

# From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

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## ***“Well-Loved Church Set to Explode!”***

***Isaiah 9:1-4; I Corinthians 1:10-18;  
Matthew 4:12-23***

January 26th, 2014

By The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens

Senior Minister

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Epiphany 3, January 26, 2014, dedicated to our moderator, Rev. Sarah Reed, to the 2013 Church Council, to all the lay people and staff of First Church who serve faithfully and lovingly, to my wife Susan E. Sitler, my sons and daughters and always to the glory of God!

*“Well-Loved Church Set to Explode!”*

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Two days ago, I started my 15<sup>th</sup> year of ministry as your Senior Minister at First Congregational UCC, Columbus, Ohio. I was in Washington D.C. speaking to over 1,000 health care advocates gathered for the annual national gathering of FamiliesUSA. I rose early Friday morning to pray and in my morning prayers gave thanks to God for my wife, my children, my family, for all of you in this congregation, for our staff and all who seeking God’s presence in their lives enter to worship and depart to serve at 444 East Broad St.

I am grateful to God every day for you. You are an amazing congregation. You are – a well-loved church and a wonderfully loving church. Thank you for being the presence of God’s love in the heart of our great capital city.

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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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Jesus begins his ministry in Matthew's Gospel lesson today. Going to the Sea of Galilee where there were 204 fishing villages, none with a population fewer than 15,000 people, 90% (or more) of whom were the working poor, Jesus gets going. He settles into the town where most of his disciples will eventually come from – the town of Capernaum. Before he gathers them, he preaches his first sermon.

He begins his ministry with nine word sermon. **“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.”** The Message is clear: **“Change your life! God's Kingdom is here” (7 words).** We get the first sentence. Change YOUR life – the only life you can change, really. Make different choices. Choose different words. Go different ways. Change. Some of us hate change. We think if something is done one way – the way we like it – it is good, blessed, and eternal. Why change the way we like something done? But, Jesus is speaking about your life. I bet each one of us here can name at least one thing we would like to change about our lives – how about two or more?

The motivation man presents a powerful reason to change – no less than God's kingdom has arrived. What is the Kingdom of Heaven? The Kingdom of Heaven is really **“God's way of bringing heaven to earth. It is God doing things here and now.”** Jesus is saying.” *“If you fishermen and fisherwomen want to get on the last boat leaving the dock, change now. Because, given the choice of being with God or against God - You want to be on God's boat.”* You want to be aligned with God's way. And speaking of “ways” – the one who is speaking is THE Way, THE Truth, and THE Life. You might as well believe him. After all, he is the son of God. I think he knows what he is preaching about.

**“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” Nine words....**

I believe there is there is a place for short sermons. As well as - Short prayers, Short music, Short announcements, Short meetings, Even short congregational meetings. Following Jesus' example – this may be the day, the time, the place for everything short and clear. Jesus says, ***“Get ready. Get set. Change. Get on board with the God’s way!”***

So what are we and the early disciples lining up to do? What is God’s way? Well.... God’s way is life giving. God’s way is world changing. God’s way is loving and just. God’s way is beautiful. God’s way builds community, heals the sick, cares for the broken ones, and turns the world of greed and speed upside down - into a world of sharing and loving presence with others. God’s way is joyful not judgmental; kind not cruel; good not evil. God’s way is worth changing your way to get in sync with... I hope and pray God’s way is the way of our congregation and your life.

**Let me tell you a story, connect it to you and me and US and sit down.**

Years ago, I saw a poster in the neighborhood market, Bozak’s market on Fulton Road on Cleveland’s Westside. It read, ***“Well-Loved Church Set to Explode!”*** It was a strange sign with a mixed message. Why would a well loved church be set to explode? I read on. It turns out that a church on the near east side of town (a few miles away) was set for demolition. It was a falling down, Polish Catholic parish whose community of faith had either moved to suburbs or died off. The demographics had shifted and the diocese of Cleveland was going to blow up the church – but not without a fight.

It seemed that all those good Polish Catholics who had been baptized, confirmed, married, and whose family members had been buried at the church were rising up in public protest. They were going to lie down in front of

bulldozers, go in the building, and do anything they could to stop the explosives and demolition. The phrase “over my dead body” was taking on new life.

