

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>

## *“We are Family!”*

*Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32; Philippians 2: 1-13;  
Matthew 21:23-32*

September 28, 2014

By The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens

Senior Minister

A sermon preached by Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 16, September 28, 2014, dedicated to Daniel Ahrens on 24<sup>th</sup> birthday, to Dan and Brittanie Logel newly married yesterday, and to the memory of all who have laid down their lives for Christ at First Church through 162 years of our life together and always to the glory of God!

*“We are Family!”*

*Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32; Philippians 2: 1-13; Matthew 21:23-32*

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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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**We are an Abolitionist congregation.** As abolitionist Christians, we trace our roots back to England. There in a print shop at 2 George Yard, in the late afternoon of May 22, 1787 twelve determined men sat down amid flatbed presses, wooden trays of type and large sheets of freshly painted book pages to begin one of the most ambitious and

brilliantly organized citizens campaigns known to humankind ( Adam Hochschild, Bury the Chains, Mariner Books, Boston, MA, 2006, p. 3).

One was a printer, another lawyer, another a clergyman and nine others were united by their hatred of slavery. Over the next 51 years, they would lead a complicated campaign that masterfully stoked public opinion, pioneered techniques that citizens' movements use to this present day – including petitions, boycotts, label buttons, wall posters – which eventually shut down the slave trade in the British Empire and in time led Americans to war and on January 1, 1863 led President Abraham Lincoln to declare all slaves free.

Recently I re-read Bury the Chains. I was amazed by a number of truths that guided the likes of John Newton, Thomas Clarkson, William Wilberforce and others to end slavery.

Here are a five of these jewels of truth I discovered:

**First, it takes leaders to move people forward. It also takes time.** Leadership for transformation takes time – in their case – 51 years+. That only marked the end of the slave trade (1838) not the end of slavery. It was the beginning of all long and tumultuous end. Only a handful

of the twelve lived to see this happen. It takes time to make change.

**Second, it doesn't take heroes to move people to do the right thing. Rather, it takes a movement of people committed to work together to change what is wrong.** The Abolitionist story is not filled with heroes. It is filled with righteous and determined men and women. This was not a "hero" led movement.

**Third, in such a movement, you have to use all the media and methods at your disposal to get the message broadcast** – preaching, teaching, boycotts, facebook, twitter, social media, education campaigns, posters and of course the mass media itself.

**Fourth, while the focus may be for a higher cause, never forget the lives and faces of those for whom you struggle.** In the case of Hochschild's epic tale, I was struck time and time again by the tremendous loss of life and culture and family among African slaves. The millions are the unnamed heroes. If one could map the path from Africa to the Americas, it is most notably marked by the tens of millions of bones of those cast overboard on their journey - lost at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. Whether thrown overboard on the horrible and ill-fated journey of the Zong,

lost in the ports waiting to take off on this horrid “middle passage,” lost at sea, or killed any number of ways in a lifetime of slavery and hardship, this story of slavery’s end is really about the unnamed hundreds of millions of children, men, and women who were slaves. Hochschild points out that when white missionaries were killed in the war of slavery, they drew attention. But, it was the African Americans and African Caribbean/South American Slaves about whom this story is one of true transformation. **The CRY: “Am I Not a Man and a Brother?” must be emblazoned on the heart – as it was in this abolitionist movement!** Many of us remember the Memphis Garbage Workers’ Strike in which Dr. King lost his life. The men wore signs that read, “I am a Man.” The memory which inspired those signs came from the slaughter on the Zong it wasn’t started in Memphis. The connections run deep.

**Finally, such a movement must believe “Why Not Us?”** This is the belief that the Abolitionists had in God and one another. Last February, the world heard the story of quarterback Russell Wilson of the World Champion Seattle Seahawks. When he was drafted, so many people said he was too small, too slow, and not strong enough to be a great quarterback, but his father said to him, “Why not you, Russell? Why not you to become the greatest

quarterback football has ever known?” The abolitionist story is an epic story of men and women who believed in God and one another. They believed in their place in history and the right idea: That slavery should end.

In the words of Margaret Mead, **“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has”** (Ibid, p.7).

**Why not us?** That was the question our abolitionist forebearers in faith must have had when they entered this epic story 69 years into the struggle to end slavery. They were a small group of thoughtful Christians who intended to change the world in Columbus, Ohio. On September 24, 1852, 42 men and women believing they could no longer abide in the union of Christian faith and a nation filled with slaves and slave-owners, formed a new congregation – Third Presbyterian Church. Interestingly, they were sent from Second Presbyterian (formerly Central Prez) with a \$1,000 loan (today’s equivalent - \$28,400) so that they might build a new church. This they did, on the northeast corner of Third Street and Lynn Alley (now where the parking garage entrance is to the Renaissance Hotel).

On September 26<sup>th</sup>, they worshiped together for the first time in a little frame church they had built and

dedicated in the summer of 1852. On September 29<sup>th</sup>, they held their first church meeting (note that they worshipped before they had their first church meeting – putting their priorities in the right order!).

They called their first pastor, Rev. William Marble in 1852. Under his able leadership, they were ready to become First Congregational Church of Columbus and open their first real church building at 74 East Broad (behind the current Key Bank Building and across from the State Capitol). From there to here they moved in December 1931. The pulpit from which I preach today (which we affectionately call “the Gladden Pulpit”) was from the 1856 First Congregational Church.

