

“You Have a Beautiful Church”

Acts 2:42-47, I Peter 2:19-25, John 10:1-10

Part II of IV in the sermon series

**“THE First Church Family and
OUR First Church Family”**

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens
Senior Minister

May 3, 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

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, Easter 4, May 3, 2020, dedicated to my friend Cantor Jack Chomsky for his 38 years of loving service at Congregation Tifereth Israel, Columbus, Ohio, to all our First Church Teachers and Mark Williams as he leads our Christian Education Ministry, to the blessed memory of Peggy Alexander who passed to eternal life on April 29th, to Bruna Joy Welsh-Huggins Espinet born May 2nd to Xavi and Sarah Welsh-Huggins Espinet and to Bruna's proud grandparents, Andrew and Pam Welsh-Huggins and always to the glory of God!

“You Have a Beautiful Church”

Acts 2:42-47, I Peter 2:19-25, John 10:1-10

Part II of IV in the sermon series **“THE First Church Family and OUR First Church Family”**

+++++

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.

+++++

In March 1943, First Congregational Church welcomed a new Senior Minister. His name was Boynton Merrill. The Rev. Dr. Merrill was an artist, a poet, an author and a gentle, kind, loving leader who guided this congregation through WWII. He was an aesthetic genius.

From this sanctuary, he blessed all 234 men and women who went from our congregation to serve in the war. He buried the dead who returned in wooden boxes. He sanctified the broken yet hopeful ones who returned to begin life after war. He faithfully served 16 years until his retirement in September, 1959. Henrietta Henderson told me 20 years ago, “Dr. Merrill only had one sermon. It was based on the way he lived. He preached LOVE.”

In Dr Merrill’s first letter to our congregation 77 years ago, he wrote, “I tell you; you have a beautiful church. We must conspire together to set that beauty free. For when beauty’s wings are spread and beauty’s face is seen, people may not call it God, but in their hearts, they know that it is.”

I was thinking about Dr. Merrill’s words this week as I sat alone in our sanctuary. With our Beautiful Cathedral of Grace rising all around me, I thought of all the times and all the ways beauty’s wings have been spread here and beauty’s face has been seen here.

I saw around me beauty’s face with our powerful pillars rising high, our Arch Angels holding the wooden beams 70 feet above me, our millions of pieces of stained glass creating blessed stories of faith and hope, our elegant banners and our two 450 year old Abraham tapestries telling even more faith stories through fabric and thread.

I heard the countless times our organs, harpsichord and piano have been played magnificently by our gifted musicians who have opened

the wings of love and how all our choirs have unleashed beauty's voice.

I reflected on all the times I have watched the beautiful faces of children and youth absolutely light up this room. And then I walked into this pulpit and I stood here looking out on this room and I imaged all your faces, all your graces, all your love looking back at me as I have attempted through the years to allow beauty's wings to be spread and beauty's face to seen.

It has been eight weeks of Sundays since I have seen your beautiful faces and embraced you face to face. Eight weeks of praying, calling, emailing, texting, writing, teaching and meeting by Zoom, worrying (because I am a worrier – not a pretty feature of faith but a real one), wondering, and praying some more for you.

Your children have been growing in body, mind and spirit and I have missed them. You and your families have been going through so much in these times and I have barely scratched the surface with you as you have faced uncertain times with health and economic concerns and job security. Some of you have worked a lot harder under much more difficult circumstances. I thank you for that. We all thank you for that. Some of you have worked a lot less – also causing stresses and different forms of anxiety. For some of you, “Stay at Home” has worked out pretty well. You love being so close to your children of all ages. For others of you, you are climbing the walls and feel like you are locked in with no way out. For most of us, we are experiencing something in between.

You have been in hospital beds after falls, surgeries and battles with serious illnesses – and you have gone through this alone or with only a small number of friends and family. You have been grieving – often

alone. You have been teaching your children at home and doing your best to find new activities and delights through these up and down days of Spring.

Even though you are not sitting here in front of me, in my mind's eye, I can see you. I see your smiles and your tears. I can hear your voices. Your laughter and your love are felt right here - in my heart.

In you, I feel the presence of God. In you, I see the face of God. In you, I know the beauty of God is loose in flight on the wings of love.

I miss you all with all my heart. I miss our beautiful church family.

“WE have a beautiful church.”

Our greatest beauty of all is you - our living, breathing, growing, energetic faith community. Our faith is like electricity shot through the wires of our connectivity. We light up when God is pulsing through our veins and the Holy Spirit is calling us to shine love.

In Acts 2:42-47, we glimpse the beauty of the First Church – you know - the one in Jerusalem, circa 33AD. The four basic elements of The First Congregational Church of Jerusalem are heralded as **teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and praying**. We can learn a lot from their example.

