

“The Power of the Plate: Love in Generosity”

Judges 4:1-7, I Thessalonians 5:1-11, Matthew 25:14-30

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens
Senior Minister

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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

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 15, 2020, Proper 28, 24th Sunday after Pentecost, dedicated to my sister Deborah K. Ahrens, to Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Ohio Justice-elect Jennifer Brunner and all women who have served as judges in Ohio and throughout the world, to all men and women who have served our nation in the United States Military in this week of Veterans' Day 2020, to Colin, Deb, Alaina and Caroline Thompson as they grieve the death of their family dog, Lincoln, to Leigh Briggs, Brittany Stricklen-Hilliard and Rev. Emily Corzine and everyone stepping up for Stewardship 2021, to our 2020 Lay Leader Award Recipients, Peter Murray and Tom Worley and always to the glory of God!

“The Power of the Plate: Love in Generosity”

Judges 4:1-7, I Thessalonians 5:1-11, Matthew 25:14-30

Let's dig into the power of the Judges and the power of the plate today. Each of us will meet some amazing people and be inspired to become even more amazing people ourselves.

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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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Deborah is powerful woman and a powerful judge whose story is shared in the book of Judges. She is one of just four female judges mentioned among the hundreds of men who held that title. Biblical judges are not what we think when we think of judges. They were often warriors who were leading forces on the field of battle. They weren't known as reflective, thoughtful jurists sitting on high considering the intricacies of the law and judging one case after another - although thoughtful words were part of their judging portfolio.

However, Deborah is different, she is special, she IS thoughtful and reflective. She is unique to judges of her time. In Judges 4:1-7, she sits under her palm tree to deliver her brilliant opinions to the crowd. She is a poet and a prophet. The Song of Deborah found in Judges 5:2-31 has been put to music through the ages and is still recited today. She is a judge of and for all the people. She clearly loves her people and her people love her. But there is so more to Deborah. She is also a mighty warrior who commanded great armies of men and used her strategic power in defeating her enemies. She is a poet under a tree and a mighty warrior yielding the sword of justice.

In a recent article in *Christian Century*, (October 21, 2020) one of my classmates at Yale Divinity School - a great theologian, author, professor, friend, and now the President of Union Theological Seminary in New York City, The Rev. Dr. Serene Jones, penned an article entitled, "A Judge Arose" about the late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. It is a personal article in which Dr. Jones shares the story of dinner party in March with Judge Ginsburg. In the piece, she speaks of the Notorious RBG's love of Deborah as one of her early role models as a Jewish girl growing up in Brooklyn, NY.

Comparing the two, Dr. Jones speaks of the poet, the prophet, the judge and the warrior AND our beloved late Supreme Court Justice. She writes, *“We aren’t told anything about Deborah’s height, her family (and) where she grew up... As scripture sums it up, her job as judge, simply put, is to do everything in her power to make sure the people are true to the covenant they made, their constitution that binds them, even when being true means battle. She is a mighty protector referred to as ‘the mother of her people.’”*

Sounds like RBG to me. Our 5’1” Supreme Court Justice was a defender of covenant and constitution and was unafraid to go into battle with her black robe, her lace-mantle across her neck and shoulders and her pen poised for poetic and prophetic entreaties on justice for ALL. About Deborah and Ruth and in each generation, we can say, “A judge rises” and works to bend the moral arc of the universe. Under her palm tree or on the bench with eight other colleagues balancing the scales of justice in America – each woman is a powerful witness for justice and inspiration and role model for women throughout time.

But Judges is much more than a story of one woman. It is the story of God acting in history. In today’s passage from Judges we are in a battle. But more than a military action, we find ourselves immersed in the full force of an ancient tale of God’s forgiveness and mercy coming out of intense struggle and conflict. Here we encounter the oppressive consequences of human sin embodied by King Jabin and Sisera. But, in Barak’s victory, we also witness God’s concern that oppression should never be permitted to stand. Overcoming oppression and evil is the purpose and the meaning of being God’s people. Here we see, that the power of God is always exerted for justice and righteousness. God’s power for good is powerfully

communicated in the Book of Judges. God is the most powerful judge of all.

God's power is at work in different ways in today's gospel reading in Matthew 25:14-30. Here we receive a parable about investment. This is the power of the plate at work in the world.

Let's be clear here - this story deals in big money. In Jesus' parable, the master divided his treasure among three servants. Lest we feel too sorry for the one who received only one share, consider that a talent was a measure of weight denoting about 70 pounds of silver or gold. Given Jesus' story-telling style, it most likely had been gold. The poor servant who got only one talent received today's equivalent of about **\$2,172,800** in today's money to work with while his master was away.

It's hard to imagine the master's disappointment in the third servant. He had handed over a significant portion of his life's work and the servant thought so little of him and his projects that he did nothing with it. He didn't even ask someone else to use the money and pay him interest on it. He just buries it.

Rev. Corzine, this would be like Mark Williams and me taking all the investments and pledges from all of the people of First Church given in faithfulness for two years and burying it in a hole in the ground at 444 East Broad. I am sure that if that happened here, none of you would be happy either. We would draw your wrath like the servant who buried the \$2 million+ of his master's.