I followed their protest closely. Hundreds turned out to stop the explosion of their well-loved church. They were organized. It was China’s Tiananmen Square Democracy Movement meeting Lech Walesa’s Polish Solidarity Movement combining with Whoopi Goldberg’s Sister Act II to stop the Catholic Bishop and the church bureaucrats in Cleveland, Ohio. It was very cool! In time the people’s movement won. The well-loved church survived. They realized how precious their parish was and they returned, raised money, restored it, and it is open still today – not a shrine to yesteryear, but an active parish spiritually exploding church in Cleveland’s inner-city.

I was thinking about our well-loved church this week. In a few minutes we will go over all the numbers. Some of them will be troubling. But, before we get to that, I want to talk about other numbers and God’s spirit alive in our well-loved church.

Consider this: Since I arrived in January 2000, 5 out of 12 downtown churches have closed their doors forever. Of the seven remaining churches, at least three are dangerously close to ending their life in the city- with very part-time pastors and little to no staffs. During this same time, First Church has doubled in membership and grown by 118% in worship attendance. We now are the largest membership Protestant congregation in downtown Columbus. We also stand as the third largest UCC membership church in Ohio behind First Community Church in Columbus and Federated Church in Chagrin Falls.

We have had 35 babies in the past 30 months – with more on the way! We had 16 baptisms last year and nine already set up for 2014 – more on the way! Our CE Program has grown. Our Youth in Mission is growing in spirit and numbers.

The adult choir has added 11 members this year— a 27% growth. Worship is steadily growing again. We just completed our best ever Stewardship program ever with over \$635,000 in pledges – up almost 5% from 2013 - including a record 35 new pledging households.

We gave away \$169,748.98 to mission in 2013. In 30 years, we have now collected and given away \$1.7 million in Sunday offerings. We give more OCWM to the larger UCC than any other church in Central Ohio. While other churches are cutting OCWM – we have increased our OCWM commitments by \$4437 since January 2012. In addition, our Good Samaritan Program served over 600 families and giving away \$40,000 of your amazingly generous gifts in 2013. Since January 2000, our endowments have grown from just under \$2 million to over \$4.4 million - while supporting the church's ministry and mission all through some treacherous economic years. We have raised \$3.3 million dollars in a capital campaign and have put it to use – buying the land on our Westside, thus doubling our territory, and internally we have restored the Jeffrey Window which was collapsing in on itself – plus many more projects! With our Capital Campaign dollars, we have sent \$120,000 on to mission projects across Columbus and the world and we are preparing to send an additional \$101,000 for a total of \$220,000 Capital Campaign mission dollars sent our partners in mission.

**We are a well-loved church SET TO EXPLODE!** With our downtown neighborhoods growing by leaps and bounds, with our spirit growing stronger each day, with our babies and children growing-up in the faith, we are blessed to be a blessing and poised to be more of a blessing to others.

William Barclay in his commentary on Acts, speaks of the qualities of First Christian Church (the original FCC)! They were a learning church. They were a church of fellowship. They enjoyed being together. They were a praying church. They knew they had to hold one another in prayer and from one another they would find strength for the journey. They were a reverent church. They lived in

awe of God. It was as if they moved through the world as though it were a holy temple. They were a church where things happened. They trusted the signs and wonders of God. They expected great things from God and attempted great things for God. They were a sharing church. They had an intense feeling of responsibility for one another. They gave away what they had. They shared their resources with all in need. They were a worshiping church. They knew that faith in Jesus and following God's love happened when they came together and trusted the Holy Spirit to lead them in worship. They were a happy church. There was joy not gloom in their church. They never focused on what couldn't happen. They looked ahead to a bright and beautiful future while being grounded in the present moment. They were a church who other people could not help liking. These were all the traits that made them attractive to all people. So they exploded with growth!

**I believe we resemble this church in many, many ways!**

I will agree that we have places in our beautiful fellowship of faith which can shine brighter, reach higher, and love more deeply. We have Jesus' words to empower us: "***Change your life. God's Kingdom is Here!***" With that spiritual fuel of Christ's Spirit, let us rejoice as we head into new year of our life together! We are a well-loved church set to explode! Thanks be to God! Amen.

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