

“You Must Love One Another”

5th Sunday of Eastertide

Acts 11:1-18; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

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From the Pulpit

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A baptismal meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 5, April 24, 2016, dedicated to the memory of the eight victims of murder in Pike County, Ohio and to Rezvaneh Hsghiti Chavah Ghazvini on her baptismal day and always to the glory of God!

“You Must Love One Another”

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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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Today we are blessed to welcome Rezi Chavah Ghazvini into Christian faith. I pray that you have the opportunity to listen to her story and walk with her as she enters into our story. Conversion into Christian faith from Islamic faith is significant beyond belief. It is not a simple thing to walk away from the faith of Mohammed and into the faith of Jesus. In fact, it is never simple to cross the lines which faith traditions draw and to be transformed in your walk of faith.

When Rezi and I talked about her conversion, our conversation opened with a one-word question – ***“Why?”*** – which led to a series of Why questions. *“Why become a Christian?” “Why would you like to be baptized?” “Why now?” “Why here?”*

What followed from Rezi’s lips and heart was a statement of faith and a lifelong story of walking with God and seeking God’s presence in faith and community which was deeply moving to say the least. She shared her story which took me back to early childhood, through the 1979 revolution in Iran when she was eight years old (which changed life as she knew it before), to growing up in a literate and creative family, to her escape from Iran with Shari first to France and then to the United States of America, where she connected with Mary Jo and Lynn, to her search for faith that took her through all the world’s religions and brought her to Christianity and this faith community for the first time on Christmas Eve. Her story was deep and rich and full of unexpected twists and turns. Think of Life of Pi when you consider Rezi’s life journey.

I was moved to tears. While listening to Rezi, **I was converted** as Rezi reintroduced me to the beauty, love, truth, grace and fullness of Jesus the Christ. I was blown away. Thank you Rezi. I am indebted to you.

In Acts 11, Peter is the first “blown away” Christian. We pick up Peter’s story in the city of Caesarea close to 2,000 years

ago. There in the beautiful port city along the clear blue waters of the Mediterranean Sea, Peter meets Cornelius and his family. Called to the city through a series of dreams and visions, Peter (the Jew become Christian) was a stranger in a strange place. Stepping out on faith, he baptized the Gentile Italian Centurion Cornelius, all his family and everyone in his household. In the process of following all his dreams and visions to the home of Cornelius, and after meeting Cornelius face-to-face, Peter is changed. Peter is converted. He is reintroduced to Jesus Christ. Peter is blown away.

Now Peter is challenged with returning to Jerusalem and **explaining Cornelius' cross-cultural religious conversion** experience and mass baptism of his household to those in the early church who took pride in homogeneity. It's hard. In Peter's case, his explanation leaves the Jerusalem homeboys silent. During their silent reflection, they finally come around to see the goodness and love of Peter's actions. They praise God and recognize that God has given even the Gentiles repentance that leads to life. They – like Peter – are converted, too.

In the midst of his conversion, what actually happens to Peter is that he falls in love again. He enters Cornelius' world, and stands in awe. He sees Cornelius, not as a Gentile, nor as a stranger, but as a brother. Peter sees this Roman soldier (the enemy by most accounts) as one who is especially gifted in new

and different ways, but truly a brother – and then following his baptism into Christ, he sees that the two of them are one in Christ. Peter is transformed and converted to Christ all over again. He falls back in love with his Savior.

Essentially, Peter lives what Jesus commands all of us to do in John 13:31-35. In what is known as the “farewell” section of John's Gospel, Jesus commands his disciples to: *“Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another.”* *By this,* (Jesus continues) *everyone will know that you are my disciples. If you have love for one another”* (John 13:34-35).

I believe the whole problem of our time is a problem contained in the partial sentence concluding with this passage, *“If you have love for one another.”* Love is the verb and noun in this incomplete – yet perfect – sentence. Love is all in all. Yet, when we encounter love we find love problematic. We do not know how to love one another.

How are we going to recover the ability to love ourselves and to love one another? Thomas Merton, writing in **The Living Bread**, puts it this way:

The reason why we hate one another or fear one another is that we secretly, or openly, hate and fear our own selves. And we hate ourselves because the depths of our being are a chaos of frustration and spiritual misery. Lonely and helpless, we cannot be at peace with others because we are not at peace with

ourselves, and we cannot be at peace with ourselves because we are not at peace with God. (Quoted in Through the Year with Thomas Merton, page 67).

Somewhere between our birth, our baptism and our life together, we have allowed fear and hate to create chaos, frustration and spiritual misery. Somewhere between the Rising of Christ on the first Easter morning and now, our faith has lost its way, too. **We have walked away from God's unconditional love and embraced the things that are not "of God."**

I cannot command you – only Jesus can do that – but I implore you to fall in love all over again. Do the little acts of love that add up over time. Offer someone a smile, sit a while with them and listen to their story rather than speak of your story, offer a hand, a hug, a short note, book to be read at a bedside or at bedtime, bring someone a pair of shoes, a glass of water. In the spirit of the Saint Teresa known in the Catholic Church as The Little Flower, do ordinary things with extraordinary love. Remember, in so doing, that we can do no great things – only small things with great love.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta, India lived this kind of love every day. She told the story in Life in the Spirit of a young man her sisters found on the streets of London laying in the street. They said to him, "You should not be here. You should be home with your parents." He said, "When I go home, my

mother does not want me because I have long hair. Every time I go to her door she pushes me out.” By the time they came back to him, he had taken an overdose and they rushed him to the hospital. But they had returned to side too late. Mother Teresa says, **“We who had love found this man who had been cast out by lovelessness. He died alone. That need not have happened.”**

It is much easier to love people far away. It is much harder to love those close to us. It is easier to send a cup of rice and relieve hunger across the globe with a generous offering than it is to relieve the loneliness and pain of someone unloved in our own home.

This week, I ask you to begin your week of loving in your own home, for this is where our love for each other must start. Love the ones you are with.

Then, when we have reached out at home or close to home, I ask each of you to extend your love further. In 15 days, I ask you to join thousands of your sisters and brothers across all faiths and come to the Celeste Center at the Ohio State Fair Grounds on Monday night, May 9. You, too, will experience a conversion of heart if you come and open yourself to the love of God that is shared between brothers and sisters from all over the city, from all over the world, and from many different faith traditions. It is powerful to be with such a broad mix of people in our own city doing justice – all together.

Don't sit at home Monday night May 9. Come with me to the Nehemiah Action. For free – you get to witness and share in God's love and justice in action.

Like Peter, I invite you to see genuine love that God is **showing you in the Cornelius' of our world** – who truly reach out in love to receive love and justice. You may have to step way outside your comfort zone. Being converted usually takes us outside our comfort zone. (Isn't that right Rezi?) **But, in doing this, you will find that you have responded to Jesus' call and command to "love one another."** You will be turned around, too. **You may even be "blown away."**

Each of us is commanded by Jesus Christ to love one another – and to stretch our arms of love wider every day. That is what we are called to do. That is what Rezi did today. You can do it too. Start this week. Open your eyes, as Peter did, **and love "the other" who is right in front of you.** From me this is a request. Remember, this is only commandment that Jesus ever gave. He commanded his disciples (including you and me) – **"You must love one another."** So be it.

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