

“The Journey Back to Love”

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17, II Corinthians 5:20-6:10, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

**Part I of X in the Sermon Series
“The Journey Back to Love”**

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Ash Wednesday, February 17, 2021, dedicated to mother, Lorene K. Ahrens whom I love and who has guided me on my journey for 63 years, to my wife Susan E. Sitler, who has been my greatest teacher and friend on the journey of love, and to MK Beall Carter and John Carter and all who bring music and poetry to life in worship and always to the glory of God!

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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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In *“The Things They Carried,”* Tim O’Brien begins his novel with a list of all the things he carried as an infantryman in Viet Nam. It is a complete list of every item in his pack – all 60 pounds of the things he and his fellow soldiers carried. As he ends his list, he writes, *“they carried all they could bear – and then some – including a terrible awe of the silent power of the things they carried.”*

His story is so much more than the Things they carried. They also carried all the realities of war and the world into which they were dropped to fight. *“They carried the sky. The whole atmosphere, they carried*

it, the humidity, the monsoons, the stink of fungus and decay, all of it, they carried gravity.”

Today is our day to inventory our list of the things that we carry – all of the things we carry – including the terrible awe of the silent power of things we carry.

Today, we lay them all out and take a good look at them. We examine them. We wonder how these things – good and bad – have become part of the things we carry. Some of them are all too familiar. We have carried them for a lifetime.

Some of the things we carry are delightful. They amaze us. As we look at them, we see the depth of our compassion and joy; our caring and our love.

Some of things we carry are troubling. Some of them are vexing. They have hitched a ride in our life and we want to find ways to face them and then encourage them to leave us alone or take on healthier forms if they are going to stick with us.

Delightful or troubling, good or bad, we have to learn to embrace the things we carry and integrate them into our lives or we have to learn to drop them somewhere where they will do no harm. We have to learn to embrace ourselves and our imperfections and see them change from difficult disturbances which create difficult emotions and sometimes physical pain to be healed and helpful parts for our journey ahead.

The things that we carry can help us or hinder us. They can heal us or hurt us. They can be our lifelong friends or our former enemies transformed into friendships. They expose us to ourselves and sometimes to others. They reveal us as true or false; real or

fake. They may prey on us one day and we pray for them to leave us alone the next day. The things we carry are all our parts put together in us for better and worse.

On this day of confession and contrition, you and I are called by God to do the hard work of acknowledging and looking at all the things we carry – the ways we have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Today, we take a deep breath and we take time to stop, reflect, repent, and begin 40 days of turning and returning to God.

Today, we begin the journey back to love.

I always think of John Builder on Ash Wednesday. John, a blessed memory, was a member of my first congregation Bethany UCC in Cleveland, Ohio. He would regularly come up to me in the greeting line on Sunday morning and tell me he refused to pray our prayer of confession that day. He would say, *“I didn’t do any of these things. Why would I ask God to forgive me for things I haven’t done?”* I would explain that this was a “community prayer” a “corporate prayer.” We prayed together so that we can move forward together receiving God’s assurance of pardon and grace.

There was no convincing John to pray the prayer of confession – although one day he told me he did his confession to God during the silent prayer time.

Finally, one day when I was alone with John, I asked him what he prayed in the time of silence. He said, *“that’s between me and God and it is none of your business.”* I said, *“You are right and you are wrong. Your personal confessions to God are really none of my business. That is truly between you and God. But how it is with your soul and how you are healing*

from whatever you prayed in silence is my business because I am your pastor and I love you and care about you. Not only that John, everyone at Bethany loves you and cares about you.” He said, *“It’s nice you care about my heart and soul.”*

In our scripture passages today, Joel and Jesus are concerned about each one of our hearts and souls.

The prophet Joel writes that God is calling us to return to God with all our heart. Through fasting, weeping, mourning, God is calling us to rend our hearts or to “open our hearts” to God’s gracious and merciful love. The journey back to love begins in confession and contrition. For us, our Lenten journey begins in this winter of discontent and moves to the Springtime of Resurrection joy. While the earth appears as a winter frozen tundra today, it is hard to imagine the crocuses, the flowering buds on the tulip tree and green grass that lay buried in the snow. But they are there - waiting for their season. They are waiting to rise and shine.

What begins in winter fasting today will end in Spring feasting by Easter. We can’t run through this journey with our heavy boots and snowshoes on today. But we can trudge forward. Ash Wednesday is perfectly suited for trudging. Like my dog Charlie and the children in our lives – we put our paws and our heads down in the snow and leap up high – in spite of the bitter cold.

While Joel takes us into the fasting, weeping, and mourning of first steps into Lent, Jesus chooses a slightly different path on this opening day of our Lenten journey. Jesus warns us not to wave our gifts of giving in front of people, not to be hoarders of our money and resources, or to pray out loud on the street corners like obnoxious pietistic pilgrims (maybe John Builder was right!), and

not to look dismal looking while fasting (or tell other people all day long how hungry we are while fasting).

Twice he uses the phrase, “don’t be like the hypocrites.” The word “hypocrites” has its roots in Greek theatre. The “Hypokrites” were stage actors who wore large masks to identify their characters on stage. The Greek word took on an extended meaning to refer to any person who was wearing a figurative mask and pretending to be someone or something they were not. The French and English picked-up the word in 13th Century religious texts to refer to someone who pretends to be morally good or pious in order to deceive others. Today, we know hypocrites as those who act in contradiction to their stated beliefs or feelings – the people we should not be like according to Jesus.

Jesus seems to be more like the French and English in this interpretation as he calls us to be honest and forthright in our living and loving. He wants transparency, honesty and clarity in our care for the poor, in our praying, in our fasting, in our stewardship of our resources. Like the Nike ad, Jesus wants us to “just do it.”

And so, we begin today our journey back to love. I implore you to take this journey to heart. Figure out the things you are carrying on the journey back to love. Look closely at the things that weigh you down and bring out the worst in you. Name them. Claim their existence. Then, let go of them as they weigh you down and bring out the worst in you. Hang on to the things that you carry which are beautiful and healing and hopeful.

Let us step forward in our journey back to love. Keep your eyes wide open. Keep your heart wide open. Keep all your senses open

for the steps ahead. In the spirit of John Builder, be grateful for everyone who cares about your heart and soul and your love.

Come, let us start our journey back to love. Amen.