“A Night to Comfort with Tender Talk”
Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens
Senior Minister

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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 Christmas Communion Meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, December 24, 2014, 11pm service, dedicated to the entire staff and membership of First Church, to Pope Francis I as he seeks to reform and reshape the Universal Church into the true image of Christ and always to the Glory of God!

"A Night to Comfort with Tender Talk"
Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20
(Part VI of VI in the Advent/Christmas sermon series)

+++++++ 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. ++++
Nothing says “Merry Christmas” like a full-blown chastising, footnoted memo addressed from the Boss to all the senior executives at the Annual Staff Christmas Party. If you have never experienced such a Christmas “bash,” count your blessings. It may mean that you are not a Cardinal in the Roman Curia.

On Monday morning, December 22 as Pope Francis spoke to the Curia at their annual Christmas greeting exchange, he let them have it. Calling his top leadership “Lords of the manor” instead of “servants of the Lord,” Pope Francis was clear in naming where they have lost their way in serving the Church of Jesus Christ. His words were uncomfortable words of truth spoken in tough love from the human head of the largest branch of our Universal Church. Contained in a pointed address to his top leadership (not to the hundreds of thousands of parish priests, nuns and laity who faithfully serve the church day in and day out), Francis’ words which can help all of us
can grow from so receiving them – words which reflect truth as we kneel at the manger this night.

In what could have been entitled, “Wise Up Oh Men of God,” Pope Francis named 15 of the most common “Curial ailments” he has witnessed as Pope in the last few years.

They include: “The sickness of considering oneself 'immortal', 'immune' or 'indispensable.'” “The sickness of mental and spiritual hardening” in which leaders along the way, lose their inner serenity, vivacity and boldness and conceal themselves behind paper, becoming working machines rather than men of God. “The ailment of excessive planning and functionalism” in which the apostle of Christ plans everything in detail and believes that, by perfect planning things effectively progress, thus becomes a sort of accountant for God rather being accountable to God.

“The sickness of poor coordination” which develops when the communion between members is lost, and the body loses its harmonious
functionality and its temperance, thus becoming an orchestra of cacophony because the members do not collaborate and do not work with a spirit of communion or as a team.

“Spiritual Alzheimer's disease” breeds forgetfulness of the history of Salvation, of one's personal relationship with Jesus, and the 'first love' of serving him which leads to a progressive decline of spiritual faculties. Over a period of time this causes serious handicaps, making one incapable of carrying out certain activities autonomously, living in a state of absolute dependence on one's own often imaginary views.

“The ailment of rivalry and vainglory” leads the apostles of the church to care more about their appearances, the colors of their robes, insignias, honors and their titles that become their most important aim in life.

“Existential Schizophrenia” causes leaders to live double lives in which they seek titles and degrees which don’t matter and abandon pastoral
service, limiting themselves only to bureaucratic matters. In so doing they lose contact with reality and real people. They create a parallel world of their own, where they set aside everything they teach with severity to others and live a hidden, often dissolute life the sickness of “chatter, grumbling and gossip.”

“Existential Schizophrenia” leads to “The disease of indifference towards others” which arises when each person thinks only of himself, and loses the sincerity and warmth of personal relationships. “The disease of accumulation” is when the leader seeks to fill an existential emptiness of the heart by accumulating material goods, not out of necessity but simply to feel secure, while in truth, accumulation only burdens and slows down our progress in life.

Finally, he names “the ailment of closed circles,” when belonging to a group becomes stronger than belonging to the Body and, in some situations, to Christ Himself. This ailment can threaten the
harmony of the Body and may cause a great deal of harm, especially when “littlest brothers” are kept out of our circles.

I consider his words some of the most earth shattering since the first angels visited the first shepherds on the first noel! In the end, after listing these and other ailments, Pope Francis concluded: “We are therefore required, at this Christmas time and in all the time of our service and our existence – to live 'speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (Eph. 4:15ff).

I can only imagine how awkward it must have been for the well-meaning Cardinals of the Curia to stand up and hand the pope their Christmas greetings having received his broadside.
This Christmas Eve, I share Francis’ reflections because of each of in our personal and organizational lives can fall prey to some or many of the ailments of the body. This can happen particularly when we lose track of who we are and whose we are. When we get caught up in our organizational and personal ailments in the church, in our work, in our families and our relationships, we lose track of so many things. We fail to see our own racism, sexism, heterosexism, lust for power and might. We become blind to our brokenness and separation from God and one another. In the words of scripture, we fall short of the glory of God.

Essentially, we are – plain and simple – children of the living God who is being born again this night. When all our ailments are stripped away and all our days are numbered on earth, God’s love for us and our love for God and one another will be all matters.
If we listen closely this night, we will hear words of comfort and joy, but they arrive through the labor pains of birth. They awaken us on the edge of Christmas morning with a mother’s cry – not an ailing whimper or whining.

Have you listened to the voices speaking from the pages of Holy Scripture tonight? Isaiah talks about the shattering of the yoke that burdens the oppressed. He says “every boot of the thundering warrior will be stopped and every garment will be rolled in blood and burned for fuel” (Isaiah 9:3-5). Titus declares that we are to be educated so that we can live sensible, ethical and godly lives right now “by rejecting the ungodly lives and desires of this world” (Titus 2:12). In the Gospel of Luke we want to hear the cooing of a baby’s voice and the gentle talk of a mother to her new son. But, instead, if we are really listening, we hear the unfolding story of a homeless newborn laid in the cattle feed trough visited by poor shepherds – who by the world’s
standards then and now – account for little in this world. In other words, we follow a child born low, laid low, and visited by the lowliest of God’s beloved ones.

Even this very night in the little town of Bethlehem a wall is being constructed to separate people. This new 20 foot high steel wall will further divide Christians, Jews, and Muslims - as the place Jesus’ place of birth and his ancestor Rachel’s tomb are kept apart. It is painfully ironic and undeniably wrong that Jesus - “the prince of Peace” - from the house of David, born in the city of David, will now be forever separated from his Jewish ancestors’ places of rest – not to mention the further separation between neighbors that this wall causes.

So here we stand on this night – a night to comfort with tender talk. Perhaps in the spirit of Francis and Jesus, the kindest talk, the tenderest talk is truth spoken in love. In the words of Ephesians, on this night of all nights, we are called
to **grow up**. In Paul’s words, “Grow up in every way” into Him – who is the head of the church - even Jesus Christ our Savior.”

So let us all grow up tonight. As we “grow up in Christ in every way” let us come to the MANGER and the table of our Lord this night, not because we must but because we may. Come with your Christmas greeting for the Son of God who is born again to us this night. Come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant, come to Bethlehem and see him whose birth the angels sing. Come adore on bended knee, Christ the lord, the newborn king. Amen.

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