

“Courage to Change”

I Samuel 3:1-10, Ephesians 3:1-12; John 13:2a-8, 12-17, 20

Rachael Gardner Purdy Ordination

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From the Pulpit

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A Communion Meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Epiphany, Saturday, January 6, 2018, for the ordination service of Rachael Gardner Purdy, dedicated to Rachael and Judy on this holy and spiritual day in their life together and always to the Glory of God!

“Courage to Change”

I Samuel 3:1-10, Ephesians 3:1-12; John 13:2a-8, 12-17, 20

Thank you for coming today. Rachael has chosen three magnificent texts of scripture for us to receive, reflect upon, interact with and respond to. We have received them. Now, let’s reflect, interact and respond...First, let us pray...

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts e acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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His name was Shemuel (Samuel) which means: *“Name of God; asked of God; heard by God.”* God was speaking to this one. God’s young servant. God’s young prophet. God called with

purpose and intentionality – in the night while “Shemuel” was sleeping, while all were asleep: “*Shemuel, Shemuel...*” Again, “*Shemuel*” and again, “*Shemuel*” and yet again... “*Shemuel, Shemuel.*” After hearing his name spoken BY GOD ALOUD SIX TIMES, and after all Samuel’s running back and forth to Eli, he finally responds as his sage teacher, mentor, and friend tells him to. He says to the Lord who is now standing there in front of him, “*speak Lord, for your servant is listening.*” And so, it begins. Face to face, in the dead of night, with the Lord speaking and the prophet listening.

How about you, “*Rahel?*” – **you** whose name means “EWE” or “Little lamb?” How many times did you hear the voice of God and wonder, “*who is that speaking to me?*” How many times did you hear from others, “you’d be a great pastor” AND Hear from God the same – “*Racheal, you’d be a great pastor?*”

Over the years, through all the questions, you never replied, “*how soon, Lord?*” or “*Where should I go to seminary, Lord?*” Or “*are you sure you are at the right zip code, street and house number, Lord?*” None of that.

Your response was actually this: “***What do you want me to do, Lord?***” In that one moment, with a clear heart and mind, with that one question, you opened the door for God to speak.

God answered your question. God has been speaking ever since!

God said, "I want you to be my servant to others. I want you to teach others. I want you to lead others on their journeys of faith. I want you to help them find their own understanding of my grace. I want you to tell them they are beautiful just as they are. I want you to be my presence of love in this world."

There is an old saying be careful what you ask for. Well "Little Lamb of God" it's too late for that. Our "Still Speaking God" has spoken. You have answered. And today, we are here to simply confirm what God has been saying and doing in your life. We are here to celebrate your call to ordained ministry.

But, before you kneel, before we pray and lay hands upon you and before God does all the work of anointing you in the power of God's Holy Spirit, to be a beloved, blessed, and set aside servant and teacher, there are just a few more thoughts to share.

On this Epiphany, here are three gifts laid before you. No not gold, frankincense and myrrh (although that would be really cool!). These are the three gifts: "**courage** to change," "**overcoming acedia**" and "**humility** to bind the broken."

First, **courage to change**. We need to acknowledge that you did not drop from the sky into Columbus, Ohio this Epiphany. Your Epiphany came through struggle and pain. In a sense, your life itself is a story of many epiphanies, many points of light, life and love all connected by a God who has stayed by your side through the struggles and the joys of your life.

You needed “**courage to change**” for you to arrive on this Epiphany as a gift from God to all of us and so many more whose lives you have touched and healed. The Courage to Change can be illusive. But, spoken by a woman who actually lost her voice as a young child because of the abuse she endured, the courage to change makes sense. When this young woman found her poetic voice again, this once caged bird freely sang of hope and God’s grace. Her name was Maya Angelou. Our nation’s poet laureate wrote, *“I can be changed by what happens to me. But I refuse to be reduced by it.”* And also, *“If you don’t like something, change it. If you can’t change it, change your attitude.”* Rachael, never be reduced by all that has happened in your life. Be changed by it. And always remember your attitude fired in the furnace of gratitude can always be changed to face any demons – past, present or future. **May God grant you courage to change.**

Second, **overcoming acedia**. The fathers of the early church went to the desert to pray and to battle the devil. Some thought they went to escape the challenges of daily living in the metropolis. They went, because, like their savior Jesus Christ, they felt they could confront the devil and overcome His horrible destructiveness. It was a noble experiment. But, often besetting the desert fathers was **Acedia** or “the devil of the noonday sun.” Acedia is spiritual boredom, indifference to matters of prayer and faith and simple laziness.