The first thing that we have recorded about the first church is that they were a learning/teaching church. The church was not established by Jesus Christ to drift from one emotional outburst to the next. We have been created as the body of Christ to see each and every moment as a teaching/learning moment (right Mr. Mark?). The first church was more concerned about doing good than feeling good. They were more concerned about learning the centrality of our

faith story than getting caught up in drama about the times in which they were living.

In these pandemic times, we must be constantly learning how to make our way all the way through these times. Each one of us must remember what we are learning from this time. We should journal about our experiences and learn from one another how to care for each other in safe, healthy and meaningful ways.

Part of our learning is counter-intuitive. We must step back in order to move forward. And if you are feeling bad for stepping back from things in the face of COVID-19, always remember - retreating is not surrendering. "Stepping back" is a way to live so you can fight forward another day.

Today, we celebrate our teachers at First Church. Quietly, effectively, lovingly, they show up prepared each Sunday to educate our children and each of us as adults. They are thoughtful Christians. They are creative Christians. They bring their "A" game to the classrooms in our church and they bring great lessons, great materials and great questions for their students. They are fulfilling the first defining characteristic of the Christian Church – they are teaching us.

Thanks be to God for each and every one of our teachers!

Second, the First Church was a church in fellowship with one another. In them, the Holy Spirit had birthed a koinonia, a holy fellowship. They shared what they had with each other. They were generous in supporting one another and those in need around them. They liked being together. **It was Holy Togetherness.** In the words of William Barclay, "It was a happy church and it was a church whose people others could not help but liking. In other words, this church

had a winsome attractiveness” (William Barclay’s Commentary on Acts, the Daily Bible Series, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA, 1976, pp.28-29).

I believe we resemble that in our life together. How many times, looking around the sanctuary or Parish Hall, I have seen you enjoying one another, lifting up one another, and seeking each other out. I am always delighted when I hear about your contact with one another outside the walls of this place. A great example is the spontaneously created and ever growing “Liver and Onion Dinner Group” which meets each month for dinner at the Cap City Diner (all of us are invited!) and 99% of whom don’t order or eat Liver and Onions. But they do love being together. Again, EVERYONE is welcome. Fellowship is something that brings us out of our shells and into communion with one another.

The Third Element of the First Church was “breaking bread with one another.” This was table fellowship in a sacred way. Jesus was always eating at someone’s table. He was the Notorious Eatin’ Machine. He demonstrated through his acceptance of every dinner invitation with every conceivable person that he believed we are all blessed when we are together at table breaking bread. His last supper was actually the first feast of the new church. Those present were witnesses to bread broken and shared in his name, as his body. They were witnesses and blessed recipients of wine poured out and shared in his name, as his blood.

Once you and I receive communion, **we are changed for good.**

Holy Communion connects us in ways that are transformational. In fact, I want you all to have bread or crackers and some kind of juice or wine this morning. We are about to have virtual communion for

the first time on Sunday morning in our church's history. Together, gathered across the city, across the region, across the country and the world, we will feel the Holy Spirit in our unity of eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ. One thing I know for certain about this First Church First Virtual communion – we will have more people “coming to the table” in pajamas than Jesus ever dreamed of. So cool! I know He will be smiling on us in our virtual communion and every one of us.

Finally, the First Church prayed together. They prayed together in their household churches. They also prayed at the synagogue – never neglecting the traditions of their ancestors. They were devout Jews and they did not cease from being devotedly Jewish for at least the next 60 years – all the way to the turn of the second century AD. I love the words in Luke 10:42, “One thing is needful” and that one thing is prayer. Pray constantly we are told. Never cease from praying. When you rise, pray. When you work, pray. When you play, pray. When you eat, pray. When you end the day and lie down to sleep, pray.

Yesterday, when checking in with many families, I asked parents to text me some pictures of their children so I can see how wonderfully all our church's children are growing. Dr. Wendy Kirkland send me an absolutely beautiful prayer video of Nolan, age 5, and Cami age 3 offering Jesus their nightly prayers. Nolan prays, “Can you please Jesus, please take the virus away from me when I wake up. And take it all away. Take it all away from all the towns, all the towns. Take the sickness away from me and from the guys around us. Please Jesus do that. Amen.” Sister Cami, at 3 adds, “Jesus please take the Coronavirus away because I want to wake up in the morning and

have it gone.” These prayers were so heartfelt and so real, they went straight to the heart of God.

I pray that we pray now and through these coming days. While we are apart one from the other, may God bless and keep us all. May God hold us together. And I agree with Nolan and Cami – “please Jesus, please take the Coronavirus away.”

To paraphrase my beloved predecessor: “I tell you; **WE have a beautiful church.** May we all conspire together to set that beauty free. For when beauty’s wings are spread and beauty’s face is seen, people may not call it God, but in their hearts, they know that it is.”
Amen.