Although we love Gladden and his legacy, this is not his pulpit. It is not the possession of any preacher. It should be called the **Abolitionists’ Pulpit** – from this pulpit the battle cry “let freedom ring,” was declared from the earliest voices of preachers here. Similarly, from this 1852 communion table, the body and blood of Christ was broken and poured out for generations of justice minded Christians. Today, they are found in the Gladden Chapel. There they sit as a constant reminder to anyone who enters this building, we fight for freedom. We believe in social justice. We will change what is wrong in this world.

There are some of us here who are uncomfortable with this – particularly when some of us set out to the state house or city hall and demand justice for children, women, and men who need health care, housing, racial justice, civil rights for new Americans, or marriage equality for LGBT persons, or when I stand with the parents who lost their children in shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Ct. and Chardon, Ohio and call for background checks for those who obtain semi-automatic weapons.

*I have been told by some that such activism is not the work of a Christian pastor.* But, I say, tell that to 42 men and women who grew into First Church and built their first church building across from the statehouse so that the legislators *“would have to look out every day and see the abolitionists across the street* (their words, not mine) *“After all,”* they concluded, *“The bravest policy is the best.”*

Tell that to the millions buried in Atlantic Ocean or in unmarked graves under lynching trees. I believe that they are my family. And all who have followed them in chain of oppression are my sisters and brothers as well. I believe it is our time in this place to bury the chains. This should be our Legacy – a legacy of Justice and peace!

Our spiritual DNA is Christian and Abolitionist – maybe not in that order for some of us! But, nevertheless our legacy must be social change! The change that we will bring about will be change of society’s unjust laws and practices. Yesterday, at Dan and Britannie’s wedding, Dan’s brother, who has been with his partner for 22 years said, *“Thank you for fighting for Marriage Equality. It is not every day I get to say that to a straight Christian pastor.”* In his comment, I heard the voices of the millions cry out, *“It is not every day that white people stand up and do the right thing for Black people. Thank you.”*

**So today is Legacy Sunday.** Our family of faith has gathered to give thanks to God and celebrate that we are here at witnesses for justice and peace. We are still kicking, still marching, still writing, still fighting, still stewards for the Lord, still witnesses for what is just.

As I look out on the room today, I see two congregations present. I see you and that is a beautiful and glorious sight. You look sensational – to quote our friend, Rick Henderson! But, I also see the thousands who have called our church their family – those who have gone before us to eternal life. (I also see the millions who lost their lives through slavery. They remind us that our work is not done). Our church family members were men, women,

and children who have been brave, courageous and righteous in their struggle for what is right and just. Some of them were titans in this city. Some of them were the backbone of this city. All of them were “just” folks. All of them were and remain family.

**One of them was Sam Gordon.** Anyone who has been around First Church for a while would have seen Sam Gordon. He was in a wheelchair and sat at 11am in the cross aisle every Sunday – rain, snow or sunshine. At 9am he sat in the circle with us – sometimes reading and leading us from his wheelchair. Sam passed away on April 1<sup>st</sup>. The week our church family and other friends gathered here to remember Sam, I received a call from his attorney, Richard Igo. He informed me that Sam had left 30% of his estate to the First Church. He had left it for “Our Future’s Broadening Way” Campaign or whatever the church would see fit to do with it. I was deeply touched. But, I thought for a nano-second, “Sam could not have had much to leave behind for the church.” Mr. Igo continued, *“It appears that Mr. Gordon had over \$400,000 in his estate. The church may be receiving well over \$120,000.”* I was stunned. Sam Gordon had assets close to half a million dollars!?! That seemed impossible. Wonderfully impossible!

Sam loved you! He loved this church and our children! Now because his gift, we will build the Samuel D. Gordon Playground Next weekend and we will dedicate it October 12<sup>th</sup> and children for generations will see his name on our Playground. That is so cool.

Do you know that most of our largest gifts that have come through endowed giving to First Church have come from unsuspecting sources?! Alma Keeler was not well known by many people. The anonymous gift giver who established the Good Samaritan Fund was not known by anyone! Yet, that legacy of love cares for thousands of people every year! Jean McNevan gave over \$500,000 to the Kimball organ. And Sam Gordon from his wheelchair ended up giving over \$120,000 to the Future's Broadening Way Campaign! He became, in the end, one of the lead give givers to the campaign!

I know of others in this congregation who have made a great impact on our daily life together AND have left a legacy of love in their estate planning for First Church! I cannot speak their names, but I can tell you we are all indebted to their passionate love of our church family. Thanks be to God!

Our family is a passionate one. We express ourselves passionately. In fact, I believe in our DNA is a code that says, “CARE DEEPLY ABOUT YOUR CHURCH! ALSO, EXPRESS YOURSELVES WITH A CLEAR VOICE!”

Christ has called us to be family together. In the words of the four famous soulful prophets, Sisters Sledge: *We are family, I got all my family with me. We are family, Get up everybody and sing.*

So I ask you, each one of you, my family members, What will your Legacy be? Sam answered that question four years ago when he changed his will to support our church. How about each of us? What will our legacy of love for First Church be? Think about it. I can't wait to hear your answer.

Happy Birthday First Church! May our 163<sup>rd</sup> year of life together be even better as we live into our call to be who God has anointed us to be in the center of this great capital city! After all, *all such passion for Christ is the bravest policy of all!*” Amen.

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