

“Branching Out in Love”

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Acts 8:26-40, John 15:1-8

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens
Senior Minister

April 29, 2018

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, April 29, 2018, dedicated to St. Catherine of Siena on her Saint's Day, to Don Streibig as he passed to eternal life on Thursday, to Anne Hudson, Barb Clapham, and Bev Cook as they recover from major surgery this week, to Rev. Abby Prendergast who was ordained into Christian ministry on Saturday, April 28, 2018 and always to the glory of God!

“Branching Out in Love”

Acts 8:26-40, John 15:1-8

+++++

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.

+++++

As you know, we follow readings from the Gospel of Mark in this year of reading I the church. One of the blessings of Mark is his brevity. He weaves his story of Jesus in thousands of fewer words and verses than either Luke or Matthew. Because Mark is so short, we call upon the Gospel of John to fill out the story lines of Mark. Mark's pithiness allows John's poetry

and power to enter centerstage in this cycle of Gospel texts. Of the 52 Sundays in which Mark is the Primary Gospel for this lectionary cycle. John is our supplementary Gospel story in 21 of these weeks. In other words, Mark makes up 60% of our readings this year while John occupies 40%.

This is important because we are blessed by two different kinds of Gospel stories in one year. While Mark reads like the “Cliff Notes” of Good News, John comes to us like the William Shakespeare of “Jesus’ love” prevailing. And, John is the master of Metaphor.

In John, Jesus speaks in the first person and proclaims: “I am the Good Shepherd” Although he was never “a shepherd;” “I am the Bread of Life” though not Bread... you get this...) and “I am the Light of the World.” In John, Jesus is “the Word” whose presence arrives in the Beginning of Time. He is “the Way, the Truth, the Life.” Finally, Jesus is “the Vine and we are the branches.”

Shepherd. Bread. Light. Word. Way. Truth. Life. Vine.

These words touch us and take hold of our imagination in ways that expand and captivate us. Poetically woven and entwined in the Gospel, these metaphors are powerful reminders of Jesus’ ability to touch our souls and enlighten the essence of our Being.

More powerful than all these imaginative visions of Jesus alive in our midst are the 57 times Jesus speaks of “Love” in John. Nowhere in the Bible is Love spoken more often and more powerfully than in the writings of John.

Love is at heart of what it means to follow Jesus. Love is the measure of faithfulness. Love is a command, though it never feels legalistic. Rather, "Love" feels like a state of being, so when love is coupled with the word "abide," it almost jumps off the page in these readings from John. Fred Craddock understandably calls it "the central verb" in the passage and emphasizes its importance in the entire Gospel of John (*Preaching through the Christian Year B*).

We are called *not only to Love one another*, but we are called to “Abide” in this Love. Eugene Peterson renders "abide" in verse 4 a little differently, but with the same meaning, as Jesus teaches his followers, *"Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you"* (*The Message*).

Just as we need the air to breathe and we need food and nourishment to live. We also need shelter and community; **we need a home.** The early Christians, who had in a very real sense lost their spiritual homes and perhaps, along with them, their family ties and their physical homes, were undoubtedly

comforted by this thought (drawn from Kate Huey's message in the UCC Weekly Seeds, April 29, 2018).

"Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you."

"Living in Jesus," or making our "home" in Jesus, is given breath and true meaning when we consider him as the Vine and ourselves as the Branches. With Jesus as the Vine and the Christian community as the branches of the Vine, we come to know how intimately we are bound together with our Savior. The branches find their roots in the vine. But, the branches are also in close relationship with the Vine.

You know how grapevines look. The branches come from the source and they are entwined with the source of their energy and strength. Looking closely, we see the many entwined branches, winding their way around one another in intricate patterns of tight curls that make it impossible to tell where one branch starts or another one ends. **Is it intimate as well as intricate.** The vine shares with its branches the nutrients that sustain it, the life force of the whole plant. The vine is *one* with the branches.

To make our home in Jesus is to be completely entwined in his love. In our home in Jesus, we find comfort. We find peace wrapped together with him in love. We find ourselves at one with him. But what happens to us if "finding home" is not a

joyful experience but rather an anxious one or one of crisis, not love. To abide in Jesus' love at that point can be far from one's imagination...

A few weeks ago, I was deeply moved by the story of Latrice Rutland who is seeking desperately to find a home for her family. She has found her home in Christ at New Baptist Church of Christ, but she is struggling to find a home for her children. Latrice spoke to us at the BREAD Rally at Congregation Tifereth Israel. Please listen to Latrice's story....

My name Is Latrice Rutland. I am 31 years old and a mother of three children below the age of 10. In 2015 I was released from the Ohio Reformatory for Women with no probation and no parole. I am proud to say I am on the right path. I refuse to follow the high trend of people who become repeat offenders no matter how hard life gets. Having a felony is a huge barrier I face every day and being a single mother does not leave space for complaints and slacking.

