“By What Power Do We Do This?”
Acts 4:5-12; John 10:11-18

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From the Pulpit
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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 3, April 26, 2015, dedicated to my brother Paul Conrad Ahrens on his 60th Birthday and always to the glory of God!

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If we are to understand the Acts of the Apostles 4:5-12, we need context before the content of this sermon. Here are some brief notes on the first three chapters of Acts....
Following the Risen Christ’s ascension in glory (chapter 1), the birth of the church in Jerusalem at Pentecost with 3,000 receiving the Holy Spirit and Peter’s proclamation of resurrection faith that day (chapter 2), the explosively joyful movement called Christianity moves boldly out into Jerusalem’s public square – known as the Temple Mount!

In Chapter 3, Peter and John confront the national religious life and its leaders by first praying in the Temple as “Christians” and then healing a man born lame from birth IN THE TEMPLE. As the lame man begs for crumbs, Peter offers him legs to walk upon and hope born in the Risen Christ’s power to heal. But with this healing, Peter and John
cross the line of temple protocol. It is not sanctioned to heal in the temple of Jerusalem.

Imagine – healing in the temple! That’s like healing in the church?! Right? For the crime of healing and proclaiming Christ in the portico of the temple, the two are arrested. Here in Chapter 4, we pick-up the story at the trial of Peter and John….The question they must answer is, “By What power do you do this?”

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.

What Jim Obergefell (Oh-ber-guh-fell) and John Arthur did on July 11, 2013 was illegal in the state of Ohio. With Paulette Roberts officiating, in a plane on the tarmac at Baltimore/Washington International Airport in Glen Burnie, Md., Jim and John were married. John died three months later of ALS in their Cincinnati home of over 20 years. But his death came after the couple’s lawsuit against the State of Ohio challenging our 2004 same-sex marriage ban.

On Tuesday, in the case called Obergefell vs Hodges, The United States Supreme Court will listen to both sides
presenting their cases concerning the legality of Same Sex Marriage in Ohio and other states named in this case coming from our own 6th District Court of Appeals located in Cincinnati. If Jim wins the right to receive death benefits as the husband of John and if the court overturns our Ohio law – perhaps bringing to an end all “Defense of Marriage” (DOMA) laws everywhere – Ohio will become the 38th state to allow same sex marriage. There have been 26 by judicial decision, 8 by state legislature and 3 by popular vote (way to go Maine, Maryland and Washington!). With this decision all the most likely this time – all states and Washington DC will become places where LGBT people will be allowed to be married. (How many of you who are Gay or Lesbian are married? How many of you have a family member who is married? How about a friend or coworker?).

When I heard the news after the November 3, 2004 election that our state would not allow same-sex marriage by a 60-40% margin I was devastated. I can’t even imagine how many of you felt that night. It was as though we choking the breath out of members, friends, and neighbors. It was one of the few nights I was ashamed to be an Ohioan.

Now, along with Brown and Roe, Obergefell is about to become a household name. This soft-spoken real estate broker from Cincinnati, Ohio will most likely become one of the most famous names in American judicial history.
Let’s practice saying it, “Obergefell”). We want to be ahead of the pronunciation curve come June when the ruling most likely will be announced.

With the support of my congregations at North Church and here at First Church, I have been officiating at same sex marriages for 23 years. When I arrived here in January 2000, this church was already on the forefront of same-sex marriage – a tradition I inherited from my predecessor, Bob Tschannen-Moran.

I believe that Mark 10:9 applies to gay marriage – “What God has joined together, let no one tear asunder.” But, what I believe and what the laws of Ohio state are divided. The 21 same sex marriages over which I have presided have been with dreamers, lovers, and passionate women and men who have believed that our God has blessed their love and sanctioned their love in marriage. It is as simple as that – and as complicated. They believe, as I believe, that should two people love one another, they should not be consigned to a life of separateness and loneliness if they feel called to unity and joy.

It is possible, the Secretary of State in Ohio could have revoked my rights to marry or the Attorney General could have, at any point, charged me with breaking the law and overstepping my state-sanctioned right to perform weddings in Ohio. But, no charges ever came. No one called and the
30 year old certificate signed by then Secretary of State Sherrod Brown still sits in its $5 frame on my window sill in the office upstairs. The collective AG’s through my 23 years of breaking the law could have called into question what we were doing by asking, “Who put you in charge here? What business do you have doing this?” (Translation of Acts 4:7, The Message). But, they didn’t even call.

In Acts, we see it is the nature of established leadership to protect its own self-interests. In the story of the early church found in Luke’s Acts of the Apostles, we see this truth demonstrated in the temple of Jerusalem. The Jesus movement has exploded with the conversion of 3,000 people on Pentecost joining the way of Jesus. Now, before the seat of religious establishment, 5,000 people repent of their sins. In the eyes of the religious leaders, called “the high priestly family,” this “Jesus disturbance” is in danger of becoming a mass movement.

