

“Turned Around for Justice”

3rd Sunday of Eastertide

Acts 9:1-6; Revelation 5:11-14; John 21:1-19

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April 10, 2016

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, April 10, 2016, Easter 3, dedicated to Jane Werum on her 90 Birthday and to the memory of Wilbur Alan “Wib” Smith who passed to eternal life 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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In today’s reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we meet Saul of Tarsus. Saul was a religious leader who had a lot of hate in his heart. He especially hated Christians. He felt anyone who was a follower of the “false prophet” Jesus of Nazareth should be put to death. He led the stoning unto death of Stephen and he was determined to crush the movement of Jesus people – also known as “the Way.” So off Saul set to Damascus to head off the Christians and finish them once and for all. **God had another plan.**

As “Saul the Persecutor” and self-proclaimed prosecutor of Christians headed to Syria, the voice of Jesus coming out of a

bolt of light called to him asking why he was persecuting Christ. What happened next is well written in the words of Flannery O'Connor: "*I reckon the Lord knew the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse*" (F. O'Connor, The Habit of Being, ed. Sally Fitzgerald, NY, Vintage Books, 1979, p. 355).

From the dust on the Damascus Road, the temporarily blinded Saul rose to eventually become the greatest Evangelist our faith has ever known. He turned from darkness to light. "Saul the Persecutor" became "Paul the Proclaimer." The "enemy of all Christians" became the best "brother in Christ" the world has ever known. The Hater of Jesus became the Lover of Christ. Through the power of God at work in him, Saul completely turned around.

In John's Gospel, another turnaround tale happens at the seaside. The Risen Christ is there by the Sea of Galilee cooking fish on the beach. As Peter comes up beside him, they still have some reconciling to do. Remember, as Jesus was being tortured unto death in the Roman Pretorium, Peter was denying three times that he even knew "THAT man." There on the beach, Peter is saved by the Risen Christ during breakfast. Peter the Pebble becomes Peter the Rock. Faced with the challenge of Jesus to love, Peter comes back to life. He rises to become the leader that Jesus had always believed him to be. He not only

proclaims his faith in Jesus but demonstrates obedience and a heart to follow him. He turns completely around.

(The following paragraph, with the exception of the bolded words, was not delivered in the sermon on 4/10/16 – but I have left it in because I love what Dr. Gaventa has said about the kinds of conversions we read about in the New Testament)

Paul and Peter are both turnaround tales which are foundational tales in the early church. In her book From Darkness to Light, Beverly Roberts Gaventa shows how the New Testament tells conversion or “turnaround stories” everywhere in the texts. Dr. Gaventa writes that three kinds of turnaround tales are found in the New Testament. They are alterations, pendulum-like conversions or transformations of faith. An **alteration** tale is when someone shifts from one set of beliefs to another within the same faith tradition. We might experience this as a Roman Catholic who shifts to the United Church of Christ – for instance. A **Pendulum-like Conversion** is one in which a person rejects past convictions and affiliations and affirms a present and future – for example a “good” Protestant Christian shaves his or her head and joins the Krishna Consciousness Movement. Finally, there is the **Transformation conversion** in which a person experiences a new way of perception forces a radical interpretation of the past. The past is not so much rejected but reconstructed as part

of a new understanding of God and the world. In this, a Jew becomes a Christian embracing the Jewish roots of the faith while believing the long anticipated Messiah has indeed come in Jesus Christ (Gaventa, From Darkness to Light, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1986, p. 26). *Turnaround tales define us* no matter if they alterations, pendulum swings or transformations. *And we all love turnaround tales.*

But “turnaround tales” are not only about personal salvation. There are turnaround tales which are found in community and reflect social salvation as well. You can’t be a member of the church of Washington Gladden and not know that the “social gospel” – upon which we were founded – proclaimed that saving one soul is not only why Christianity is here. Jesus came to save and deliver the entire world and all people from poverty as well as pain.

For twenty years the BREAD Organization in Columbus Ohio has been creating and telling turnaround tales for justice. BREAD stands for Building Responsibility Equality And Dignity and has 54 Jewish, Christian and Muslim congregations doing the work of Justice. First Church has been a part of BREAD for 16 years. We joined BREAD through a unanimous congregational vote in January 2000. Through listening to one tales of what “Wakes them in the middle of the night,” then selecting an issue for research, doing the research for justice-action and taking action, BREAD has engaged many

issues of injustice, including issues of health care injustice (caring for those who have no health care at all - before Obama Care was initiated), transportation injustice (like getting people from places of high poverty to places where jobs are found through COTA and public transportation), education injustice (like low reading scores or high rates of truancy in the Columbus City Schools), lack of quality identification for **Hispanics who are often treated unjustly for “being Brown”** something the 20,000+ African-American BREAD members can identify with having been framed for hundreds of years for **the crime of “being Black” in America.** And now, we are working on creating better job opportunities for those in under-served neighborhoods in Columbus. All of us in BREAD want to be part of a new turnaround tale.

