

“Resolved to Thrive in the Light”

Jeremiah 31:7-14, Ephesians 1:3-14, John 1:10-18

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr.
Senior Minister

January 3, 2021

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Christmas 2, January 3, 2021, dedicated to the memory of David Magers, to the honor of Samuel Anderson Rink, born to Elizabeth Mitchell and Trenton Rink on December 14th, to the grieving families of Casey Goodson, Jr. and Andre Hill who were murdered by law officers in December in our city, to the men and women in the Columbus Division of Police who do their jobs with integrity and in the service and protection of ALL the residents of Columbus, to the players and coaches of the Ohio State Buckeyes Football team who gave us all something great to cheer about this week and to all the bridge builders, including Angie Trautman and always to the glory of God!

“Resolved to Thrive in the Light”

Jeremiah 31:7-14, Ephesians 1:3-14, John 1:10-18

+++++

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.

+++++

Old Joe lived way out in the country by himself. His best friend and his closest neighbor was Johnny who lived across the creek. The two had been there so long they had grown old together. With their wives having passed on and their children grown and gone, all they had left were their farms and themselves.

But for the first time in memory, they had a serious disagreement. One of Old Joe's lambs had wandered off and Johnny had claimed him as his own since he found him on his land. Old Joe argued that the lamb was his. "If he was yours, what's he doing on my land?" yelled Johnny. Things got so bad that they started arguing about others things and finally – they just stopped talking to each other.

This went on for months. What had started as a disagreement became an ugly divisive battle. They even dragged neighbors into their fight forcing them to take sides with Old Joe or Johnny.

One day a travelling carpenter travelled down the country road and stopped at Old Joe's place. Carrying his tools, he stepped up and knocked on Old Joe's door. Old Joe, who used to be civil and friendly had become embittered and lonely. He peeked through the slightly opened door and snarled, "What do you want?"

With his toolbox at his feet, and kindness in his eyes and voice, he answered, "*I'm a carpenter, just travelling by and wondered if you had any projects I could work on.*" Joe opened the door a little more and shot back, "*As a matter of fact I do have one! See that creek down there? I need to build a high fence along that creek so I don't have to look at my neighbor's house anymore and I can keep him off my property.*" The carpenter looked at the creek and then turned and responded with a smile, "*I will do a good job for you.*"

The next day as morning dawned, Old Joe loaded up the wood for the fence and took it down to the creek. He said to the carpenter, *"You know what to do."* With that, he headed into town to get some more supplies for his farm. The carpenter knew what to do. He set to work. He worked all day measuring, sawing, nailing and putting it all together. As the sun was setting, he finished.

Just then, Old Joe pulled up in his wagon. He was silenced by what he saw. The carpenter hadn't built a fence. He had built a beautiful foot bridge across the creek. Before Joe could speak, Johnny came walking across the bridge. In the light of dusk, Old Joe saw Johnny had something on his shoulder. Johnny reached out his hand and said, *"Joe, I am so glad we can get together again. Here is your lamb. I was wrong. Please forgive me. I just want us to be friends."*

Old Joe stuck out his hand and they pulled each other in for a long hug, right there at the center of the bridge. With that, the carpenter hoisted his toolbox on his shoulder and turned to leave. Old Joe said, *"hey where are you going? Stay awhile. Johnny and I can keep you busy for weeks."* The carpenter said, *"I've got to be going. I have more bridges to build."* And with that, he headed down the road.

(Adapted from *"Old Joe and the Carpenter,"* in *Doorways to the Soul*, edited by Elisa Davy Pearmain, Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, Ohio, 1998, pp. 59-61.)

This is a simple story. A story of building bridges rather than fences. A story of unity over division. A story of friendship over anger. A story of healing over hurt.

It is a story we need today as we step over our bridge from 2020 to 2021.

We have come through a year that has literally kept us apart. As we have been apart, the spirit of divisiveness has grown in all too many places. However, through this time, there have been “travelling carpenters” who have dedicated themselves to building bridges rather than fences. In our families, our neighborhoods and our city, these carpenters have been working hard to build us bridges back to one another. They have done so in a spirit of unity over division. They have smiled rather than snarled. They have built-up rather than torn down.