Since I have been home it has been constant hard work. I have held typically two

minimum wage jobs just to make ends meet. My rent usually takes up 60% of my income. Working 2 full time jobs stops me from being able to spend valuable time with my children. I often miss

PTA meetings and Sunday Service. I rarely have time for normal activities like park trips and ice cream dates with my daughter.

In 2015, I turned to the Van Buren Family Shelter with my daughter because I continued to receive denial letters for housing. I applied and was denied over 40 times to different housing complexes because of my record. Each time I had to pay between \$25 and \$40 fee with no refund. I had to quit my late shift job because of shelter curfew, which left me with only \$600 a month income. Just before finding an apartment the shelter served me an eviction notice because the space was needed for other families. That same week I was blessed with a two-bedroom apartment off Parsons Avenue for \$475 a month. Unfortunately, that rent is about to increase to \$725 which I cannot afford.

Because of my struggle with stable affordable housing I have not been able to provide sufficiently for my family which creates an environment of stress and anxiety. My daughter often asks me "will we have to go back to that place" (meaning the family shelter) when she hears or sees me stressing over every day financial obligations. I do not have evictions or outstanding housing debt. I am not a menace to society. I am a hard-working single mother. I do not wish to complain or make excuse for my past decisions. I have accepted responsibility for my actions. I served my time and now I just want a second chance to be a regular person and a good

mom. I do not want my past to determine my or my children's future. Thank you for listening to my story.

As I have co-chaired the BREAD Research team on “youth and families” the past six months, we have discovered that Latrice Rutland is not alone. We have learned that there are 54,000 low-income families in Franklin County who are spending more than half of their paychecks on housing. These are renters and homeowners. This is unacceptable. Many of these families are working more than one job and struggling to make ends meet. We all probably know at least one family in this situation.

We know that a worker in Franklin County would need to earn \$15.98 per hour in order to afford a two-bedroom apartment. We met with over 30 agencies working to meet the needs of youth and families - from substance abuse to homelessness, from mental healthcare to foster care. They told us families need housing first!

We also know that children who experience homelessness, repeated eviction and unsafe housing grow up with high levels of fear and anxiety, struggle in school and are less likely to be successful as adults.

We know that the city of Columbus will allocate another \$5 million towards housing in 2018. The Affordable Housing

Alliance calculates that \$141 million is needed to help 3,000 families afford their current housing, preserve and improve the current affordable housing stock, and build new units. This is a \$136,000,000 gap – and that still won't address the depth of this crisis.

In a meeting with Mayor Ginther on Thursday, in which I was the BREAD spokesperson, the Mayor admitted that we have a major crisis with affordable housing. I challenged him to step up and become the Champion of addressing this crisis. He didn't say "yes I can." He didn't say, "no." What he did do is invite BREAD to be at the table in our community create a strategy for solving this crisis which will take years to turn around. I said we would be there! BREAD is "At the Table" for solving the Crisis of Affordable Housing in Franklin County. Along with the Housing Trust Fund, Government Sources, landlords, builders and other private sources, we will be at the table. We are not going to leave the table until Latrice and her three children – along with 53,999 other families in our county have a place to call home – a safe place, an affordable place, a place we each would want to live in. We are in this for the long haul!

You and I – together we are BREAD. We are entwined with sisters and brothers of 40 different congregations across Central Ohio. We are all branches of a Living, Loving God.

Love is an action word. Our Risen Lord is calling us to get up and move. Jesus ends Chapter 14 in John with these words: *“Get Up! Let us be on our Way!” (John 14:21b)*. In the words of Ursula K. Le Guin in *The Lathe of Heaven*, *“Love doesn't just sit there, like a stone, it has to be made, like bread; remade all the time, made new.”* Love moves mountains!

So, what are we waiting for?

We are a strong and powerful presence when we get up and go. We are the Branches to Jesus' Vine when we are wrapped together in love and when we show up. Our great opportunity to be the branches of Jesus' love is right around the corner – 8 days from now. Let us ALL show up at the 2018 Nehemiah Action on May 7. We get rolling at 6:45 p.m. There we will stand up for a solution to help our region's youth and families to attain afford housing. First Church's goal is to have 200 people from our congregation together in one place for 90 minutes of action. Bring your children, grandchildren, friends, family, co-workers, and neighbors. If you have any Facebook friends, bring them, too. Let's see their faces at the Nehemiah Action!

Will you be there?

Will you stand for justice together? Will you love your neighbor – like Latrice Rutland and her children – who are struggling to find home in this day, this age, this community? Let us be the branches of love entwined completely with The Vine. Let us be bound together with Latrice and all who suffer from too little love and poor and inadequate housing. Let us stand together May 7 as BREAD.

Will you be there?

Copyright 2018, First Congregational Church, UCC