Through our research, BREAD has found that Columbus is a tale of two cities. There are privileged neighborhoods and constituencies that thrive here while other neighborhoods and people are considered throwaways. For example, Linden and the Hilltop have unemployment rates of over 15% and poverty rates over 40% compared to the overall unemployment rate of 4.5% for Central Ohio. Everyone knows these conditions **didn't suddenly appear this way.** These came about through decades of decisions that marginalized neighborhoods as they declined leaving residents with little opportunity or hope.

In our tale of two cities, a recent study by Toronto's Martin Prosperity Institute ranks Columbus as the second most economically segregated metro areas in the United States of America – right behind Seattle Washington. We have the second most segregated city in which pockets of extreme wealth and extreme poverty can be found. Poverty is high in our city even among those who are employed – a condition in which too many people are working too many jobs just to scrape by. This is especially true for people with any kind of criminal background who struggle to find employers who will hire them. 31,000 people returning from jail in Franklin County each year struggle to find any employers who will hire them.

During the research on jobs, one of our community's leaders said of Linden and the Hilltop, "these neighborhoods are too far gone" to save. He said, "these places are so bad and people are so hopeless that it would take more resources than we have the willpower to invest to turnaround these places." They are "too far gone?" When I heard these words, I was angry. How about you?

Who decides when someone is "too far gone" to save?
Who decides when a community is "too far gone to save?"
Since when did God make someone else God? Since when did the label "too far gone" get stamped on our city and the neighborhoods and the people in our city?

What if the Risen Christ had walked away from the Persecuting Saul and proclaimed he was “too far gone” to save? What if the Risen Christ had said of the Denying Peter that he was “too far gone” to save? For that matter, what if the Risen Christ had said about you or me, “He is too far gone to save” or “She is too far gone to save”? We wouldn’t be here if that label was attached to us! We wouldn’t have a faith or a church if that label had been slapped on Peter and Paul. And not one of us would have gotten out of bed this morning if we had been deemed “too far gone” to save.

I don’t know about you, but I believe God is in the turnaround tale business.

I believe God takes the ones who others treat and talk about as trash and transforms them into something beautiful and good and precious. That is what I believe. I also believe God takes neighborhoods which some leaders proclaim as “too far gone” and transforms them into something beautiful and good and precious. What do you believe?

I believe it takes the Will of God and the Will of God’s people to make a turnaround tale. And if we want a witness to urban turnaround tale, we don’t have to look too far. Just head up 71 North to Cleveland’s East side.

Something miraculous is happening in Cleveland. The **Democracy Collaborative**, in partnership with the **Cleveland Foundation**, the **Ohio Employee Ownership Center**, the

City of Cleveland , and the city's major hospitals and universities—is helping to implement a new model of large-scale worker-owned and community-benefiting businesses. The **Evergreen Cooperative Initiative** is beginning to build serious momentum in one of the city's most dramatically impacted by the nation's decaying economy.

With the Cleveland Clinic, Cleveland State University and Case Western University serving as Anchor Institutions, worker-owned businesses have risen from the decay and dust of **Cleveland's east side**. Solar-power is being harnessed. Worker-owned cleaning businesses have risen in which the laundry of the Clinic is all being washed, dried and returned for use through neighborhood businesses – owned and operated by neighborhood people. Hundreds of good paying jobs have **been established because Cleveland's** Business Community, the Cleveland Foundation, the City of Cleveland and people power have come together to forge a different solution to the problem of urban flight, blight and fright.

In BREAD, a growing number of us believe that we can create a model just like this in Linden, the Hilltop, Franklinton, the South Side and more. It takes the Will of God and the Will of People working together to create 21st Century turnaround tales. Would you like to join me in this effort? Would you like to be among the thousands who proclaim “our people and our neighborhoods are **NOT** too far gone to save.”

We believe in transformation. We believe in social salvation – not just saving a soul. We believe in justice turnaround tales. We believe in new tale – a tale of ONE city – ONE Columbus – not a tale of two cities.

If you would like to join me and be a part of the 164+ First Church members and the thousands of BREAD members as we all come together Monday night, May 9 to the Celeste Center, at the Ohio State Fairgrounds. It will be a great night for justice and yet another turnaround tale will be written, told and acted upon. We will change the script through the power of God and the power of God's people.

If God can save Paul and Peter, God can save you and me. If the Kingdom of God can come for one – it can come for all! I believe in turnaround tales. How about you? Join me one month from now. **Let's all show up.** How about everyone in this room today making a promise to come to the Celeste Center on May 9? We can do this! Together!

You might have to give up something for 120 minutes of your life – but what you will get back in return will be hope and belief in people. After all, God made us beautiful and special and created us for nothing less than transformation and turnaround. **Let's write the next turnaround tale right here in Columbus, Ohio! Let's be about God's business on Monday May 9. Alleluia! Amen.**

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