

A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, May 6, 2007, Easter 5, dedicated to Tom Brownfield and Heather Parsons, two lay people who keep the vision of Washington Gladden alive and well in this church through their passion for justice and always to the glory of God!

“Love in Action”

Revelation 21:1-6, John 13:31-35

In the Gospel of John 13:31-35, Jesus ends his teaching with these words, “I give you a **new commandment**, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this everyone will know you are my disciples, if you have loved one another.” We hear this and say, “this isn’t new.” Deuteronomy and Leviticus spoke of such love before Jesus. But, in fact, it is a “new” commandment. He tells them to love those who are in their own faith community - love the disciple next to them. While other commands say “love your neighbor . . . love yourself . . .” This says, love one another. Start loving in this community of faith. In essence, he tells his disciples to “put their love in action.”

Today, I will share three stories of loving one another - three stories of Love in Action. Before I do, I would like Tom Brownfield to stand. Yesterday, Tom Brownfield became the new moderator of the Central Southeast Association of our Ohio Conference in the United Church of Christ. He also a pivotal leader in our BREAD team at First Church.

Tom is a prophetic lover of people and justice. He is a man with a vision and a passion for justice in this church and this world. Some would call him a Dreamer. I call him a Realist. For unless, God’s vision for justice comes about, we are destined for destruction and doomed to disappear from the earth. Count me in your team, Tom. And I trust and pray that everyone in this sanctuary will join our BREAD team at Temple Israel tomorrow night. This is not only my prayer, but my charge to this congregation.

Now, three stories . . . Let us love one another and let us pray . . .

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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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Story #1 - Lover of humanity, Mother Teresa of Calcutta often said, *“We can do no great things - only small things with great love.”* Another way she said this was, *“We should do ordinary things in life but with extraordinary love.”*

She tells the story of her Sisters of Charity in London, England. They work at night to go and pick-up people on the streets of London to give them shelter. One night they found a young man lying on the streets. As they went to pick him up, they said, *“You should not be here. You should be at home with your parents.”* He answered, *“When I go home my mother does not want me because I have long hair. Every time I go home, she pushes me out.”* He did not want to go with them. Having prayed about him later that night, they came back and found he was gone. He had taken an overdose and was in the hospital.

She writes, *“It is easy to love people far away. It is not always easy to love those close to us. It is easier to give a cup of rice to relieve hunger than to relive the loneliness and pain of someone unloved in our own home. Bring love into your home for that is where love for one another must start. Otherwise, love may become homeless”* (Mother Teresa, Life in the Spirit, Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1983, pp. 38-39). **Love in action begins in our homes when we love one another.**

Story #2 happened here three days ago with We Believe Ohio’s day of Prayer in Action. Many of you know that 14 months ago, I founded We Believe Ohio with the idea that people of faith needed to be a positive voice for change in this state. WBO unites diverse religious voices to achieve social justice.

Thursday, we gathered on this holy ground. I was joined by 125 people from Cleveland, Columbus, Akron, Cincinnati, and Dayton who came to our sanctuary and dedicated themselves for our first ever Day of Prayer in Action. We were Jewish and Christian. We were Sikh and Islamic. Our prayers were spoken and sung to God in English, Hebrew, Punjabi, Polish and Arabic.

We were black and white, rich and poor, and all gathered and dedicated to present to the Governor, Lt. Governor and 22 leaders in the Ohio House and Senate proposals for the state budget which called for four items: Civility in the process of leading our state's government and Funding for the poor in Education, Housing, and Health Care. Our proposals could all be fulfilled within the existent state budget and called for funding 150 million dollars for specific items within the several billion-dollar budget.

Now on the surface, there was nothing special about us. We are just common folks. None of us are famous. But together, we form a bond and band of love that cannot be broken. In this we are a powerful force for justice.

Our oldest member was Hilda. A recent stroke victim, she could barely speak at 90 years old. But she was on her feet and she came all the way from Cleveland for the day. The youngest was our own Nina Zimmerman, who at four years old, held up and held forth from the Governor's office to Rep. Ted Celeste's office. Nina sat in the Governor's chair in his absence. The picture caption could say, "Hurry back Governor Strickland. I am holding your seat for you . . . but not for long. I like being Governor for the day!"

We all agreed that budgets are moral documents. As such, the state budget should reflect the values we hold dear and "self-evident" in our faith traditions. We are all children of God. We need to care for mothers and their children who have no health care. We need to make sure that our public education in this state is better, hopefully one day, the best it can be - so that where you begin in life will not determine

where you end up. We need to lift the cap on the Housing trust Fund, thus allowing almost \$15 million more dollars to be used for projects which help teens who are homeless (a growing population) and addresses our state's nation leading foreclosure rate, which creates new poor and new homeless families each day.

