We could use a quarter of million of your dollars for this! I appeal to you in help us fix up 444 East Broad – including accessibility needs, children's playgrounds, energy savings and "greening efforts," tuck pointing, chancel lighting, sound systems and deferred organ repairs, all amounting to \$1.35 million.

Quite frankly, if the 4% who said "no" and the others who abstained from voting give \$1.35 million to this space and our mission, I promise the 96% will absolutely 100% deliver the goods of the remaining \$3.55 million! I say this because I know a "no" vote and abstentions, do not mean "no" or abstaining from love of our church and caring for our "adequate" building's needs for repairs, restorations, rehab and greening, and serving God's mission here and abroad!

I know a secret about everyone in this room. Don't worry. It is not a secret you have shared with me in the confidentiality of my pastor's study. It is a secret written on every one of your hearts.

It is this . . . I know that you need to give. I know that giving is the reason for your living. I know that you also love to give. I know that you are deeply and sincerely grateful for the blessings you have received from God. Giving is act of worship for you – or if you prefer – an act that reflects your highest values in life. For you, giving is an act of praise to God. As the Apostle Paul says in II Corinthians 9, it is in cheerfulness and joy that you give.

I know you are generous people. Giving adds meaning to your life. For many of you, giving is a reflection of your spiritual response to God's goodness and love in your life. I know you are passionate about giving to mission. I also know many of you believe in our church's past, present and glorious future in the heart of this great city!

I also know you need to be asked to give. A few months ago, Wib Smith stood at the lectern in our chancel during our congregational meeting and spoke to the church's budgetary needs. He said, "You have to ask me to give." Wib and everyone else in this congregation – I, Tim Ahrens, am asking you to give the greatest single gift you have ever given in your lifetime to this church in this moment in time! Please give to our Capital Campaign. Please be extravagantly generous to "the Future's Broadening Way."

Take a good look at the symbol on the front bulletin, designed by Cori and Ben Rowley. It reflects the Trinity, growth and the three sections of our Capital Campaign. For some it symbolizes the green space that will grace the corner of Cleveland and Broad once it is a part of this church property. For me, it shows our ever increasing vision of being "green" and living more in harmony with our sacred earth. To me it reflects the future. Out of this tiny sprout of green will grow a future which is strong and beautiful.

I am captivated by Celia Jeffrey's last written words to this congregation, penned 81 years ago: "May this gift (valued at \$3.1 million dollars in our time) serve as a challenge to the church to inspire us all to do our full share in making the dream of a beautiful and adequate church building come true." What great gift will you give in our time to challenge and inspire our church to make dreams come true?

The Gospel of Luke ends with Christ ascending in the clouds. Before he ascends, The risen Christ's final words to his followers are these, "I am sending you the promise which my father gave . . . that you will be clothed with power from on

high” (Luke 24:49). There is an urgency to his words. The disciples cannot stay forever in the Upper Room waiting for something to happen. They must step out, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to take on the tasks that God has placed before them. We have an urgency as well. We must raise the money needed to purchase the land next door and build the dreams that God is, even now, placing before us! Our power comes from God and the boldness of the challenge should guide us forward with undaunted courage.

I hold up for you a prism through which the light of God must pass and through which I have seen rainbows of hope in uncertain times. It is a gift to me from the youngest granddaughter of Celia Jeffrey, Elizabeth Mykrantz, who died only 3 ½ years ago. Betty had it in her home in Sessions Village. It is a window from the study of Dr. Washington Gladden at 74 East Broad Street. I first saw it when rainbows were blasting through its prisms on a sunny afternoon 10½ years ago. Upon her death, Betty willed it to me. I hold it up as a sign of God’s hope for all of us. Far down the future’s broadening way, the generations to follow us will shine the light of the risen Christ on this city if we are bold enough and strong enough to step forward and give them a chance to be here doing it! We need to inspire the generations to come by our actions today. That’s what Dr. Gladden did for Celia Jeffrey. That’s what Celia Jeffrey did for us. What will do for others?

Who among us will be remembered 80 years from now as the one or the ones who stepped into the future’s broadening way and made the dream come true? Perhaps it will be all of us. Amen.