

# From the Pulpit

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## *“Adopted Children”*

*Jeremiah 31:7-14; Ephesians 1:3-14; John  
1:1-18*

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By The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens  
Senior Minister

A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, January 5, 2014, Christmas 2, dedicated to my friends, Sherman Hill who has overcome so many obstacles in his life and moved to Indianapolis, Indiana this week and to Rev. Stephen Phelps in thanksgiving for his ministry at Riverside Church, New York City for his 27 years of pastoral ministry and always to the glory of God!

*“Adopted Children”*

*Jeremiah 31:7-14; Ephesians 1:3-14; John 1:1-18*

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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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As we step into the New Year and stand on the edge of Epiphany, our texts call us away from birth stories to growth stories. We are given a whole new look at faith. We are called by Jeremiah, Paul, and John to grow-up, to mature into our faith. In a nutshell, babies are great. It is really hard to walk away from the baby of Bethlehem and begin growing up with the young carpenter of Nazareth. But, are our texts call us forward.

Jeremiah, speaking from the heart of exile, calls people to stay strong, keep singing and step out of death into the new life – trusting God to break the power of fear and death in their lives. In God, creation will flourish, social life will resume, community will be restored and people will prosper. God will break through the cycles of death and reintroduce cycles of life.

John calls us to see God in the beginning. Even before the world had shape and form, God was. God is and God will continue to be. Out of the darkness, God’s light will shine. Whether a bolt of lightning in a terrifyingly dark sky, or a distant beam of light toward which one moves, or as the dawn that chases the night, God’s light pushes back darkness.

Have no illusions. Darkness is always a constant presence in this world. John reiterates that the powerful opposition to Jesus and his ministry and beyond to this present day always carries darkness with it. But, the promise of John is that despite its best efforts, including the crucifixion of Christ, darkness has not and will not put out the light.

This brings us to the mature faith called forth by Paul in his letter to the Ephesians. From the dark and death-creating prison cell of Rome, where the empire sent its criminals to rot and die, Paul finds hope in Christ. Out of the despair of his dungeon home, he sends this letter to his brothers and sisters in Ephesus giving examples and truths for living.

In his introduction to Paul's letter to the Ephesians in The Message Bible, Eugene Peterson eloquently writes:

*What we know about God and what we do for God have a way of being broken apart in our lives. The moment the organic unity of belief and behavior is damaged in any way, we are incapable of living out the full humanity for which we were created. Paul's letter to the Ephesians joins together what has been torn apart in our sin-wrecked world. He begins with an exuberant exploration of what Christians believe about God, and then, like a surgeon skillfully setting a compound fracture, 'sets' this belief in God into our behavior before God so that the bones - belief and behavior - knit together and heal.*

*Once our attention is called to it, we notice these fractures all over the place. There is hardly a bone in our bodies that has escaped injury, hardly a relationship in city or job, school or church, family or country, that isn't out of joint or limping in pain. There is much work to be done.*

*And so Paul goes to work. In this six chapter letter, he knits the body of Christ together again. (Eugene Peterson, The Message, Navpress, Colorado Springs, CO., 2003, p. 2122).*

In the first three chapters, Paul lifts up the glory of God and our deep connections to God. In the final three chapters, Paul gives us instructions on what matters in our relationships and how to live our lives in a mature way.

In Ephesians 1-3, we are told: We are blessed with every spiritual blessing in heavenly places. God chose us and claimed us before the foundation of the world. God made us and adopted us as God's children – accepting us as fully beloved. In God, we have redemption through Christ. In Christ, we have obtained an inheritance of faith. We have actually been made to sit in heavenly places in Christ Jesus. Through him, we are sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise.

**But Paul doesn't stop there.** In his final three chapters (Ephesians 4-6), we find out how we are to live in the light of the truths he just presented. As followers of Christ we are called to: Walk the way of faith worthy of our calling. Maintain unity among ourselves. Quit lying. Quit stealing. Be kind to each other. Be tenderhearted, forgiving one another. Walk in love. Do not let recklessness, uncleanness or covetousness be named in the fellowship. Relate well, properly and healthfully to one another – holding on to the precious relationships which God has given to our care.

Do you see what I mean about moving from birth and baby stories to mature stories of faith and walking with God?

I am drawn back to one phrase in Ephesians. Paul says in 1:5, "...*God destined us for adoption as God's children through Christ...*" Essentially, we all come to our faith through adoption. Not one of us is born a Christian. Each of us

accepted through the grace of baptism into the family of faith. Therefore, we are all adopted into Christ's family. I find this to be a powerful truth of our faith.

Too often, adoption gets a bad reputation, as if adoption into a family is a negative thing. I don't see it that way. I can't see it that way. I will never see it that way.

In reading the writings of Deborah N. Silverstein and Sharon Kaplan, on adoption, they identify seven core issues in adoption – issues which face the adoptee, the adoptive parents and the birth parents – in different ways. They lift up those issues as **loss, rejection, guilt/shame, grief, identity, intimacy, and control**. These issues surface at various times throughout life among one or all three of the relational triad.

I find these issues common to not only parents and children in adoption, but in some ways they are related to all of us as people of faith. In following Christ and accepting his way for our lives – like it or not - we set ourselves apart from others.

As such, we too struggle with issues of loss, rejection, guilt/shame, grief, identity, intimacy, and control. **Loss** of relationships which shun God; **rejection** of ways which lead us on the path to hurt and hopelessness; **Guilt and shame** around struggles with darkness and trust in God; **Grief** in turning away from our old ways (and sometimes old relationships which are negative and hurtful), **Identity issues** as we struggle with who we are in Christ; **Intimacy** as we turn our lives over to Christ and seek his love and his way of living and loving;; and **control** as we let go of former ways and let God guide our lives, our souls, our steps.

As we turn now to God's table of grace and seek more intimate communion with Christ, I want you to consider a radical idea for our faith walk in 2014....

### **Place God first in 2014.**

#### ***What will happen to your life this year if you place God first?***

If you choose to arise in the morning giving Glory to God, walk through the day singing praises to God, put your head down at night with God in your heart and on your breath, what will happen to you? What will happen to you, if you feel, touch, taste, and see God's glory in all the expressions and experiences of all your days in the remaining 360 days of 2014?

Taking these questions a bit further, what would happen to each of us and all of us if God was our first love, our first passion, our first truth? If God was the first presence on your Facebook page, the first motivation for your fingers and your minds as you touched the letter pad on your cell phones and computers (and remained your best motivation before pressing "Send"), if God received your first look when your heart awoke to love, what would your life be like then? If God guided your financial decisions – how you spend, what you invest in, and what you do with the money you have – assuming the blessings of the funds come from God.

What if God received all the glory (not the Buckeyes or some other team dear to your heart), what if God reflected all your best intentions, what if God was first – what would your life look like? What would this world look like?

I encourage you to live into these questions as we step into the New Year. As we move from birth narratives to growth imperatives, may we accept our place as adopted and fully loved children of a loving God – the only truly perfect and compassionate parent. As we step into our walk with our brother, Jesus Christ, may we know the full welcome into this, our family of faith. Amen.

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