At the end of the day, a Jewish man from Cleveland, was walking with me. When I asked him his story, he told me of horrors and hardships I never imagined humanly possible. Then he concluded as we stepped into Trinity Episcopal Church on Capital Square, *"As a child surviving the Nazis in Poland, when I thought of Christians, I thought of cruelty and hatred. I thought of neighbors, who in the name of Jesus sent my family to be incinerated at Auschwitz . . . We have a saying in Judaism - 'Tikkun Olam.' As you know, it means 'to heal the world.'"*

Last year, I heard you speak in Cleveland and you said, 'Tikkun Olam' and I never thought I would hear a Christian use this word. From my past, I never imagined Christians could be healers in this world. Today, I see in We Believe Ohio sincere Christians - and for that matter Jews and Muslims - who seek to heal the world. I am strengthened in that thought." **Love in Action is about "Tikkun Olam," or "healing the world."**

Story # 3 . . . with a prelude . . . In the book of Revelation, John shares his apocalyptic vision of a new heaven and a new earth. He speaks of the Holy City coming down from Heaven adorned like a bride for her bridegroom. He speaks of the New Jerusalem where there will be no more crying, no more death, no mourning, no pain, because "the first things have passed away." In this vision, all things will be new!

God knows we need a vision for a world where pain, death and mourning subside and pass away. When I read the vision of John for a new world, I wonder how we could catch glimpses of the new world order. I believe Building Responsibility Equality And Dignity (BREAD) offers John's vision of the Holy Spirit in the concrete.

When I make morning announcements and ask you one-on-one to come to the BREAD Action Assembly, I do so because I feel a BREAD Action Assembly reflects the love of God in action. When we gather - Jews and Christians - we are calling from the deepest places in our souls for justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream. It is not another evening meeting. It is, in my mind, the most important night of the year! I ask you to come not because I like bugging you. I appeal to you (in the words of Paul) brothers and sisters, to be a living sacrifice of love for God.

Remember our Biblical Story! From Genesis 3 through Revelation 22, the Bible in a nutshell tells the story of a God reckless with desire to get God's family back. The decisive blow of reconciliation is when God sends his son on a long journey to planet Earth. Jesus is God's rescue plan of love.

Now the story . . . My teacher, Henri Nouwen tells in his book Return of the Prodigal Son of his experience of sitting for hours at a time in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia gazing upon Rembrandt's painting *Return of the Prodigal Son*. Henri tells that while staring at the painting, he gained new insights into the parable.

"The mystery is that Jesus himself became something of a prodigal son for our sakes. He left the house of his Heavenly father, came to a foreign country, gave away all that he had, and returned through the cross of suffering, to his Father's house. All of this he did, not as a rebellious son, but as an obedient son, sent out to bring home all the lost children of God . . . Jesus is the prodigal son of the prodigal Father who gave away everything the Father had entrusted to him so that I could become like him and return with him to his Father's home" (Henri J. M. Nouwen, The return of the Prodigal Son, New York, Image Books/Doubleday, 1994, p. 55).

You and I are apart of God's rescue plan of love! We have been placed here to heal the world, to love one another and to put our love into action.

Like our God, we too, must be reckless with desire to get God's family back together. When I read that payday lenders in Ohio prey on the poor charging interest rates AVERAGING 390% INTEREST on short term loans, a cycle which has now trapped 400,000 Ohio families in a vicious cycle of poverty in which Ohio families are paying \$290,000,000 in fees every year to pay day lenders, I say, we must work to get God's family back together! **BREAD has the audacity to plan for such hope. We will share the plan for making loans fair.**

Putting our love into action means showing up tomorrow night. I want you to promise right now - this morning - to put love in action and show up tomorrow night at Temple Israel. I don't mean maybe. I don't mean possibly. I mean, "yes" to joining voice with 200 other voices and making a huge difference tomorrow night. If you are able to be with us and choose not to be tomorrow night, and find yourself watching TV instead of joining your voice to justice - I know this is not very "Congregationalist or UCC "of me - but I want you to feel guilty about your choice to stay away. You are needed. And if you are able, you need to come.

Love in action happens when we see the Christ in our midst in those least able to stand alone, and we stand with them.

*Please join me in taking action for love.
Amen.*

