

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>

# **“Imagine More... God’s Rainbow is Bigger and Brighter!”**

Exodus 33:12-23, 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10,  
Matthew 22:15-22

October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2014  
By Rev. Dan Clark,  
Interim Associate Minister

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Auntie Em tells Dorothy to find a place where she won't get into any trouble. This prompts Dorothy to walk off by herself, musing to Toto, "'Some place where there isn't any trouble.' Do you suppose there is such a place, Toto? There must be. It's not a place you can get to by a boat, or a train. It's far, far away. Behind the moon, beyond the rain..."

One of the most beloved books, films, songs of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and today starts with one person imagining more... imagining what life could be like with freedom and openness... a place where she belongs, where she is listened to and loved.

Arlen and Harburg wrote and published this song at the end of the 1930s, the decade in which this very building was completed... the decade of the Great Depression. But even in the midst of the storms of economic and social turmoil, actors were singing about a rainbow, and church members were commissioning the Jeffrey Window where Christ is seated... on a rainbow. It was the Great Depression. And

people were thinking about rainbows. And here we are... 162 years after the founding of this church, 83 years after the construction of this building, asking perhaps the same questions that our forebears asked...

Is there place where people are free and open and listen to one another and love one another? Do you imagine that such a place exists?

I hope so. Maybe a place like that is somewhere over the rainbow. Or maybe it's right here... among us... with us... within us.

Let's imagine that together. Let's imagine more.

The biblical story that gives us the rainbow is problematic. Its historicity is suspect and its violence is appalling. (Incidentally, this biblical story has also given us a feature film that grossed over 100 million dollars early this year... and the content of this morning's children's musical, 100% Change of Rain).

Dan Clendenin helps us make sense of this prehistorical story this way:

“References to Noah, the flood, and his ark have provoked the best and the worst from Christians. You can visit full-size replicas of Noah's ark in Holland and Hong Kong. Bogus pseudo-science appeals to the flood. Since the third century, explorers have tried to find the archaeological remains of the ark. There's also the cruel theology of the church fathers that just as there was no salvation outside of Noah's ark, there's no salvation outside the Christian church. But Noah's story has also appealed to our better angels. Consider artistic expressions like... catacomb frescoes, illuminated manuscripts, massive church doors, mosaics, tapestries, and more.” (Here I would add children's musicals.)

Clendenin continues... “In the end, and after all the complications and obfuscations, Scripture makes a simple but profound point when it compares church baptism to Noah's ark — the church should be a place of refuge, safety, and salvation. It is a life boat. A shelter from the storm.”

And life is stormy, to be sure.

With a forecast of 100% chance of rain, God provided a rainbow to give all people a 100% chance of love.

With the storms of slavery and civil war stirring, a rainbow of abolition became visible with the first members of First Congregational Church.

With the storm of the Great Depression raging, a rainbow of glorious worship became visible with the last century's members of First Congregational Church.

Storms still rage. The world is stirring. There is, I admit, plenty to be afraid of... even now ISIS and Ebola and homophobia and racial tension saturate our TVs, radios, and social media newsfeeds. But perhaps in light of these storms, we should follow in the faithful footsteps of our founders. Let's raise a rainbow of hope. A bigger and brighter rainbow. Let's imagine more for our city, our state, our nation, our world. Let's imagine more for First Church.

Just like in the Wizard of Oz, we can go from black and white to Technicolor. It is the Christian message that a hopeful, courageous, and imaginative faith in a glorious, gracious, and generous God can move everyone from a black and white world with mono sound and a barren landscape to a HD, surround sound, full color, full contact way of living.

It's this new and vibrant way of life that Jesus invites us to in John's gospel when he says that he has come to give life abundant.

It is this fresh and radiant way of life that the Apostle Paul intimates when in his letter to the Ephesians he offers this beautiful doxology: "Now to God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen." Imagine more.

I imagine a rainbow big and bright. Bigger and brighter than the one that promised peace to Noah. Bigger and brighter than the one in the Jeffrey window. Bigger and brighter than the one that indicates that this church welcomes all people and has for over 12 years. I imagine a big and bright rainbow full of all the colors of God.

In Jesus's Sermon on the Mount recorded in Matthew's Gospel, his brilliant discourse on day-to-day ethics, he tells those listening that "you are the light of the world." We are the light of the world. And it sure is a stormy world. But when light is reflected and refracted in the precipitation of a storm, we get a rainbow. (That's the simple science lesson for the day.) We are the light of the world. We are the

rainbow in the storm. That's what Jesus says, at least. The professor, prolific writer, and Presbyterian minister, Eugene Peterson, renders this saying in this way: "You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Parent in heaven."

I imagine a big and bright rainbow full of all the colors of God. Because you are here to bring out the God-colors in the world.

As your interim Associate Minister and a member of the Stewardship committee... and more than that, as a member of this church... here is what I invite you to do... Imagine more... Rediscover childlike faith, wonder, and awe. Cultivate your hopes and dreams for our life together. Plant seeds of faith and see what grows. Imagine more...

Imagine more for children. Imagine more for adults.  
Imagine more in worship. Imagine more social justice.

Imagine more openness and hospitality. Imagine more beauty. Imagine more for our members and visitors. Imagine more for the neighborhood. Imagine more for Columbus and all of Central Ohio. Imagine more for the state, the nation, and the world. Imagine more in your own spiritual journey – whoever you are and wherever you are. Imagine more...

Whatever you have imagined.... Whatever your childlike faith, wonder, and awe can stir up... God has more. God's ideas for First Church are bigger than our own. God's dreams for mercy and justice, beauty and worship, openness and hospitality, stewardship and generosity outshine ours. Let's imagine together what God has in store for First Church.

In order to reach our goals for Stewardship in 2015 and to live into our exciting potential as a downtown church with a legacy of social justice, a reputation for beautiful art, architecture and music, and a radical commitment to hospitality and openness in the center of a vibrant and growing city... In order to imagine more, we are asking everyone to prayerfully consider a generous increase in giving in the next year.

Auntie Em tells Dorothy to find a place where she won't get into any trouble, and she begins to sing...

Somewhere over the rainbow way up high  
There's a land that I heard of once in a lullaby  
Somewhere over the rainbow skies are blue  
And the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true

Judy Garland said, "I've always taken 'The Wizard of Oz' very seriously, you know. I believe in the idea of the rainbow. And I've spent my entire life trying to get over it."

Dorothy believes. Judy believes. Do we? Will we take this seriously? Will we believe together that "the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true"?

I say we can, because God can and will "accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine." So let's imagine more.

Amen.

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