

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Epiphany 4, January 29, 2012, dedicated to David Holt, Ardis and their family, to the First Church staff, the Church Council of 2011 and all who served the church in leadership last year, and to always to the glory of God!

“Listening to God’s Call”

Deuteronomy 18:15-20;

Mark 1:21-28

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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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With sighs too deep for words and the burden of prayers unattended, he set off for work one day. He was a teacher. He taught law. They were amazed by his words and the authority by which he delivered his teachings. People came from all around those parts to hear him, because he was different. There was a *qualitative* difference in his words. One man came, possessed by many spirits.

Speaking a singular voice with a plural tongue, he asked the teacher, "**What have we to do with you? Have you come to destroy us?**" And then the one man, possessed by many, turned his questions into a statement. He said, now speaking with a singular voice, "**I know who you are, you are the Holy One of God.**"

Neither the questions, nor the statement stopped the teacher. Rather, the teacher became a healer. He said to the many voices, "*Be silent!*" And they became silent. He said to the many voices, "*Come out of him.*" And they did. They came

out of him, but they have not left us. They echo still with their questions and the singular statement. They still cry out, these voices of many from a single man's being - ***"What Have We to Do With You?"***

I hear the voices, don't you?

I hear the voices in those who **will not believe** that the teacher and healer is the Holy One of God. I hear the voices in those **who cannot believe** that he is one who teaches with authority. I hear the voices from faithful and unfaithful disciples, from unbelieving critics and skeptics. I hear the voices in church and society. I hear the voices from pews filled with pain and pulpits too often filled with loneliness. I hear the voices of the many in the one. In word and in deed, in pew and in pulpit, in church and society, I hear the voices ask, ***"What have we to do with you?"***

With sighs too deep for words, the teacher and healer, now Savior and Lord, continues to teach and heal. He continues, as is his practice, to go on the Sabbath to church and synagogue. He continues to respond to skeptics and critics that they should be silent until the time when they are ready to speak and to be graceful, forgiving, loving, reconciling, to walk in his ways and follow his will. He continues to call the faithful, the believing and the often silent, to speak and to live into the answer of the question - ***"What have we to do with you?"***

The answer, as you already know, is within each of you. Each one of you already knows the answer of what you have to do with him. The answer is **"EVERYTHING."** We have **everything** to do with him. And he has everything to do with us. Our lying down and our rising up have to do with him. Our breathing and our praying have to do with him. Our healing, our hoping; our forgiving, our living; our loving and our faithing have to do with him. Our moving on past-the-past, our living fully in the present moment, our dreaming long into the future has to do with him. When he is the

beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega, everything has to do with him.

There are times in our lives when the voices of the many coming from the single man or woman may seem to challenge or threaten our very existence. But I encourage you to hear those voices in a new way. They may, in fact, be the voices which - although they may sound threatening on the surface - are calling you to come to know who you really are and **whose** you really are.

"What have we to do with you?" the many voices coming from the one man asked the teacher in the synagogue. The Gospel of John answers the first question the teacher left unanswered this way, *"I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me"* (John 14:6). In other words, I have EVERYTHING to do with you.

"Have you come to destroy us?" the many voices continue. Again, John's Gospel answers the second question which Mark's Gospel leaves unanswered with these words: *"I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly"* (John 10:10). In other words, *"I am not the destroyer, but the creator and the giver of life and the nature of the life I give are full, eternal, and abundant."*

He calls us **together** to be life-giving and love-giving. He gives us the tools to build a better world in his name. With these tools we build the foundation of a better church in this world.

We build this foundation with the mortar and stone; with the music and song; with the hands and hearts of: **Worship, Evangelism, Stewardship and Mission.** These four foundational rocks shape our present moment and upon their foundation we will build everything we do together. They stand together. None can stand apart.

Worship- Our worship must always glorify God! As we

gather to worship each week, Jesus Christ calls us to lift our praise and joy to the heart of God. In prayers, in music, in preaching, may the Holy Spirit carry us to new places and help us experience renewed faith. We are growing in spirit and numbers in worship each week. Everything we do should begin in prayer and worship of God. **We need the rock of worship to build our faith community.**

Evangelism - Evangelism simply means "God's Good News." To live and share God's good news is what we are called to do and be. Evangelism is invitation and welcome - God's invitation to us and our response by invited others to join us on the journey of faith! We grow with integrity as we worship and invite friends, family and neighbors to come and be with us on the journey.

