

“The First Day of First Church”

Exodus 17:1-7; Philippians 2:1-13, Matthew 21:23-32

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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, September 27, 2020, dedicated to memory of the 27 women and 15 men who became the founding members of Third Presbyterian Church, now First Congregational Church, Columbus, on Sunday, September 26, 1852 and to all the men, women and children have dedicated themselves over 168 years of life together to serve Christ here in Ohio's Capital City, to my son Dan Ahrens on his 30th Birthday, to Betsy Zahn on her 95th Birthday this Tuesday, to honor Rev. Joyce Wealand as she serves today on her first Sunday as an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, to memory of the late Supreme Court Justice, the Honorable Ruth Bader Ginsburg, to the memory of Breanna Taylor 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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Our congregation's history begins in hearts and minds of faithful dissent. By the late 1840s, a growing movement of Christian abolitionists was gaining strength in the struggle against slavery.

Abolitionist Christians could no longer abide in the union of Christian faith and a nation which embraced – in any way – the existence of slaves and slave-owners. They believed human beings are not property. They are human beings.

In Columbus, in 1852, a cluster of such believers from Second Presbyterian Church decided that they were Congregationalists at heart and they parted amicably with Second Presbyterian to form the Third Presbyterian Church. With 42 people transferring membership on Friday, September 24, 1852, the members of Second Presbyterian Church sent them off with this benediction:

‘In view of the importance of this occasion, we add our expression of sympathy with those who leave us, and an earnest desire that the great Head of the Church may be with them and help them. May He make them a church of His own, to glorify Him and promote His Kingdom in the world! May those who remain and those who go, when toil is here finished, meet in heaven, and together form a part of the church triumphant there!’

With a \$1,000 loan (the equivalent of \$33,322 in 2020 dollars) provided by their sisters and brothers from Second Presbyterian, our newly formed church purchased a lot on the northeast corner of Third Street and Lynn Alley (where the entrance to the parking garage at the Renaissance Hotel is today). There a frame chapel was erected as the first of our churches.

A formal call was extended to The Rev. William H. Marble. Under the Rev. William Marble’s earnest and integral leadership, the chapel was dedicated on July 11 and the congregation first worshiped in their new chapel on Sunday, September 26, 1852 as 27 women and 15 men gathered to praise God and turn their resistance to slavery

into faith in action. They officially signed the charter of organization on Wednesday, September 29, 1852.

By 1856, the church was fittingly renamed The First Congregational Church, Columbus. With church membership steadily increasing, First Church entertained plans for a more spacious building. First Church followed the admonition of Henry C. Bowen, a leading Abolitionist and Congregationalist who said, *“Buy a lot facing your State House and build a good building. Make them see that you are there. The bravest policy is the best.”* They did just that. They purchased land directly across from the State House in 1856 on the north side of Broad Street and began to their church under the leadership of their new pastor, The Rev. J.M. Steele.

Only five months into his pastorate, the young and energetic Rev. Steele set out for New York City to raise \$7000 for the Norman-style building. Tragically, he contracted smallpox during the pursuit and died shortly thereafter. Grieving their loss, the brave little congregation pressed ahead and on December 23, 1857 they dedicated their new building at 74 East Broad Street. That became the location of First Church for 74 years until we opened this building at 444 East Broad Street 89 years ago - in December 1931.

First Congregational Church was the first White Abolitionist Church in Columbus, Ohio. As early Christian Abolitionists, we joined with several other Black congregations – including Second Baptist Church under the leadership of the famed, renowned and great leader Rev. James Preston Poindexter (1849-1898) – to free slaves and support the Underground Railroad. Second Baptist was right behind First Church on Gay Street (our back doors met in Lynn Alley). Our fellowship in those early years was tied closely to our

sister Black abolitionist congregations. Together we formed the first interracial work for justice in Columbus' history. Our origin story is a remarkable story of determination and commitment to racial justice.

I have often wondered what happened on the first day of First Church (then Third Presbyterian Church). We know there were 42 charter members – 27 women and 15 men. Here are their names in the alphabetical order by which they signed the book (as best as I can interpret the spelling of their names): Mrs. Amelia Adams, Mr. Thomas S. Baldwin, Mrs. Matilda A. Baldwin, Mr. Michael B. Bateham, Mrs. Josephine C. Bateham, Mrs. Elisa Birgraft, Mrs. Eleona Edgar, Mrs. Sarah Ann Edwards, Mr. Charles H. Goss, Mrs. Sarah Goss, Mr. Andrew Gunning, Mrs. Mary M. Gunning, Dr. J. C. Hamilton, Mrs. Rachel H. Hamilton, Rev. Warren Jenkins, Mrs. Mary M. Jenkins, Mr. Matthew Long, Mrs. Mary Long, Mrs. A.E.B. McGrary, Mrs. Mary E. Osgood, Mr. George Otscott, Mrs. Elizabeth Otscott, Miss Dana C. Pearson, Mrs. Phebe D. Rankin, Mrs. Mary Jane Reed, Mr. L.L. Rice, Mrs. Sarah Rice, Miss Elizabeth Ridgeway, Mrs. Mary Searles, Mr. Francis C. Sessions, Mrs. Mary J. Sessions, Mrs. Lydia C. Stanton, Mr. Samuel B. Stanton, Mrs. A.E. Stricklen, Mrs. Elizabeth Tuttle, Mr. James R. Tuttle, Mr. C. Wahl, Mrs. Elizabeth Wahl, Miss Mary White, Mrs. Jane Wilkins, Mr. Abram Alvin Wright and Mrs. Mary A. Wright.