In writing Acts, the author Luke paints this Courtroom scene beautifully and with dramatic tones. On one side, “the rulers, elders and scribes are assembled and led by Annas (the high priest - like the pope), Caiaphas, John and Alexander.” These are the same rulers from whom Peter hid while Jesus was on trial and headed for execution two months before. They are the brightest theologians and politicos of their generation. On the other side, are Peter
and John, who are described as “uneducated common
men.” All they have is the power of God, now known to
them in Jesus Christ in their corner.

The rulers’ question is one rulers usually ask to
common men whom they perceive to be “disturbers of the
peace” “Who put you in charge here? What business do you
have doing this?” (The Message, p. 1978).

Those in power assume that they have all the authority
and all the power to run the show! They call the shots. They
manage the masses. They move the money. They are large
and they are in-charge. That is how they perceive
themselves. Those in power look at the likes of Peter and
John (and Jim Obergefell and John Arthur) with disdain
and think, “They are nothing compared to us.”

Peter and John are standing before the religious rulers
having been charged with disturbing the establishment.
They are treated like common criminals. The issue for the
religious leaders is that Peter and John have healed by power
and authority beyond the power and authority of the temple
leaders. In the eyes of the power brokers - these fools (for
Christ) claim Jesus as their power-source. They have
brought him back from the dead. Their real crime is
administering a “Divine Health Care Plan,” in the name of
Jesus. Let us call it “Jesus Care” (but let us say it with
disdain so that people think it is a bad thing to heal people
who have no previous health care coverage or hope). The rulers and leaders have already rejected and crucified the foundation of this movement. Now they have a REAL problem on their hands. They have been upstaged and backed into a corner by two uneducated men. It is the role of the establishment to APPEAR to be in charge. That is their job. Now, Peter and John, through the power of God's Holy Spirit, have clearly demonstrated that Jesus heals and that Jesus is a message of hope. In other words, Jesus LIVES!

These rulers do what rulers do in situations like this. They tell the men to be quiet. They tell them to say nothing to anyone about what has happened. They seek to suppress information by denying, deflecting, and delaying the truth. It is a tactic used by those in power when trying to silence common folks like Peter and John. However, trying to silence and hold back spirit-filled people is like trying to stop a breaking wave from hitting the beach. It cannot be done.

After thinking over what the rulers have charged them to do, Peter and John proclaim that they will not be silent. They cannot be silent. To be silent is to deny God’s truth and they cannot and will not deny God. That is what people of faith are famous for - speaking the truth - with love and justice.
We have all seen these kinds of proceedings before. In fact, John and Peter were not the only ones in the Bible to “think over” and then speak out and act out for what needed to be done. In Nehemiah 5:77ff, the prophet and city planner responded to the sights and sounds of abuse he witnessed against his people and took time to think over what he would do. He called a GREAT ASSEMBLY to address the issues of his day.

When those in power and authority deny, deflect and delay the truth from coming out, people of faith speak out anyway. In our over advertised and marketed culture, we are even more prone to this form of information control. Nevertheless, we have our Peters, Johns and Nehemiahs standing up for what is right and we should stand with them.

Here at First Congregational Church, we ALL belong to two movements as members of First Church. We all belong to the Jesus Movement that Peter and John (and the Holy Spirit!) started 2000 years ago. We also belong to a movement called BREAD - which stands for Building Responsibility Equality AND Dignity. When First Congregational United Church of Christ of Columbus, Ohio, joined BREAD through a unanimous congregational vote January 24, 2000, we began a journey that would take us through many twists and turns - together.
In just eight days, every one of us as members of First Church and BREAD are being called to a great assembly (to use the words of the prophet and city-builder Nehemiah). At our great assembly, we will look at some critical issues for our times. We will look at violent crime on the streets of our city and mental health care needs for our county’s most vulnerable citizens. “Welcome Columbus” which seeks to open our arms in a meaningful way to our sisters and brothers who are new Americans.

On our new issue – Violent Crime – through research we have found a way to address this issue which has worked in Boston, Cincinnati and other places – in most locations cutting violent crime in half! I believe it will work here. This is needed for the health and well-being of our city right now.

By whose power do we do these things? By the power of God working in our lives and in the life of our community!

To make a difference, we need to turn out many people on Monday night, May 4, 6:30pm at the Celeste Center at the state fairgrounds, 717 East 17th Ave., Columbus. I would like to see everyone in this room present - plus your friends, family and neighbors. There is child care for children under 4 as well.
The Nehemiah Action is an amazing gathering of over 3,500 people from all sections of our county, all races, Spanish and English speaking, all parts of Christianity, Jews and Muslims. If you have never been to a Nehemiah Action, you want to go. It will blow your mind! It will open your heart and spirit. It will educate and activate you. BREAD is us and we are BREAD. In this action packed and action oriented meeting, which is spirit-led and spirit-fed you will be blown away by hope! I dream of seeing each and every one of us there working for justice.

The Good Shepherd, the one in whose name and by whose power we are doing these things calls us to not be silent. Like Peter and John before us; like Jim and the late-John Arthur before us and like our sisters and brothers in BREAD in this present moment, we are called to do justice, love tenderly, and walk humbly with our God. Let us step out and do it. Alleluia! Amen.

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