

*“Loving and Welcoming
ALL Ages and Races”
(Part II of V in sermon series,
“Extravagant Love and Welcome:
Uniting All in One Community”)*

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 13

*II Timothy 1:3-7; I Kings 19:9-18; Romans 10:5-15;
Matthew 14:22-33*

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Proper 14, August 13, 2017, dedicated to the memory of Rev. Tom Higgins, pastor of the United Church of Christ, to David Kellermeyer in his battle with cancer, to Marsha Keith on her 60th Birthday, to all our FCCUCC 90+ year-old members and our Millennials, to the 33 injured and the three dead in Charlottesville, VA. in the aftermath of the violence there on Saturday, August 12th, to all who work daily to overcome racism in our times & always to the glory of God!

“Loving and Welcoming ALL Ages and Races”

*II Timothy 1:1-7; I Kings 19:9-18; Romans 10:5-15;
Matthew 14:22-33*

(Part II of V in sermon series, “Extravagant Love and Welcome: Uniting All in One Community”)

Today, we come to the second sermon in the series, “Extravagant Love and Welcome: Uniting All in One Community” I will focus on Age and Race.

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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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AGE:

Our congregation has changed in so many ways since September 8, 2002 – the day we voted to become an Open and Affirming (ONA) church. Allow me to share a few numbers. Since, 2002, we have added 628 new adult members, 233 births for a total of 861 new people in our fellowship (virtually doubling our membership). We have also had 167 deaths and 232 baptisms. In a timeframe when five of the 11 downtown churches closed, and a few others have struggled to keep growing forward, we have doubled in size and become at least 12 years younger on average. We have grown...younger.

Right now, we have 48 children three years and younger in our fellowship. We also have 365 Millennials – those born between 1983 and 2003 (they make up 1/3 of our members... more on this coming up). By the end of this month, we will

have baptized 21 new babies, infants, youth and adults into Christian faith this year – running ahead of our 31 baptisms 12 years ago – our greatest year of baptisms since the baby boom generation in the 1950s (we baptized 8 adults that year).

While babies are being born and rising up among us at a fast pace, we also currently have 11 members who are age 90+. Plus, we have two more – Ed Koetz and Nell Cole – who will join the ranks in the next few months, making thirteen 90-year-olds! Twink Starr is our oldest member at 95 years young. We also have 52 members over the age of 80 in our fellowship. Our older adults in this congregation are shining lights and examples of what Mary Catherine Bateson has written about in her book, “Composing a Further Life: The Age of Active Wisdom.” They show us all how to live fully with what Bateson calls, “*an improvisational art form calling for imagination and willingness to learn.*” These spiritual “youngsters” compose their lives in new patterns – and thus inspire us all. Truly amazing!

As you see, at First Church, we are young and old and everything in-between. We welcome ALL ages and celebrate all people. What a blessing.

As some of you may know, I completed my doctorate two years ago and focused the study of Millennials (now those

between 14-34, born between 1983-2003). The study also addressed the student debt crisis which hangs as a ball and chain on this generation. **We are blessed with 363 Millennials in our congregation 33% of our adult members.** Our 33% of Millennial members compares to 17% in most Mainline Protestant Churches across the country. Furthermore, First Church has a larger Millennial presence than Muslims (29%) and Mormons (24%) for the percentage of our church that is 14-34 years old.¹ I have been told, we have more Millennials than any UCC church in Ohio. The First Congregational Church, UCC Millennials are racially, ethnically and economically diverse. They are 88% white; 8% African-American and 4% other races and ethnicities. Between the ages of 15-24, 98% are in public schools or college. The older Millennials are employed, under-employed or unemployed at undetermined rates.

As a generation, Millennials are complex. In some ways, they are elusive, beautiful, gentle and just. In other ways, they are self-concerned and pre-occupied. Unlike the Pew Study which says they are “detached from institutions,” our Millennials are “in the house...periodically.” Of our Millennials, about 35%

1. [D'Vera Cohn](http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2010/12/20/baby-boomers-approach-65-glumly/) and [Paul Taylor](http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2010/12/20/baby-boomers-approach-65-glumly/), “Baby Boomers Approach 65 – Glumly,” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (December 20, 2011), (<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2010/12/20/baby-boomers-approach-65-glumly/>).

attend church “regularly,” which means one and maybe two Sundays each month. The other 65% attend even more sporadically. But they are networked in relational ways. Through Facebook and social media, they find each other and communicate frequently.

The Millennials are defined as anyone born from 1983-2003 by William Strauss and Neil Howe in *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*. This means a generation which is now coming of age between 14-34 years old. This generation is the largest generation since the Baby Boomers (1946-1964 births). It is also a generation now fully coming into their own in church and society. In *Millennials Rising* Howe and Strauss address this new generation of leaders calling this a generation where “*hope abounds...and the future holds great possibilities.*”² Continuing on, they say, “*With Millennials rising, America needs to start thinking bigger. Test them. Challenge them. Put difficult tasks before them and have faith that they can do themselves, and their nation, proud. Lead them. Love them.*”³

Who are these Millennials? In March 2014, the Pew Research Center issued a report entitled, “*Millennials in Adulthood.*” The report’s subtitle says it all, “*Detached from Institutions, Networked with Friends.*” This is the most racially diverse

² Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, (New York, N.Y., Vintage Books, 2000), 367.