This is a story about financial activity. It is a story about investments. When we talk about talents here, we are talking about a measure of money. We are not talking about the ability to sing or dance, to paint or teach, playing instruments or compassionately

care for members and our neighbors. We are talking about a huge sum of money which would have equaled more than two lifetimes of payment to these servants for their hard work. The man wanted his money working for him while he was away. He was a capitalist who expected a return on his investment.

But Matthew inserts language in this parable that changes it from a pure investment story into a Kingdom of God story. We move from returns on the investment portfolio to questions about eternal life or eternal judgement.

We have been working our way through the Gospel of Matthew during this entire 2020 pandemic. We know a few things about this Gospel writer by now. We know he inserts spiritual truths into parables and loves to remind us about the final judgment of God. It feels clunky sometimes. It feels like we are cruising through a story and then we take a sharp turn to the edge of eternal damnation or a another sharp turn to eternal life. Matthew drops strong moralizing on our heads just when we thought we were hearing about something else. As a preacher, it feels like I am driving a car down a mountain with no guard-rails and NO brakes – like Mr. Toad’s wild ride.

So, let me gently apply what brakes I have left as I head into Matthew’s message. There are many great messages in this parable. Let’s look at two:

First, we need to invest well in the what we believe in (repeat). I believe in First Church. It is my deepest hope and prayer that you believe in First Church, too. I believe we are a light to the nation and at the heart of hope in these often dark and challenging times. I believe we have a mission and ministry dedicated to care for our members and for our neighbors in need. We have a special place in

this city and in this world. We have invested in our church to make it come alive in the days and years ahead. That's what we do, that's what we are.

I hope these words from Leigh Briggs and Brittany Stricklen-Hilliard, our 2021 Stewardship Co-Chairs help you. Let me share three important paragraphs from Leigh and Brittany's very personal letter sent back in October as they centered us in the times in which we are living and a vision for proportional giving.

They wrote:

The year 2020 has been like no other time in the history of First Church. Our nation feels more divided than ever. We have been apart more than we have been together. We have worshipped online in new ways. The Staff, Council and Commissions have carried out the business of the church in new ways. During these uncertain and unsettled times of Covid-19 and the heightened awareness of systemic racism in our nation, we grieve as a community of faith. We also recommit ourselves to living out our call as Christians to fight against racial and socio-economic disparities in all areas of our life.

Through this, First Church remains a beacon of faith, hope and love; loving generously. First Church draws from our deep faith tradition as followers of Jesus Christ and our commitment to social justice as the grounding for our life together.

What is proportional giving? *Proportional giving is offering to God in a committed and faithful manner a portion of what God has given us. To help guide all members of the church with their level of financial giving to the church, the annual stewardship committee prayerfully asks all of you to consider giving 3% to 10% of your gross income. These guidelines represent a significant shift from our most recent stewardship campaigns, which have suggested percentage increases over the previous year's gift. The annual stewardship committee is asking the*

congregation to embrace this opportunity by thinking in a new way about how to live your most generous life by loving generously and unleashing “The Power of the Plate.”

You and I have been asked to be proportional givers. Let’s respond to this invitation. We have been invited to invest in First Church for 2021 in gentle and clear ways during these past four weeks of the annual stewardship campaign. So far, we have heard from 111 of the 276 households of faith who pledged in 2020. The pledges are coming in strong. 65 households have stepped up in their giving over 2019. 65 of your households of faith - or 59% of you - have increased your pledged investments. Thank you and thanks be to God!

We have \$444,563.96 pledged toward our \$1,000,000 goal. But we are waiting to hear from 165 giving units and we have only 15 days to go. So, that means 60% of us have yet to respond. Please step up and make a pledge. **Please go to the church website and make your pledge today.** I encourage you, if you are able, to step up in giving as well. To reach our goal will take generous people with a vision of proportional giving answering to the power of the plate.

Please join me and my family as we feel the power of the plate and pledge for 2021. The power of the plate calls each of us to share our love with generosity.

By the way - this is not only an invitation to members of First Church. If you are listening today, if you are a friend of First Church and you have journeyed with us virtually in 2020, we need your support, too. We will continue livestreaming services after the pandemic is over and we are back together again in our glorious Cathedral of Grace. You can come and join us here. You can stay

with us and grow in your faith with us. We would love for you to invest in First Church – the Beacon on Broad Street in the heart of Ohio’s Capital City with the City in our hearts. We will use your investments well. We promise to serve this city, this region and the world with abundant love.

There is a second message that I take away from Matthew 25:14-30. It is this: **We have a magnificent treasure right here.** We can’t bury it. It won’t flourish in the ground. We have to take a risk and step up and increase our investment in this magnificent treasure called First Church. We have to grow our treasure. We have to give like we mean it. Together, we can get through these times and be in our magnificent space – together again – in person.

Together, we become God’s plan in this world and through our investments in First Church we magnify and amplify God’s Message. We can only do this together and we only do it when the love we feel bubbles over into lives of generosity. I hope and pray to feel the power of the plate today.

Will you step up in 2021 and keep us moving forward in faith? I need you to do this. We need each other to do this.

May the power, poetry and prophecy of the judges Deborah and Ruth inspire you.

May the power of the Plate – which is Love in Generosity – strengthen you and guide you as you Give like you mean it.

And may the power of God guide your steps and your life now and always through Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