In all my years here, I have never read their names aloud. It is honor and a true joy to hear their names and speak them aloud because without them we are not here. Who were these people? What were their life stories? How did they get to America? How did they get to Ohio? How did they get to Columbus? What work did they do? How many children did they have? What became of them in the years that followed? Our records show that 20 of the 42 were “dismissed” (the

word used then for a transfer of membership). Of those 20, ten went on to start other churches. Some were just “dismissed” with a date. Did they leave the Christian faith? We don’t know the back story – so we shouldn’t make it up.

What drove them to do the right thing for racial justice, for social justice?

I wonder so many things about day one at First Church. Who was there in worship that first Sunday? Were their guests? How many children were present? What were their names? What did the children think about leaving their old church and their friends and starting a new church just four blocks north on 3rd Street? Were some of the married women widows, were their husbands opposed to this move, or were they church goers and their husbands not? What did Rev. Marble preach about? What were his texts? What hymns did they sing? Did they have a choir? If so, who was the choir director? What did they sing that day? Were there ushers or deacons? Did they have communion at this table that first day? Were there any baptisms? What happened that day after church? Did they have a cookout? How did they translate their strong abolitionist beliefs, blended with their powerful faith in Jesus Christ and turn it into action on behalf of men, women and children who were treated as three-quarter human and enslaved only 110 miles to the south across the Ohio River in Kentucky and beyond into the slave-holding southern states.

Here we are 168 years and one day later. We have been blessed by their brave vision of a better world – a nation where slavery ended – in part due to their work and battling to bring it to an end – although we continue to battle the vestiges of slavery’s racially dividing effects up to this current day.

61,362 days have passed since the first day of First Church. So much has changed. But, four things remain the same. First, we are blessed to have the communion table which survived all the way to our present moment. It connects us sacramentally and spiritually with our 42 forebearers. Second, we have God's Word as our constant companion that has been with us for 2000 years and more. We are inspired like they were to follow God's Word still today – as our forebearers in faith were 61,362 days ago on the day this congregation was born. Third, we share their deep call to racial justice and being antiracists – whose expression was so powerfully demonstrated by starting our congregation. Fourth, we share the Covenant they gave us that day.

Our Church's covenant for 168 years has been the same. Perhaps they read it first on Sunday, September 26, 1852. I invite you to read it now. You will find it on page 2 of our worship program.

We covenant with the Lord Jesus Christ and one another, and bind ourselves in the presence of God to live together in all God's ways as revealed to us by the Holy Spirit and holy scripture. The church acknowledges that all members have the right of individual interpretation of the principles of the Christian faith and respects them in their honest convictions. In accordance with the teaching of our Lord, the church recognizes two sacraments: Baptism and Holy Communion.

61,362 days have passed since these words were first expressed. These are powerful words that claim our trinitarian faith, ground us in God's Word, connect us to the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion, and connects us forever with this radical faith statement: *"The church acknowledges that all members have the right of individual interpretation of the principles of the Christian faith and respects them in their honest convictions."* In other words, each one of us lives by this

belief – that I honor and respect your interpretation of the principles of our Christian faith. I honor and respect YOU in your honest convictions. Wow!

This is an open and affirming statement all by itself. I happen to know that within this congregation we have a wonderfully wide range of beliefs, interpretations of our faith and HONEST convictions. I know that there have been probably tens of thousands of people who have traveled with us on our journey of faith at First Church. Many of them are dearly beloved to us. Each one has believed different things about God, about Jesus, the Holy Spirit, about the church, about the Universe and about who we are and how we express ourselves as children of God. Some have interpreted our faith in such a way that they have been ordained to preach the Gospel (like Joyce Wealand was last week). Others have felt the call to mission work and other forms of church service, to law and justice work, to serve our nation in the military, to medicine and education, to government service, to business and finance, to manufacturing and industry. Others still have interpreted this covenant and our faith that has led them to other faith expressions and for some it has led them to walk away from the faith altogether. This covenant calls us **to individual interpretation and honest convictions.**

Following this covenant leads us to trust in God and that God is still speaking. It means we have to trust ourselves enough to challenge what we believe is wrong and embrace what we know is right.

In his memoir, entitled *Black Boy*, published in 1945, Richard Wright puts it this way: *“Ought one to surrender to authority even if one believed that that authority was wrong? If the answer was yes, then I knew that I would always be wrong, because I could never do it. Then how could one live in a world in which*

one's mind and perceptions meant nothing and authority and tradition meant everything? There were no answers." To Richard Wright, I say, "I wish you could have journeyed with us – where we would have held your mind and your perceptions as sacred and true."

Today, we pause to give thanks to God for the Legacy of our First Church and for the founders in faith who had the courage and vision to create our congregation and then trusted God, and Jesus and Holy Spirit to guide them forward. Like the Exodus story, we can only imagine the hardships and the joys they encountered. Like the letter of Paul to the church at Philippi, we pray that we can continue to carry forth their encouragement, their love, their compassion and sympathy, their humility in looking out for the interests of others and their counting on Jesus to lead them to be antiracists and stop the hemorrhaging hate and abuse of native people and African-Americans. Like Jesus, in his parable of the two sons, we can only pray that our words and actions are honest and true and speak for themselves.

I pray today that we remember and celebrate with gratitude and joy the 42 who had the vision and courage to follow their convictions and create a church home for us here in the heart of the Ohio, in the heart of Columbus, and in the heart of the love of Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God for each one of them.

Thanks be to God for each one of you. Amen.