

# *“A Love Letter to First Church”*

*I Samuel 16:1-13, Ephesians 5:8-14, John 9:1-41  
Part V of IX in the sermon series: “Christianity 101”*

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens  
Senior Minister

*March 22, 2020*

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](mailto:home@first-church.org)

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



A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 22, 2020, Lent IV, dedicated to the memory of Patty Pohlman who passed to eternal life on Thursday March 19<sup>th</sup> and to her sons and their families at this time of loss, to Dr. Karl Danneberger in OSU's intensive care unit and to Sallie, Kyle and Marc who are unable to see their husband and father through this time, to all the doctors, nurses, police, fire firefighters, and support staffs on the front lines of the battle against the Coronavirus COVID-19 and always to the glory of God!

*“A Love Letter to First Church”*

*I Samuel 16:1-13, Ephesians 5:8-14, John 9:1-41*

*Part V of IX in the sermon series: “Christianity 101”*

Today, on this fourth Sunday in Lent and the fifth sermon in the sermon series, “Christianity 101” I was hoping to address the question, *“Is Christianity a Religion of Love?”* While I absolutely believe the simple answer is “YES,” I had planned to bolster my answer with evidence of this truth for our faith. I believe Jesus Christ is the embodiment and essence of Love and we, as his followers, are called each day to follow in the way of love.

In fact, I also believe if ANY religion does not have Love as its core and greatest value, it is not a legitimate religion at all, because I believe God is Love. If someone out there in the name of God, Allah, Yahweh, Adonai, Elohim, Jesus Christ, Vishnu, or Shiva practices a “religion” that DOES NOT believe God is Love they should cease and desist now because you are following a false God.

So, “YES” Christianity is a religion of LOVE.

But with our world changing by the moment, I am shifting my approach today. As of 8:30 this morning, there are 320,224 confirmed cases of Coronavirus with 13,753 deaths in 172 nations, with 26,973 cases in the United and 354 dead, with 250 cases and 3 deaths in Ohio and over 24 cases in Franklin County – and with all of these numbers changing by the minute, our lives and our reality has been taken hostage by a micro-biotic terrorist named COVID19.

With many of you on the front lines in this battle and many others on lockdown in Lent, my message ABOUT LOVE is going to be delivered as a Love Letter to each of you. Following the model given as a gift to us as Christians by Paul and others in the First Century AD, I write to you with my heart in my fingertips – because I am deeply concerned about you and love every one of you.

I pray you receive this as a love letter from me to you. I write with each of you in my heart and on my mind as you have been held in my daily prayers for over 20 years.

+++++

*Please pray with me: 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.*

+++++

March 22, 2020

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in faith,

Grace and peace to you in the name of Triune God – Creator, Christ and Spirit. I bring greetings from the staff and many members of our congregation with whom I have spoken in recent days. Although it is hard, we all are keeping a “social distance” around the building and across the miles. We are doing this to stay healthy, keep safe, save lives, and minimize the spread of the Coronavirus.

Through this Lenten Lockdown, now in Day 10, we are finding new ways to do everything. We are finding new ways to work, to move, to shop, to keep in touch, to communicate with family and friends, to support the people and institutions we love and believe in, and much more.

Each day, from rising until laying down to sleep, I am thinking of you and praying for you. I have attempted to keep in touch

through many different ways. But most significantly, through the power of daily prayer and through intercessions with God on your behalf I have been holding you.

**You all amaze me.** During these difficult days of increasing quarantine, you are saving lives in hospitals and nursing homes through your medical excellence as doctors, nurses, hospital administrators, caregivers and chaplains. You are keeping factories and families together through your hard work and leadership. You are teaching virtual classes for all ages of children, teens and adults as educators. You are holding households of children together as parents through your love and care. With your children of all ages home for schooling you are somehow holding it together.

You are out there holding public school systems and universities together as administrators in these difficult times of educational transition. You are students, professors and politicians, office and business administrators, bridge builders and building and landscape architects, IT geniuses, librarians, journalists and writers, electricians and engineers, food service workers and supermarket managers, stay at home parents, realtors and entrepreneurs. You are making a difference in the retail, health care, banking and insurance industry. You are cleaning buildings and feeding, sheltering, and fighting for the homeless and the hungry. You are changing lives as therapists, lawyers, musicians, artists and people serving in care positions for those from birth to death. You are patrolling our streets, doing TSA clearance and serving our nation in all the branches of the United States

Military - and much more. I am proud of each and every one of you and all that you do every day to serve others.

You are also creatively figuring out how to negotiate the new challenges of lockdowns and quarantines in your apartments, condominiums, neighborhoods, life plan communities, nursing homes and rehabilitation centers. You are all negotiating the “new normal” and trying to find ways to do it joyfully and with humility and compassion.