³ Ibid.

generation in American history with 43% of Millennials as non-whites. The report tells of a generation entering adulthood with less trust than their generational predecessors. Only 19% of Millennials say most people can be trusted. This compares with 31% of Gen Xers; 37% of Silents, and 40% of Baby Boomers. Interestingly, researchers point to the racial diversity of the Millennials as influencing their low levels of social trust. This coming from previous studies in 2007 that found minorities and low-income adults have lower levels of social trust than other groups.⁴ Racial diversity and social trust are not the only measures of this generation. The report says Millennials are somewhat more upbeat than older adults about America's future. 49% of Millennials saying the country's best years are ahead though they're the first in the modern era to have higher levels of student loan debt and unemployment. The report opens:

The Millennial Generation is forging a distinctive path into adulthood.... They are relatively unattached to organized politics and religion, linked by social media, burdened by debt, distrustful of people, in no rush to marry— and optimistic about the future. They are also America's most racially diverse generation. In all of these dimensions, they are different from today's older generations.

⁴ Paul Taylor, "Millennials in Adulthood: Detached from Institutions, Networked with Friends," *Pew Research Center*, Washington, D.C., (March, 2014), http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2014/03/2014-03-07_generations-report-version-for-web.pdf).

*And in many, they are also different from older adults back when they were the age Millennials are now.*⁵

In August, 2014, the Pew Research Center released another important finding entitled, *“Nones on the Rise.”* In this report Pew Researchers revealed that Millennials are much less likely to practice organized religion than older generations, and are more likely to be skeptical of religious institutions. While the majority of American Millennials are religious, one in three is “not religious,” continuing a trend towards “irreligion” that has been increasing since the 1940s 29% of Americans born between 1983 and 1994 are “irreligious,” as opposed to 21% born between 1963 and 1982, 15% born between 1948 and 1962 and only 7% born before 1948. *“Irreligion”* is best described as *“the absence of religion, an indifference towards religion, a rejection of religion, or hostility towards religion.”*⁶

In *Millennials Rising*, Howe and Strauss point to a generation comfortable in their own skin when it comes to God and God-talk.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ _____, “Nones on the Rise,” *Pew Research Center, Religion and Public Life*, Washington D.C., (October 9, 2012), www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/.

*Millennials are growing up a spiritually driven era, when newsweeklies announce God is back, politicians chatter incessantly about faith, and when adults help kids seek faith-based answers to secular questions...At church, today's teens can get bored and turned off when modern services get too casual, too MTV-style. They're pulled in a new direction. Anything that seems very old-fashioned, that's where they are going...Intimacy, Interactivity, tradition and getting out of the pew attracts them.*⁷

In a changing religious climate in America, the challenge for the Mainline Protestant Church is to engage Millennials and meet them where they are. The Millennials may be the last remaining hope for Mainline Protestant churches to get back on the playing field of American religious life.

20% of our First Church Millennials were born, baptized, confirmed and/or married here. 80% have come as young adults who came on their own and chose our church as their first adult choice for worship and witness. Some of them have had babies and are now raising their children in the church. When new members join, at least 75% claim that our social justice heritage and current witness have drawn them. They have responded by showing up. Others name our classical music and traditional worship as a draw. Still others love our

⁷ Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 235-236.

Gothic Cathedral in the heart of the city they call home. Some claim all three draws to First Church.

Our Millennials are eager to understand and reinterpret the Social Gospel for a new day. There are very few Millennials at First Church who don't articulate a passion for social justice. They "get" justice and they are engaged by it. They don't run and hide from the intersection of art, faith and social justice.

The Millennials tend to get fired up about justice and they are less active – on the whole – in the leadership and life of the church. We are working to integrate our Millennials more and more into the leadership of the church. Rev. Dan Clark co-led our Long-Range Planning Committee with Steve Sterrett (and half the committee started out as Millennials). Brian Cave was our First Millennial Moderator last year and Alec Dietz is our First Millennial Senior Deacon. Last year, half our Council was filled by Millennial leaders or late Generation Xers (born 1965-1983). I am very proud and amazed by our Millennials at First Church. They make us a growing, energetic, dynamic and getting younger congregation in the heart of a growing, dynamic and thriving center city neighborhood in our Capital City of Ohio.

