

From the Pulpit

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“Agents of Hope” Transform the World”

(Part V of V in the sermon series,
“Hope Comes Alive”)

August 31st, 2014

By Rev. Tim Ahrens

Senior Minister

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 31, 2014, dedicated to the memory of my friend and a champion for justice, Ms. Alicia Rivers and to our newborn beauties, Caleb Frank and Isabelle Collins, as they enter this world in loving families and always to the glory of God!

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“Agents of Hope’ Transform the World”

(Part V of V in the sermon series, “Hope Comes Alive”)

Exodus 3:1-15; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

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Through the five Sundays of August, Rev. Clark and I have focused on “Hope” in our sermon series, “Hope Comes Alive.” The sermons have been entitled, “Hope is Anchored in our Souls,” “Hope Cannot be Seen,” “Hope in Trying Times,” and “Hope Comes Alive in an Imaginative Faith.” Today I conclude with “Agents of Hope Transform the World.” All the sermons may be found on our church website www.first-church.org. They are also printed and found in our information racks at 9th Street (and hopefully) Broad St. on the table. Soon, all five will be printed together and placed in the same locations.

On his behalf, let me say, thank you to you for the favorable response and interaction we have experienced in response to this series. In you, “Hope Comes Alive.”

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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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Hope is not just about faith. Hope is found in knowledge. **In fact, Hope is embedded in the temperament of our brains.** A hopeful (or bold or uninhibited) disposition is likely rooted in your genetic make-up and emerges in your early life. As you mature, hope can become your default position in life. This happens best when your hopefulness is further reinforced with life experiences which bolster hope. But, nonetheless, a hopeful brain overcomes evidence which seeks to override it. **Hope is wired in!**

I love the story of identical twins that had completely opposite approaches to life. One was always positive and one was always negative. One lived in hope and one lived in despair. So, on their eighth birthday, their parents sought to turn the tables. They gave the negative twin a room filled with computers, action games, videos and more. He walked in saw everything in front of him and began to complain about how

these items were not good enough. For the positive twin, they filled a room with horse manure. He walked in with a huge smile on his face and threw his hands into the pile of manure proclaiming - *“Thanks Mom and Dad! This is wonderful! Where ever there is this much manure, a new pony can’t be far away!”*

Do you see how our brains are wired (or not) for Hope?

In another story, Hope met Reality in St. Mary Byzantine School as I was walking down the hallway with the principal, Sister Mary Griffin (the sister of the Diocese of Columbus’ Bishop Jim Griffin). Sr. Mary was telling me how hard life was for the children in her inner-city Cleveland school. As we walked and talked, we approached a kindergartner in the hallway. She was a beam of God’s pure light - buoyant, beautiful and filled with hope in the day that God had given her.

When she overheard our conversation about the hard life of the children, she stopped, turned and looked right at her principal and said – with tears in her eyes - **“Sr. Mary, Nobody ever told me life was hard.”** Hope had just encountered Reality. Sr. Mary knelt down and hugged her tiny kindergartner and reassured her that she was loved and would continue to shine God’s light. Holding the child’s face in her hands, Sr. Mary said, “You keep hope alive, my child.”

Hope meets us in empty hallways at school as well as the empty tomb and turns our tears into dancing. Hope meets us in

our down days and lifts us to new beginnings. Hope does not disappoint us. *Hope is in our brains! It is wired in. How we tap into the Hope that is in us is up to us.*

Hope comes alive through special agents of hope in our lives. They are our Transformers – transforming our deepest grief into our greatest hope. You know who the special transforming agents of hope are in your life. Meditate upon them for a second. Give thanks to God for them. Hope comes alive in “Hopeful” people. That is perhaps the most important truth of Hope!

In John Bunyan’s classic, The Pilgrim’s Progress, the hero of his story is named Christian. Christian is accompanied on his pilgrim’s journey to the Promised Land by a friend named Hopeful. As they reach the River Jordan, the last stage of their journey, Christian becomes overwhelmed by the waters rising and moving fast in front of him. He says to Hopeful, *“I sink in deep waters, the billows go over my head, and the waves go over me.”* Hopeful responds, *“Be of good cheer my brother. I feel the bottom and it is good.”* But panic sets in and Christian fears that he will drown and never behold the gates of Jerusalem. As Christian sinks deeper and deeper, Hopeful struggles to keep his friend’s head above water and tells him that Jesus is watching and waiting for him. Christian responds that it is only Hopeful for whom the Lord awaits. *“No,”* Hopeful responds, *“Be of good cheer. The Lord is making you whole now.”*

With this Christian begins to recite Isaiah 43:2: “*When you pass through, I will be with you and through the rivers; they shall not overflow you.*” The crisis ends. They find their footing. As they reach the shores, they are met by two Shining Ones whom the Lord has sent to welcome them into the house of salvation (John Bunyan, The Pilgrim’s Progress , New York: Washington Square Press, 1957, pp. 151-152).

Without Hopeful, Christian would surely have drowned. With Hopeful’s encouraging presence, Christian would have given up. He would have succumbed to despair. Without Hopeful, all of us are vulnerable to giving in and giving up. With Hopeful, we can sink and be swept away by despair.

I believe, Hopeful is a special agent of God. He is the one whom God chooses to lift his friend from despair to hope; from death to life. I also believe, everyone one of us can be such a special agents of Hope for others. We have the power of God within us, to reach into the raging waters of life and be present to those around us in times of great need.

Let me be more succinct – I see you as Hopeful. In your homes, in school, at work, in hospital rooms, in nursing homes, in your neighborhoods and in this church, you reach out to others and lift them up. In seen and unseen ways, day-to-day – you are Hopeful. You represent Hope. Your imaginative faith brings hope alive. Your brain and spirits – wired to hope – make hope possible for others to grab of when the waters of

despair are sweeping over them. I know – because I have been lifted up and saved by the likes of you in my life and in Columbus, Ohio. You are the Hopeful to my Christian.

Last March, I was testifying at the Ohio Statehouse for Medicaid Expansion. Outside the hearing room – filled with nay-saying House Representatives – was a group of ten young adults with developmental and physical disabilities who had drive 3 hours from Cleveland for a rally at the statehouse - many of them in wheelchairs, all of them hopeful that the legislators who expand Medicaid and give them much needed assistance. I sat down on the bench next to one young woman who said to me through halting and stuttering speech – but with a smile as big as the sun, *“I can’t speak good. I don’t have many words. Would you speak for me?”* I said, *“I would be honored to do that.”* I asked her name. She replied, *“My name is ‘Angel.’”* She gave me her button. I wore it proudly. I spoke for Angel. But, it was really Angel who was the Special Agent of Hope who lifted me up and gave me strength to witness on her behalf.

My friends, we are called to be Angels for others. We are called to be angels of Mercy and Justice. We are called to be like Hopeful was to Christian. So be Hopeful. Be hopeful so that this world which God created as “good” doesn’t sweep you and others away. Be hopeful, so that you and others around

you – may live. In your body, mind and spirit, I pray that
Hope may Come Alive. Amen.

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