

From the Pulpit

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“Hope Comes Alive In an Imaginative Faith”

(Part IV of V in the sermon series:
Hope Comes Alive”

August 24th, 2014

By Rev. Tim Ahrens

Senior Minister

A baptismal meditation delivered by Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, 11th Sunday after Pentecost, August 24, 2014, dedicated to Ellie Harper Winberry on her baptismal day and to Cathy Levine on this Matzevah in blessed memory of her mother and always to the Glory of God!

“Hope Comes Alive In an Imaginative Faith”

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Exodus 1:8-2:10; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

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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 salvation. Amen.

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I’ve heard it said, *“You can’t do something hopeful if you use the same kind of thinking that created your despair in the first place.”* Another way of positively framing this is: *“What you can imagine, you can do.”* Hope comes alive in an imaginative faith.

Thoughts of an imaginative faith rose in my mind as I was on the phone three weeks ago with Nicole Hockley. Nicole, from Newtown Connecticut, had emailed me and asked for time to talk. She wanted to tell me about a project near and dear to her heart called “The Sandy Hook Promise.” Certainly I knew

the name Sandy Hook - from the Elementary School in which 20 first graders and six adult educators were killed on December 14, 2012. “The Sandy Hook Promise,” about which Nicole wanted to speak is this: *“I Promise to join other parents to encourage and support sensible solutions that help prevent gun violence in our communities and our country.”*

As Nicole introduced herself to me, she began, *“My two sons were in school at Sandy Hook on December 12, 2014. My oldest son was in the fifth grade and my youngest son, Dylan was killed in his first grade classroom that morning.”* She continued speaking but I was stuck on the shooting death of her six year old son. As she talked, I went online and found a picture of Dylan (and the other 25 shooting victims – including the shooter himself). I printed out Dylan’s picture and as she spoke, my imagination flowed into the heart of this courageous mother. With tears streaming down my face, I tried to listen again.

Eventually Nicole asked, *“Rev. Ahrens, do you have any questions?”* *“Just one,”* I said. *“How do you do this?”* I asked. *“As a father of four, I wonder, how do you pick up the phone and call a complete stranger and get your words together to talk?”* She quietly and thoughtfully replied, *“I have hope. I hope through our efforts, I will help some family out there who will not have to suffer as we have suffered. I cling to this hope.”*

Through the power of her imagination, Nicole Hockley is doing something hopeful with a new kind of thinking. Along

with others, she is hopeful that gun violence will end and those who need mental health care will receive it. She is hopeful that a call to an unknown pastor three states away, will bring others together who will join a movement of hope AND ACTION – because Hope should always inspire ACTION – to make some changes in this land.

So far Nicole's hope planted in my heart is bearing fruit. Because of Nicole's hope and this picture of her son Dylan that I carry with me, 25 pastors are gathering in the large conference room of First Church on September 11th to have a prayerful conversation about ending gun violence in Columbus and Ohio.

Like Nicole Hockley, The Rev. William Barber II inspires me with his imaginative and hopeful faith. This 51 yr. old UCC pastor and president of the NAACP out of Raleigh, North Carolina, who walks with a cane because of a painful arthritic condition affecting the spine which has afflicted him for 30 years, (ankylosing spondylitis), has started a "Moral Movement" which he and others launched because of highly restrictive voter registration and election laws passed on Maundy Thursday 2013. As he said, *"On Maundy Thursday, they chose to crucify voting rights in North Carolina. What would Jesus do about that?"* When telling this story while leaning on his cane, Rev. Barber continues with a smile, *"This old crippled preacher has found his legs."*

Because of Rev. Barber's inspiring, imaginative and hopeful faith, I assisted in organizing 40 clergy who came to the Statehouse last Thursday and joined in solidarity with "The Moral Movement," committing ourselves to our own week of prayer for justice in Ohio. You have an insert on this week and all of us are invited to pray - wherever we are - in this week of prayer which unites us with 11 states - including North Carolina - about concerns of our day. Imagine an Ohio with justice for all the people and for the all the earth, sky and water within our borders.

Where better than the church to be the place where - in the Apostle Paul's words, "*we are **not conformed** to the patterns of this world, but **transformed** by the renewing of our minds...*" (Romans 12:2)?

To be transformed we need to remember, in the words of Congregational preacher and abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher, "*The church is not a gallery for the exhibition of eminent Christians, but a school for education of imperfect ones.*"

Can you imagine something different in this world because of your hope-filled faith?

There is an expression - "you are what you eat." As people of God, children of the Most High and Hopeful Creator of the Universe, let's turn this phrase from food to faithful

imagination.... **“You are what you hope.”** In the case of hope, your outlook, your identity, your whole perspective can change. Consider these questions:

- When, where and with who do you feel most hopeful? Why?
- How long are you willing to wait for your hopes to be realized?
- What unhopeful ideals or behaviors are you still nibbling or devouring? (For example: whining, carping, finding fault, gossiping, triangulating, or demonizing).
- Which among your hopes your hopes have always been part of your personality and which are new to your life?
- With whom do you share your most cherished hopes?
- With whom do you share your most cherished hopeful actions?
- After which HOPE- Hero do you pattern your life? How is that going?
- What secret hope would you like to tell someone else about?

If you are lacking a HOPE-Hero, I recommend you spend some time around young children. As a pastor, I find our greatest imaginative life and hope comes from our children.

Unknowingly they embody hope and delight for us. I say unknowingly, because they don't set out to show us. They simply live their hope. They show us how to expect "the new," to look toward that, which is not yet, and to accept and risk the unspecified. They embody what we have lost in the way of imagination.

I love the story of a young child who went into her new baby's bedroom one night. After her parents went downstairs, she sneaked in. What she didn't know was that mom and dad were listening to everything on the "baby Monitor" in the Living Room. She went to her little brother's bedside. She sang a song to the baby. Then she said, *"Baby, tell me what heaven is like. I am beginning to forget. Little brother, please tell me about it so I don't forget."*

Maybe our lack of imaginative hope is found in this simple truth. We have forgotten what heaven is like. Maybe we have forgotten how to imagine.

Have we forgotten how to hope? I hope not! I pray this week, Hope rises from your imaginative life of faith. *"What you can imagine, you can do."* Amen.

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