But, I have a word of warning to all of us who are aging into the time of the age of active wisdom, we need to allow the

Millennials to lead! They will do it in ways that make us uncomfortable and ways we do not understand. However, I have watched (and studied) the fear of failure in our denomination has actually produced failure in many ways. Our denomination is dwindling and dying. I contend this is a direct result of NOT turning over leadership to Millennials. The UCC needs a whole new model of leadership...another sermon for another day.

I also have a word of calling out and calling forth for our Millennials. Step up and bring your best gifts, your best ideas, your best faith forward. In the words of Howe and Strauss, we need you to pull us in a new direction. As you care about “Intimacy, Interactivity, tradition and getting us out of the pews, step up and lead us forward.” Don’t wait. We need you now. Find your voices and your pathways to leadership. Bring your new ways. Do things differently. We need you to. Bring us hope and change.

As I have said, Millennials are elusive, beautiful and gentle and just. That is a scary great blend for guiding the church. In the words of the Apostle Paul to his young understudy, Timothy, *“Remember, God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline” (II Timothy 1:7).*

RACE:

Our ONA welcome also addresses Race. I had a lot on race prepared for today but I put it aside in the aftermath of deadly confrontations yesterday in Charlottesville, VA. As White Supremacists, white nationalists, the KKK, and Neo-Nazis descended on Charlottesville again to protest the name change and possible removal of a statue of Gen. Robert E. Lee, they were met by counter-demonstrators – 19 of whom were injured (five critically) and a 32-year-old, Heather Heyer murdered when 20-year-old James Fields of Maumee, Ohio drove his car at high speed into the crowd of counter-demonstrators. Fields' mother, Samantha Bloom said that she knew he had driven to Charlottesville for a “Trump Rally” but knew nothing about the white supremacists marching. *“He told me it was about Trump and Trump is not a white supremacist,”* said his mom. I hope and pray that Samantha Bloom is correct – that Mr. Trump is not a white supremacist. But, he needs to speak out clearly and specifically against white supremacists and white nationalists. He also needs to remove “Alt-Right” leadership from his inner circle of White House advisors.

Rev. Seth Whispelway of Sojourners United Church of Christ was one of a number of clergy linking arms and peacefully resisted the KKK entrance into the park. Rev. Whispelway

said, *“We are here to counteract white supremacy and let people know it is a system of evil and system of sin.”* Thanks be to God for his and others’ peaceful resistance to evil and sin. He is my hero this morning.

Here we are today, once again torn by racial hatred and violence. While words and fists, weapons and cars were flying around Charlottesville yesterday, a helicopter crashing – leaving over 30 injured and three dead (including the two officers who died in the copter crash (H. Jay Cullen and MM Bates), I received a call from LuAnn Stoia of Channel 6/28 who ended up interviewing me on the front steps of First Church. I commended to her (and to you) that we would be wise to follow the admonition of the Prophet Isaiah in chapter 58:12. He calls us to be “restorers of the breach.” We are called to fix what is broken. In the Message, Eugene Peterson interprets Isaiah 58:12 like this: *“Use the old rubble of past lives to build a new, rebuild the foundations from out of your past. You’ll be known as those who can fix anything, restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate, make the community livable again.”*

I commend this to you in prayer. We need to make our community and our nation “livable again.” I am asking each one of us to spend one minute in prayer at noon each day for the next 30 days. Set your alarms and give a minute to God at midday. Ask God to guide you to be a restorer of the breach.

Where have you witnessed racial hatred? Where can you do one thing to fix what is broken? Then in the 24 hours between each one-minute prayer, do one thing to reach out across the divide of racial breakdown. Join with others and invite them to pray with you. Form a prayer circle for one minute each day at lunch.

We have to find a way past slavery and racial bigotry and racial hatred. In his autobiography, in 1885, our 18th President Ulysses S. Grant concludes his two volume Memoirs with these words, *“The cause of the great War of Rebellion against the United States will have to be attributed to slavery... We cannot be half slave and half free. All must become slave or all free, or the state will go down...I have come to the conclusion that this saying is quite true.”* What will it be? Will we all be slaves? Is that what we want? Or will we finally all be free? I hope this is our goal.

We are still a nation divided. We have broken apart even further in the past year. We have to create ways to come together.

Yesterday, 132 years later, our 44th President, Barack Obama, quoting South African Freedom Fighter and first Black President, Nelson Mandela, tweeted in three tweets (BTW: This is how to use tweets effectively and well): *“No one is born*

hating another person because of the color of his skin or his background or his religion ... People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love... ...For love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite."

We must find a way to face and overcome the racism that is in the bones and DNA of this nation. Hate can define us and divide us any longer.

What will it be First Church? Will we be repairers of the breach; those who fix what is broken? Will we share the love we have come to know in Christ and from God and witnessed between one another? Or will we simply head out the doors today and continue in our paths of life without making a difference?

Take one minute to pray and each day find a way to heal and mend the breach that has become a part of the American landscape.

Next Sunday, I return with: **“Loving and Welcoming ALL Sexual Orientations and Ethnic and National Backgrounds.”**

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