2015 LENTEN SERMON SERIES
“The Essence of Christianity”

From the Pulpit
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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Ash Wednesday, February 18, 2015, dedicated Jane Carter and to the memory of Marcus Borg to whom I dedicate this Sermon Series & always to the glory of God!

“The Essence of Christianity”

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; II Corinthians 2:5;20-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

(Part I of VIII in the sermon series, “The Essence of Christianity”)

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.

Le Chambon-sur-Lignon is a small farming village in south central France. Residents have been primarily Huguenot or Protestant since the 17th century. During World War II, the French Huguenots made the village a haven for Jews fleeing from the Nazis. They hid Jews within
the town and countryside and helped them flee to neutral Switzerland. It is believed that between 1,000 and 3,000 Jews were hidden in LaChambon - a town of only 3,000 people during World War II.

Aware that Jews were being murdered and later wiped out in the gas chambers of concentration camps, French Protestant Christians in a tiny mountain town took action to save as many people as possible. They turned their community into a hiding place for Jews from all across Europe. Magda Trocme, the wife of the local pastor in the Reformed church, explained how it all began.

*Those of us who received the first Jews did what we thought had to be done—nothing more complicated. It was not decided from one day to the next what we would have to do. There were many people in the village who needed help. How could we refuse them? A person doesn’t sit down and say I’m going to do this and this and that. We had no time to think. When a problem came, we had to solve it immediately. Sometimes people ask me, “How did you make a decision?” There was no decision to make. The issue was: Do you think we are all brothers or not? Do you think it is unjust to turn in the Jews or not? Then let us try to help!*
When asked of the risks she faced, Magda Trocme replied:

_In the beginning, we did not realize the danger was so big. Later, we became accustomed to it, but you must remember that the danger was all over. The people who were in the cities had bombs coming down and houses coming in on their heads, and they were killed. Others were dying in the war, in battles. Other people were being persecuted, like those in Germany. It was a general danger, and we did not feel we were in much more danger than the others. And, you see, the danger was not what you might imagine._

_You might imagine that the people were fighting with weapons in the middle of the square, that you would have had to run away, that you would have to go into a little street and hide. The danger was not that kind at all. The danger was in having a government that, little by little, came into the hands of the Germans, with their laws, and the French people were supposed to obey those laws. (Courage to Care, ed. C. Rittner and S. Myers, 102)._}

Early in the war, the police arrested Magda’s husband Rev. Andre Trocme and his associate pastor, Rev. Edouard Theis. Although they were later released, the Gestapo continued to monitor all their activities. In the summer of
1943, the Gestapo forced Rev. Trocmé into hiding for ten months by offering a reward for his capture. Many knew his whereabouts but no one turned him in.

In 1982, documentary filmmaker Pierre Sauvage—who was born as his parents were sheltered in Le Chambon - returned there to southern France to film “Weapons of the Spirit” (1989). He interviewed many people forty years after the Holocaust, asking simply, “Why did you hide the Jews at risk to your own lives?” The overwhelming response was that they did what they did because it was the right thing to do. It had to be done. They did not regard themselves as heroes nor did they want others to see them that way. Almost everyone in the community took part in the effort. Even the children were involved. When a Nazi official came to organize a Hitler Youth camp in the village, the students said they would not do that. They told him that: “We will not do that. We make no distinction between Jews and non-Jews. It is contrary to the Gospel teachings of Jesus.” The Nazi left and never tried again.

Reflecting on his film and the amazing people he met returning to LeChambon after 40 years, Pierre Sauvage believes that the villagers’ courage must never be forgotten.
If we do not learn how it is possible to act well even under the most trying circumstances, we will increasingly doubt our ability to act well even under less trying ones... If Jews do not learn that the whole world did not stand idly by while we were slaughtered, we will undermine our ability to develop the friendships and alliances that we need and deserve. If Christians do not learn that even then there were practicing Christians, they will be deprived of inspiring and essential examples of the nature and requirements of their faith. If the hard and fast evidence of the possibility of good on earth is allowed to slip through our fingers and turn into dust, then future generations will have only dust to build on. If hope is allowed to seem an unrealistic response to the world, if we do not work towards developing confidence in our spiritual resources, we will be responsible for producing in due time a world devoid of humanity—literally. (Ibid. 135).

Magda Trocme also saw the rescuers as teaching a lesson. After the war, she told an interviewer: “When people read this story, I want them to know that I tried to open my door. I tried to tell people, ‘Come in, come in.’ In the end, I would like to say to people, ‘Remember that in your life there will be lots of circumstances that will need a kind of courage, a kind of decision of your own, not about other people but about yourself. I would not say more.’”
In the end of “Weapons of the Spirit,” Pierre Sauvage interviews the farmer who first hid his parents, “Why did you do it? Why did you hide my family?” The man, then in his 80’s looks into the camera and responds, “I don’t understand your question.” Pierre Sauvage reframes the question and asks again. The man answers, “Jesus tells us to love our neighbors. Why would I not do what my savior tells me to do?” He looks right into the camera and his serious look changes to a smile. He reaches out his hand to Pierre and holds him. There is in this farmer of LeChambon an inner resolve that comes from a place in the heart.

This place in the heart is the essence of Christianity.

The story of LeChambon is a wonderful illustration of what a Christian community looks like. Under pressure to do the right thing, courage rises up. Growing out of a biblical understanding of “loving thy neighbor” in the vision of Christ, a community of 3,000 farmers grounded in the faith of Jesus Christ and way of our Savior steps forward to save 1,000 Jews while 6 million are being wiped out in genocidal madness in the Holocaust.

