

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister
The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ,
Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 4, June 8, 2008, dedicated to all the
artists among us, to my father, Dr. Herman C. Ahrens, Jr., who
taught me to do the right thing and turns 84 on June 12th, and
always to the glory of God!

“Do the Right Thing”

Hosea 5:15-6:6; Matthew 9:9-13

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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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I am in love with love. I love the joy and delight I see in the eyes
of two people when they love one another. I love marriage and I love
doing weddings. I love the mystery and the joy that come from two
people finding one another, falling in love and making a leap of faith
and love and binding themselves together in the sight of God and all
God’s people gathered together to celebrate the covenant of marriage.
I have witnessed the miraculous and marvelous energy and joy that
happens at weddings.

But, there is one wedding I performed that stands out in my
memory. It happened 15 years ago this month. After worship one
Sunday a couple who had been together for some time approached
me and asked to see me as soon as possible. I could tell something
was on their hearts. So, a few days later the three of us sat down in
my office. Holding hands and looking at me, they announced they
were getting married and asked if I could perform their wedding.
Without hesitating, I answered quickly, *“I would be honored!”* They
continued: *“We have checked the church calendar and nothing is
happening the second Saturday of June. Could you do it then?”* I told

them I would check our family calendar and get back to them. Shortly after I agreed. Little did I know, it would not be that simple. You see, it was 1993, the couple was gay, and my congregation was three years away from becoming open and affirming.

For the next six weeks, I met with our deacons and church council about this covenant union service. We wrestled with the questions about homosexuality and marrying a gay couple in the church. Never did I divulge the couple's names because I wanted the deacons to decide this based not on the people themselves, rather on the principle of honoring the love and the covenant between two people. Some deacons felt we needed to do Bible study on the question. Others felt prayer was the answer. Ultimately, we did both. In the course of our wrestling match, several members left our deacons board and eventually they left the congregation.

Patiently, the men waited for our church leaders to battle with their own faith and fears and their own ideas about what was and what was not acceptable in the church. They simply wanted to know: *"Can we be married in our own church?...if not, why not?"* One of the pivotal moments came when one deacon proposed a compromise. *"Why not have the service outside the sanctuary at the altar in the narthex of the church?"* Another deacon responded with kindness: *"I just received the invitation to your son's wedding here. How would you feel about having the wedding in the lobby of the church while the sanctuary was empty and the altar bare just 30 feet away?"* In response, the first deacon acknowledged he had never thought of this question as a father. Overcome by tears he responded, *"We have to do the right thing for the two young men and for their families . . . I am afraid no other church will do the right thing."*

In the end, the deacons and church council approved the covenant service of two of our members. In the end, we owned our belief in doing the right thing for our fellow Christians and fellow human beings. This test of our extravagant welcome at North

Congregational Church became the forerunner of our deciding on June 2, 1996, to become open and affirming.

Fifteen years have passed. In those 15 years, our congregation has joined more than 250 other UCC churches as an open and affirming church. We did so on September 8, 2002, - just weeks before we celebrated our 150th anniversary as an abolitionist congregation founded in 1852. In 2005, the United Church of Christ voted to support the marriage of same-sex couples. While many other denominations have continued to battle over their acceptance of gays in the church and come out on the wrong side of the question, we have continued to do the right thing. While the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox churches barely (if ever) talk about their gay members openly (and then not very lovingly), most other denominations fail time and time again to do the right thing in relation to the GLBT community. On May 2, the United Methodists defeated by a margin of 517 - 416 a measure to adopt a mandate to *“refrain from judgement regarding homosexual persons and practices as the Spirit leads us to new insights.”* Apparently, there will be no new insights allowed for United Methodists on their welcome and treatment of gay persons. While Episcopalians try to figure out their dance with Anglican relatives, we find the Lutherans and Presbyterians in about the same place as Methodists as we enter the ninth summer of the newest millennium! By the way, Baptists, Pentecostals and evangelicals (often led by pastors who guide all their decision-making) aren't even close to talking about love and welcome for their GLBT members. Did someone say, “shun them?” And so I ask: When will our brothers and sisters in Christ wake up? Stand up? Speak up? And do the right thing?

