

“Move”

*Isaiah 9:1-4, Psalm 27:1,4-9, I Corinthians 1:10-18,
Matthew 4:12-23*

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, January 26, 2020, Third Sunday after Epiphany, the 168th Annual Congregational Meeting Sunday, dedicated Lynn Wallich, Matt Meyers, Chris Farquhar, Todd Jacobson, Mark Brown and the 2019 Church Council, to Tom Worley for his tireless and powerful witness for First Church, to the memory of Jim Fewlass, to our amazing staff, and especially to Sharon Leidheiser for her faithful service to our church since April 2002 & blessings to Sharon as she moves to new horizons & always to the glory of God!

“Move”

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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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Years ago, a friend of mine had one word on her office wall. That word was **“MOVE.”** The word “Move” was strategically placed on a wall where all who visited her office could see it. My friend is a psychotherapist and the word “MOVE” was placed

behind her seat and directly across from the chair where women and men came to receive therapy.

When I asked her about the word and her purpose for placing it where it was, she said, *“So many people who come into my office are stuck. They are frozen. They need to move. Unless we move, we will not change. We will stay stuck right where we are. Every single human being needs to move in order to have a healthy and happy life.”*

“Move” is a powerful word.

It can be applied to each one of our lives in so many ways. Think of all the ways we can MOVE. We can move backward or forward. We can move to the left or to the right. We can move up or down. We can move physically, emotionally, spirituality, mentally, or we can choose to stay stuck right where we are. Staying stuck is a choice as much as moving is. Refusing to move can bring on paralysis of body, mind or spirit. But, moving can change our perspective and perhaps our life.

In our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus literally gets up and MOVES. He moves from his carpenter’s shop in Nazareth to the fishing village of Capernaum 30 miles away. Something motivates this 29-year-old carpenter to head to an impoverished lakeside setting in Galilee. From what Matthew’s Gospel tells us, it is his second cousin, John the Baptist’s arrest and imprisonment which get Jesus out of the hill country and down to the Galilean Sea.

Once he reaches the Capernaum, he keeps moving. His motor keeps humming. He calls the first four of his eventual 12 disciples to follow him – which is very significant because he has set in motion his movement of salvation and hope. Once his followers have left their boats, their families, and their vocations to catching fish, he keeps moving with them by his side.

He prophecies deliverance. He teaches in the lakeside synagogues – in many of the 43 poor fishing villages surrounding the Sea of Galilee. He proclaims “repentance for the kingdom of heaven” and proclaims good news of God’s kingdom coming on earth. He cures every kind of disease and sickness among the people.

With all these actions, he sets in motion his true life calling – the Savior of the World. This is a huge change! Jesus goes from measuring and crafting wood to measuring and crafting the human condition. He has moved from carpentry to converting sinners to God’s blessed followers.

Talk about Moving!

This is a complete overhaul. He becomes the first true “mover and shaker.” He moves people and shakes them to the core of their being. He moves them to repent – which means to “turn around!” He moves people to listen and learn. He moves people to come and receive healing grace in the face of overwhelming illnesses and diseases that literally killing them. He moves people to follow a new way, on a new path with a new script called the “Gospel” – the good news of hope and salvation.

He is truly a MOVING Messiah!

Do you have any idea how hard it is to do what Jesus did?

Do you have any clue how hard it is to move people to change? How do you get people to change their patterns, their perspectives, even where they sit, what they eat, what they spend their money on, what they invest in, how they live and how they die, who they talk to, who they listen to, what they are willing to do to literally save themselves?

This is daunting work.

Let me give a few examples. 35 years ago, I had a member of my church in Cleveland, Ohio who believed she would die soon, even though she was seemingly healthy. She couldn't be moved to change her perspective. Her parents had died and as a single woman, she was sure she would die soon to be with them in heaven. We met often for prayer and I listened (in disbelief that she was "near death"). Turns out she had cancer. A form that 90% of people at the time moved through and recovered. She was convinced she was in the 10%. She was. She passed away within months. She was 39 years old.