You are the people of God. You are gifted. You are blessed. You are shining God’s light everywhere you are. You are making a difference. Thank you. And - Thanks be to God for ALL of you and all you are doing. Thank you for living into and through these days filled with staying in place – being strong and trying not to be afraid in the face of a global pandemic. **You all inspire me. I love you and I believe in you!**

I appeal to you to please take care of yourself and then take care of others. We have to look out for each other and practice safe, healthy actions in all that we do. Every day, please answer these six “quarantine questions” (which Susan shared with me):

1. What are you grateful for today?
2. Who are you checking in on or connecting with today?
3. What expectations of “normal” are you letting go of today?
4. How are getting outside today?

5. How are you moving your body today?

6. What beauty are you creating, cultivating or inviting in today?

(7. I add a 7<sup>th</sup> bonus question: How are you finding time to read books?)

Here are three lessons on love and compassion that have helped me throughout my life.

**Lesson #1, practice the presence of absence.** This lesson I learned from my teacher and mentor, Fr. Henri Nouwen, 38 years ago. In the fall of 1982, Fr. Nouwen and I were in a conversation with other students at Yale Divinity School about the challenges of ministry. He said, *“in time, you will learn to practice the presence of absence.”* He went on to say, *“You cannot be with everyone. You cannot be everything to all people. You must trust God every day that God is in control and God is present when you are absent.”* **The presence of absence** means that even when we are not there, God is there. God is always present. God’s amazing grace is at work when we are not around. This is a hard lesson to learn.

While we are separated from one another, God is not separated from each one of us. God is constantly present with us – even when we are absent one from another. In the hospital ICU units we can’t get to – God is there. God is working through the doctors and nurses who are there to minister and heal the people we long to see and be beside. In places locked down from our normal flow and constant contact, God is there. Remember -

our faith and hope come from God who is present in our absence. **Lesson #1 – practice the presence of absence.**

**Lesson #2 – When you love, you are blind to the faults of others. When you do not love, you are blind to their virtues.**

Have you found yourself judging the people you (say you) love? Are you able to point out all the faults in their behaviors, all their shortcomings, all their faults and failings? Have you found yourself blinded to their gifts, their talents, their delightfulness, their humor, their love – yes – their virtues? Have you simply lost track of love? When you “burn” inside, are you burning with love or judgment? Are you fueled by your own insecurity and anxiety or by your admiration and belief in the other?

In John 9, Jesus heals a man born blind. Outside the miraculous power of God, it is impossible to heal a man born blind. That is who Jesus is (not just what he does). He sees a man who doesn't see and believes he will see again. With spit and mud and the power of God, Jesus opens the eyes of the blind man.

If Jesus can do this for a man born blind, imagine what he can do for you. In these days of pandemic pandemonium, I am calling upon you to summon the power of God and the unconditional love of Jesus, to see others for their virtues and not their vices. I am calling on you to love those close by and far away in a new way. Become blind to the faults, idiosyncrasies, narcissistic tendencies, and obsessive-compulsive behaviors of those around you and love them. Open your eyes to the love that drew you together in the first place. As partners in

relationship, see the grace and greatness of your beloved. As parents, see your children as the beautiful Children with whom God has graced your life. As children, see your Parents with eyes of love and compassion. Seek to understand, not to be understood, as St Francis tells us. See virtues, not vices. Just love one another. **Lesson #2 - When you truly love, you are blind to the faults of others. When you do not love, you are blind to their virtues.**

**Lesson #3 – no God can save us except a suffering God.**

We are blessed as Christians to follow Jesus Christ, who suffered unto death to show us the way to life – both life in this world and life eternally. The Way of Jesus has particular power for us today. The great illusion of leadership is to think that a person can lead us out of a desert who has never been in a desert. By that I mean, a leader who has not suffered cannot lead us through suffering. No one can lead you out of the shadow of death unless he or she has been through the valley of the shadow of death. Only one who suffers can lead us through suffering to new life.

This is truer for our times and our circumstances than ever before. As each one of us face these days of uncertainty, we must all remember that our God has gone before us and faced suffering time and time again. Our Savior went to the cross, suffered an excruciating death and rose again to new life to show us the way into, through and out of suffering.

Jesus Christ is believable and is worthy to be praised and followed because he has gone through Hell, returned from Heaven to Earth and shows up each day to lead you through all that you face. Trust that our God will lead you through these days, too. Our God, who suffered unto to death in God's son Jesus Christ, will not abandon you in your greatest hour of need.  
**Lesson #3 - no God can save us except a suffering God.**

I close with these thoughts from the Apostle Paul in Philippians 4:8-9, *“Summing it all up, my brothers and sisters, I’d say you’ll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse. Put into practice what you learned..., what you heard and saw and realized. Do that, and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into God’s most excellent harmonies.*

I miss you all.

We will be together again, and we will rejoice!

I love you all!

Tim