How do you think that man, and the "crowds" in Mark's Gospel, found their way to synagogue, lakeside and home? They were invited. Someone said to them, "Come and meet Jesus." What a joy and humble honor it is when someone we don't yet know chooses to come and worship God with us! We need to be unafraid of the "E" word. Over 40% of our neighbors and co-workers have no church to call home. They need your invitation. It could mean "everything."

Evangelism means everything. We need church growers not just church goers in our midst because evangelism calls for the transformation of persons and society to structures and ways of love and justice. It calls for bringing all people to experiences of joy and hope found in Christ. It calls for the liberation of the poor, the oppressed, the lonely, the forgotten and seemingly forsaken. It calls for restoration of the world to God's promises of wholeness and completeness. **We need the rock of evangelism to build our faith community.**

In **Stewardship** we find the natural outgrowth of faith. Stewardship is thanksgiving to God for the "wondrous gifts" God has given us. Stewardship is our return to God of thanks and praise through giving our time, our talent, our treasure to

the Lord! When we believe in the purpose and mission of the church, we give. When we see ourselves as stewards, we willingly and joyfully share our treasures, our talents and our time. Let each one of us make a covenant of faith to be counted among God's great givers! Let's make this the year of transformative stewardship. We are moving in the right direction with 40 new pledging households of faith stepping up this year, now let every heart and mind leap forward this leap year in our giving!

In the words of Washington Gladden, spoken over 110 years ago from our pulpit, *"To maintain this church will require of the members a little more time, a little more resolution, a little more sacrifice, and a little more love, than some churches require of their members, but no more than it will be good for us to give."*

May each of us find a way to give a little more time, with a little more resolution, with a little more resolution and a little more love in 2012. It's true - it will be good for us to give. **We need the rock of stewardship to build our faith community.**

Mission- Everything we DO here and out into our world should reflect God's mission. And our entire mission must be embraced by the spirit of prayer and guided by the power of the Holy Spirit. We have educational mission, administrative mission, worship mission, parish life mission, church growth mission, music mission, caring ministry mission and so on.

In addition to this entire mission, we minister in our mission to men, women and children who come to our front door from next door and from the far corners of this planet. In 2011, we gave an amazing amount of time, talent and treasure to our mission here in the heart of the city. We truly have the city in our heart. We gave over \$174,000 to mission last year. That includes \$35,000 we gave through the Capital Campaign! Thanks be to God!

In other words, more than 17.4% of the money we brought in we gave away to others in need and those who dare to care for them. We gave more than a tithe or 10% of our money to mission - then we added 6.5% on top of that for Our Church's Wider Mission (OCWM).

Through dollars given and hands given to mission, we surprised ourselves and our city with love and generosity. Thanks be to God and thanks be to you for this mission and for the future mission and ministries of First Church! **We need the rock of mission to build our faith community.**

Upon the rocks of worship, evangelism, stewardship and mission we will build our faith community - all rising from THE rock of our salvation - Jesus Christ our Savior.

With sighs too deep for words and the burden of prayers unattended, the carpenter's son set off for work one day. He was a teacher of the law whose teachings were centered in grace, forgiveness, love, and reconciliation. When he broke bread and poured out wine near the end of his last semester of teaching, his students, who were gathered around him, had only captured a glimpse of his wisdom though they had matriculated in his presence for three years. Hours after the final class ended, they watched their teacher die on a cross. Three days later, as they lay in their tears, he rose from the dead.

He gave them everything he had. He gave them abundant life. He gives everything to us as well so that we might have abundant life, too.

In word and in deed, in pew and in pulpit, in church and in society, in skeptics and in believers, the question still echoes, "***What have we to do with you?***" His words, carved into our table remind us each day that the answer is "EVERYTHING." - "***DO this in Remembrance of Me.***"

When we have absorbed this power and the meaning of

his spirit into our bodies and souls, we will know how to answer the voices of the many from the single man's being no matter how or when or where they may engage us. Amen.

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