On the other hand, I have seen people face seemingly insurmountable health challenges and change to meet those challenges. I have been to the bedside of thousands of people through the years. Most have combined love, medicine and miracles to outlive their diagnoses – maybe doing so by a month, but battling through to the end. Many have overcome altogether. Many have been moved through faith, through prayer, through

care to change the trajectory to turn things around. You have moved me in your moving battles to live. And even in the face of imminent death, you and your loved ones have moved me to believe in God's power to change us and save us for blessings eternal, blessings beyond this life. These are movements of the soul – movements of faith and love to overcome despair and even death.

One of the most inspirational people who moved in care for his health was my father. Following triple by-pass surgery, he changed his exercise routine, eating habits, and more and lived 30 additional years by changing and moving.

Here is another example of how daunting the work of “moving” people can be. Over the last several months, in case you didn't know, we have had an impeachment process of the president of the United States going on. Listening to the proceedings, it seems clear to me that something is amiss at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. But, listening to the White House's chief counsel yesterday, it was made clear that absolutely nothing is wrong. So, which is it? Is there something wrong? And if so, is the “something” impeachable? Or is there nothing wrong and the entire executive and legislative branch (and now the judicial branch) has been simply tied up in knots for years for nothing?

The trenches in Washington and in America are deep and seem to be getting deeper. I can't see any movement at all except for digging down and creating deeper divisions – all while we have crises of homelessness, needs for low income housing, dealing

with escalating gun violence, health care costs sinking a growing number of middle class and poor Americans, refugees flowing to our borders, the earth crying out to be saved and so much more.

We learned over a century ago in World War I that **trench warfare** doesn't work in war. It also will fail us in politics, in church, in our daily work and each of our individual lives – relationally and spiritually.

Actually, Jesus taught us 2000 years ago that being entrenched and getting stuck doesn't work. He showed that denying, avoiding, and dancing around something doesn't work. In his poem, "The Secret Sits," Robert Frost writes: *"We dance round in a ring and suppose, But the secret sits in the middle and knows."* We need to end our dances of supposition and know the truth that sits in the middle – no matter what we are facing in our lives – in our church life or our national life.

To move a war, a nation, a church, or for each of us in our own lives, we need to move forward. Like Jesus, we need to find our purpose and change to meet the vision and direction of that purpose. Or more simply, we have to move.

If we want to find out where to move and how to move, perhaps we need look no further than the prophet Isaiah and our Savior Jesus Christ. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, the Messiah will make a way through the darkness and lead us to the light. He will move us from the shadows to the light of God. Isaiah 9:2-3:

*The people who walked in darkness, have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined.³
You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you, as with joy at the harvest.*

Jesus' way through the darkness and to the light is to get up from his carpenter's bench and go to the Galilean Sea. His movement is to "increase the joy" of his people. How does this work? Look at who he is as well as what he does. He is the embodiment of love and joy. He does what he does as he increases joy through praying and worship, healing, teaching, sharing good news and mission. Joy comes through generous giving.

The secret in the middle is simple - "love your neighbor as you love yourself." Both things must happen in the design of God – you must love yourself and your neighbor. This is how movement of the body, soul and world truly work in God's design.

20 years ago, this week, I preached my first sermon as your called Senior Minister. Since then, I have preached more than 2100 times at First Church. In my opening sermon, January 30, 2000 (which you can find on the church website) entitled, "Unpacking," I shared a lot about who I was and what had shaped my life of faith. But, at the end of the sermon I talked about the four foundational rocks upon which to build our life together – **Worship, Evangelism, Stewardship and Mission.**

These four foundational rocks are the foundation of all we do together. They stand together. They can never stand apart.

It's ironic that to move forward, you need to have a clear foundation upon which all forward growth and movement is based. No one wants the foundation to be moved – that can turn out badly. But, when the foundation is well set, you can move forward in meaningful ways. In other words, when our worship is genuine, our spreading “good news” or evangelism is heartfelt and outreaching, our Stewardship of time, talent and treasure is truly generous and our mission is to those who really need our love and embrace of hope is real, then all will work together in our service and love of Christ. With a foundation well established, we can move forward together.

We all have to move.

We need to change how we operate, what we do and where go. We have to shift from what doesn't work to try new ways of advancement. On this day of our annual congregational meeting, we all must move. And we have to do it together. In this season of Epiphany, this season of light, we must move with those who go from darkness to light. We have to stand up and step forward from our old ways and follow Jesus. In his light, life, and love we will find all that we need to Move forward in the joy of living.

MOVE.

Amen.

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