We can all name and claim the feelings we have when someone or something has been ripping-up, tearing down and destroying relationships. However, it is essential that we name and claim the feelings we have when a person or people have lifted-up, built up and brought us together in our relationships. Often, like the carpenter, they have worked alone with little light shining on their efforts. But their finished product – a bridge built to bring us together – is as clear as light shining in the darkest places.

It is my hope and prayer that each of you who are part of the First Church family have been building bridges this past year. If not, I implore you this morning to be resolved in 2021 to be bridge builders in your family, in your town or city, in your workplace and school and beyond.

We have plenty of tools given to us through our faith in Christ to be carpenters who build bridges. The apostle Paul provides six tools for our toolbox for building unity in Christ in Ephesians 1:3-14.

First, he reminds us in Ephesians 1:3 that **we are blessed with every spiritual blessing in heaven.** God blesses us each and every day. God’s blessing us so that we can be a blessing to others.

Second, Paul tells us in Ephesians 1:4 that **before the foundation of the world, we were chosen to holy, blameless, and covered by God's love.** This is huge. It is proclaimed in the first chapter of John's Gospel as well. Before the world was, we were known and named by God to be love in this world. The foundation of the Earth was established by God in love. It is love upon which everything else is built. Love is laid down as the foundation of the world and each of us was chosen to be holy, blameless and covered by God's love.

Third, in Ephesians 1:5-6, Paul reminds us that **we have all been adopted by Christ as God's very own.** We all belong to Christ. The power tool of adoption is very powerful indeed. If we see ourselves as adopted not born into this family of faith, we all step into our faith together. We all come into the family of faith the same way. Adoption means that we are truly wanted. Our heavenly parent seeks for us to be in the family. We are sought after and chosen by God to be in Christ. Let's never lose touch with this truth.

Fourth, **through Christ, our sins are taken away and we are forgiven by the riches of God's grace** (Ephesians 1:7). Our prayers of confession and assurances of pardon are not simply exercises in religious practice. They are real and lasting reflections of God's grace in our lives. Grace is not a game. It is a way of life. It is a way of moving from hurt to healing and from division to unity. It is through God's grace that we come to know the fullness of God's love. Love and grace are the right and left hand of God working in and through us. Let's use both hands in building bridges in 2021.

The fifth tool we find in Ephesians 1:10-11. **God's salvation is offered for all.** We live with Christ Forever and he is gathering us all together every day in unity of His Spirit. Honestly, this tool is

essential. God is at work in our lives binding us together as one. We may not see this. We may not accept this. We may not embrace this. But God's salvation is there for us. All we need to do is accept the gift as it is given. **This tool is powerful.** It acknowledges that we are bound to the Jesus Way all the days of our lives. We may not see it, feel it, reflect it or live it. That's on us. We have to change. God has given us this "Forever" tool and we simply need to use it well.

The sixth tool is found in Ephesians 1:13. **You and I are marked as belonging to God by the Holy Spirit through the truth of the Gospel and Salvation in Christ's name.** That is a lot to take in all at once. Simply put, we belong to God. This is a liberating word. If we feel our connection is – "in God" – then our daily actions are meant to be good for God. We are full of the Holy Spirit in our walk, in our way, in our lives and in our love.

Filled with God's grace and kindness, chosen for greatness in God's love, and marked and claimed by the Holy Spirit for living out the bridge-building way – does it get any clearer than this? Can our mission for 2021 be any more blessed than starting in Paul's loving words to his beloved church in Ephesus?

As we approach God's table of grace to begin our new year's walk with Christ, let us add one more tool to the toolbox for our bridge building work.

It is this: As we step into the Season of Epiphany this week, the season of light, the season of God's manifestation in Christ, we are all called to make one resolution for this new year. **Let us be resolved to thrive in the light of Christ.** Moving beyond surviving to thriving – may you and I walk, talk, act, and live in the light of Christ's love. The light which the Magi followed to the stable in Bethlehem is

calling us out into the world this year. The “Light of the World” is calling us into bridge-built relationships this year.

As we are reminded in John’s first chapter, “The Christ light is full of grace and truth.... And from his fullness, we have all received grace upon grace.”

May we walk in the light as each day grows longer. May we walk in the light as love grows stronger. Come across the bridge that Christ has built from despair to hope; from division to unity, hate to love. Come across the bridge and join me at the table of grace. Amen.