Choosing to do the wrong thing is usually veiled in language that quotes the books of Leviticus, Deuteronomy and Romans. Hiding behind archaic Judaic law codes and practices, which have NEVER been used, and behind a list of sins, which are misinterpreted from Paul and misrepresented in Romans, churches continue to wallow in doing the wrong thing for their own birthed and baptized children. Is it any wonder that the GLBT community stays away in

droves from the church, which often gave people their spiritual nurture and home away from home in childhood and beyond?

WWJD (What Would Jesus Do) if he were a Christian in America today? (Actually I will be preaching on that in four more weeks!) To track the Jesus method to those others cast out, please refer to his response to lepers (last week) and his engagement with tax collectors and sinners this week. Clearly, Jesus would have to leave most churches today that bear his name. He was no model "Christian." He ran around with prostitutes, loan sharks (that's what a tax collector was in his day) and sinners. You also need to note that the founder of faith never said anything against gay people and same-sex relationships (not even in John's Revelation!). Jesus simply practiced radical hospitality for all people - even kids! He asked for the children to come and see him while the disciples were intent on keeping them away from him (I guess because they have colds and dig in the dirt).

Jesus broke down the barriers between the religious folks and the irreligious ones. I think Jesus would have fit in really well here. Someone once said to me they didn't like organized religion. I responded, "*You have come to the right place - we practice disorganized religion here! Welcome home!*" Having said that, our hospitality this weekend for the visitors to the Arts Festival has been highly organized. Praise God for organized hospitality and disorganized religion! We have our priorities in the right order!

I am sick and tired of Christians doing the wrong thing in this world when Jesus of Nazareth - our founder, spiritual leader, and the light of the world - was always doing the right thing. We dance around too many issues of right and wrong in whose name? Certainly not the name of Jesus.

It is wrong is hate and harass people - by phone, letter, email or any method of communication. It is wrong to put people down and laugh at them - not with them. It is wrong to hurt another person

with piercing words or silence or cold shoulders. It is wrong to speak ill about someone else and not speak with them. It is wrong to cast out a neighbor or a co-worker because of the color of their skin, the accent of their voice, their disability or the roots of their national origin, faith tradition or ethnic heritage. It is wrong and wherever and whenever it happens; we need to be on the right side of the issue or the incident. We need to be on the side Jesus found himself on - sometimes uncomfortably standing up against injustice and unrighteousness - sometimes at the dinner table with those others that have forsaken and forgotten.

You and I are called by God to do the right thing! Our savior took the 613 laws of Moses and boiled them down to two: **YOU ARE TO LOVE YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, MIND AND SOUL AND YOU ARE TO LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOU LOVE YOURSELF.** That should be good enough for us as well.

In recent weeks, the California Supreme Court upheld and recognized the legality of the Canadian marriage of Rev. Troy Perry, (founder of the Metropolitan Community Church) and his life partner Phillip Ray DeBleick. Now same sex marriage is legal in California because a pastor did the right thing and fought the good fight. A Christian pastor led the civil courts to do the right thing. Across the nation and the world, pastors and churches are leading the charge on global warming, immigration reforms, the global debt crisis, the end of global slavery and the worldwide sex trade. Churches across the globe are giving relief to victims of cyclones and earthquakes. We do the right thing in so many spheres of influence across the world.

Here in Ohio, pastors and churches led the battle against payday lenders who gouge the poor in neighborhoods across our state. It is my hope and prayer that we continue to do the right thing for the one in three Ohioans caught in poverty. I hope we do the right thing for mothers and babies with a rising infant morality rate. I hope we do the right thing in all health-care reform through the growing

coalition of Ohioans working for health-care justice. But, I also hope we do the right thing with gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered women and men who are seeking civil rights in the workplace. For as we know, workplace justice issues become even more crucial in an unstable economy.

When Jesus called Matthew, the tax collector, to become a disciple, he reached out across the divide, which often separates people (the divide of judgment and ideology), the divide that separates too much of the world from one another and ultimately from God. I encourage you to do the right thing - today and every day. Reach out and help out. It is the right thing to do.

Amen.