Acedia didn't die in the desert with the church fathers. Acedia still resides in the hearts and minds of pastors in our time. It manifests itself in a refusal to embrace spiritual growth. The sins of acedia still appear today. Pastors lose their passion for serving. They feel overwhelmed by the challenges of ministry. They give in and give up. They become apathetic, lazy and bored too easily. Like our current President, they don't read books. Like too many of us, they don't pray with regularity and discipline. They speak without carefully thinking and praying through scriptural texts (and iPhone texts) and the trouble of preparing before preaching. Acedia – rather than the Holy Spirit - holds them in its devilish noonday grip.

Rachael, **overcome acedia** in your ministry. Don't prop yourself in front of Screens instead of praying and reading and learning and living. Be with people in their need and care for

them there. But take care of yourself as well. If you don't, acedia will overcome you.

Be like the Apostle Paul. That man was on fire for Christ. Fueled by the power of the Holy Spirit, he was alive at noonday – and all the other times of the day and night! In his passion he spoke about everything and got some things all wrong. That's why everyone in this room can find points of disagreement and outrage when it comes to Paul. But, let's not always get stuck there. Rather, let us hear his words in Ephesians, this servant of the Gospel according to God's grace. Let us gain access to God with boldness and confidence through faith in Him who called us to be teachers and preachers of God's holy word – even Jesus Christ our Lord. Racheal, **overcome Acedia** and become an even greater more passionate lover and liver of God's Holy Word.

Finally, in humility, bind the broken. In John 13, Jesus kneels to wash his disciples' feet. Judas already has it in his heart to betray Jesus. Jesus knows his crucifixion is coming soon. Yet there he is – on the floor with a basin of water – washing their feet – even over the incessant protests of Peter. He says, "You call me Lord and teacher. Then do as I have done!" Be servants to all.

In his short story, "The Ragman," author Walter Wangerin tells the mythic story of a man who walks the streets meeting people in their pain – modeling Christ in the city. On this day, poetic and prophetic license in relation to gender identity is needed – to change Walter's "Rag Man" to a "Rag Woman."

Racheal, may I do that?

One Friday morning, A Rag Woman appears on the streets of her city as a strong healthy woman with a cart filled with clean rags. She moves through the city and meets torn, tattered and broken people on the streets of her city. As she encounters them, she picks up the rags and tattered pieces of their tattered and torn lives and heals them -one-by-one – as she wraps them with her clean cloth. There is the little girl crying and left alone after being beaten by her parents. There is the man homeless and huddled in a corner crying in loneliness. There is the man with one arm who cannot work because he cannot carry the weight of the world.

As the clean cloth touches the lives and skin of the wounded ones, the Rag Woman carries away all the bloodied and torn rags. She carries them - like the sins of the world - to the city dump. There, having taken on the pain of the world and having healed the wounded, the worn, and broken of heart,

mind and body, the rag woman lies down on the pile of rags and dies that Friday night as the sun sets.

But this story doesn't end with Friday's death. As the narrator draws the story to a close he writes:

“But, then, on Sunday morning, I was wakened by a violence. Light – pure, hard, demanding light – slammed against my sour face, and I blinked, and I looked, and I saw the last and the first wonder of all. There was she was - the Rag woman, folding the blanket most carefully, a scar on her forehead, but alive! And, besides that, healthy! There was no sign of sorrow nor of age, and all the rags that she had gathered shined for cleanliness.

Well, then I lowered my head and trembling for all that I had seen, I myself walked up to the Rag Woman. I told her my name with shame, for I was a sorry figure next to her. Then I took off all my clothes in that place, and I said to her with dear yearning in my voice: “Dress me.”

She dressed me. My Lord, she put new rags on me, and I am now a wonder beside her. The Rag Woman. The Christ!”

Today is Epiphany – the day of God's manifestation of light, love, and life in Christ Jesus. Now, it is time to come and kneel before God. Here receive God's Holy Spirit and rise with revitalized courage to change. Rise with the courage to

overcome Acedia. Rise in humility to serve Christ for the all the remaining days of your life and bind up the broken ones whom God sends to you.

God is standing before you calling you by name. *“Rahel, Rahel.”* And there is but one reply. It is the reply from the lips of *“Shemuel”* long ago. *“Speak Lord, your servant is listening.”* Amen.

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