In his book, The Heart of Christianity, recently deceased theologian Marcus Borg writes, “What is the heart of Christianity? What is most central to Christianity and being
a Christian? It is this. How does the heart of Christianity beat within all of us who are baptized into Christ?’

In the weeks ahead, Rev. Corzine and I will look into the texts of the season and the season of the heart of Christianity. We will look deeply into the essence of Christianity. As “Essence” is defined as “the intrinsic nature or indispensable quality of something that determines its true character,” the “Essence of Christianity” will come to light in this season as Beloving, Following, Justice, Compassion, Hope, Love and Resurrection Faith.

We begin our Lenten journey on a snowy day in winter. As we begin “Lent” - which means “springtime” in Latin - we will experience this season opening us to the springtime of our souls. Our hope and prayer is that you spend these 40 days in holy preparation of your soul for the Resurrection of Christ which awaits us on Easter Sunday. As we dig through the snow planting seeds and desiring growth in the springtime of our lives of faith, may we be open to awakening. May we open the doors of our souls – as Magda Trocmé did so many years ago. May we open the door of our hearts to Christ as he comes knocking. May we say, “Come in, come in.”
As Magda reminds us, “Remember that in your life there will be lots of circumstances that will need a kind of courage, a kind of decision of your own, not about other people but about yourself.” Thanks be to God for this opportunity to walk into the heart of our faith – into the essence of Christianity. Amen.

“Beloved”

Mark 1: 9-15
(Part II of VIII in the sermon series, “The Essence of Christianity”)

The Rev. Emily Krause Corzine
Associate Minister

February 22, 2015

This past Wednesday, as I have done in years past, I stood with a small black dish in my left hand. I pressed my right thumb into the black gritty ash and I watched individuals came forward to receive a sign of the cross on your forehead or palm of your hand. It is a privilege as a pastor to stand
face to face with you, and look you in the eyes and offer these words, “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.” There is something raw and real about those words, something that reminds us of our mortality. Something that puts it all into perspective ---that our lives are not our own.

For many churches in the Reformed faith, reclaiming the ancient practice of receiving ashes is relatively new. I was young adult before I heard those words and felt those ashes on my head. I was moving forward in line behind other seminarians. I heard the names of three others in front of me, Elizabeth, Kate, Bob, . . . and then it was my turn. “Beloved, child of God, remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.” Maybe the person putting ashes on my head didn’t know my name, (I wasn’t wearing a name tag), maybe she did say my name and I don’t remember, but, what I heard was, “Beloved, child of God.” The power of those words on my heart were enough for me to claim Ash Wednesday as one of my favorite services of the year. She didn’t call me by name, she didn’t have to. What she did for me that day was share God’s claim on my life--a powerful reminder of God’s love and care for me as a child of God.

For me there is something in offering those words to others as a powerful reminder of God’s unconditional care. Being
named sets the tone for one’s journey into Lent, a season of self-examination and reflection. A season of repentance and turning our lives toward God. It’s a season of study and prayer. The journey through Lent is a hard one. It is one what leads us into darkness, into the depths, toward the cross.

Over the next several weeks, we’ll spend time together reflecting on “The Essence of Christianity.” Our theme comes to us from the works of the late Religion professor and writer Marcus Borg. We’ll discuss intrinsic components of the Christian faith. Today, early in our Lenten journey, it seems fitting that we begin with Love.

It doesn’t take long in the fast moving Gospel of Mark to hear the voice from Heaven saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” In eleven short verses and after his baptism by John in the waters of the Jordan, God makes the claim on Jesus’ life. Just as quickly as Jesus hears these words the Spirit drove him into the wilderness for forty days. There, Jesus will have plenty of time to think on those words. Plenty of time to wrestle with the claim on his life.
Jesus heard an affirmation from God. From beginning to end. From the farthest reaches of the world, God claims Jesus in the waters of baptism…. You can almost hear it…. “You Are Mine.” “I love you.” “I am proud of you.” Jesus heard that he was unconditionally God’s Beloved Son.

“With you, I am well pleased” are such words of love and affection from a parent to child; from one to another. Who wouldn’t want to hear those words? “You are my Beloved and with you I am well pleased.”

We don’t always hear those words. We too often don’t hear anything like that kind of love.

Instead of “I’m proud of you. You did your best.” The teenage honor student hears, “What happened. You’ll need to try harder next time.”

Instead of “I’m glad I had you for my dad. You were always there for me.” The aging parent hears, “why couldn’t you have been more like Nathan’s dad?”

Instead of “Thank you, honey, for keeping everything running smoothly at home while I traveled for work this week.” He hears, “You couldn’t have dinner ready for me when I got home?”
In so many situations, when a word of love or praise is called for, we can’t help ourselves. We critique, we problem solve, we give advice. And then there are times when we get it right.

Rowan Williams the former Archbishop of Canterbury wrote a book entitled, Writing in the Dust: After September 11th. In this short and beautiful book he reflects on the messages that people sent to their loved ones from planes and towers when they know that they were going to die. The vast majority of those individuals had just one thing to say: I love you. The voices on the phone didn’t mention strategy, didn’t express disappointment or regret, didn’t problem solve, didn’t share information. The voices just expressed love. Rowan writes of “the triumph of pointless, gratuitous love, the affirming of faithfulness even when there is nothing to be done or salvaged.” ¹ (unquote)

Love is what God expresses as Jesus comes out of that water. Love is what God shares with us in so many ways. Sometimes that love isn’t so easy to hear or it’s just hard to believe.

A pastor waited to shake parishioners’ hands after church one Sunday. He had just preached all about God’s grace and how God wants so desperately to draw us into God's love. After the service, a young woman said on her way out, "Those were beautiful words, Pastor, but I don't think you'd say them if you really knew me." ² The ache in those words lingers.

How many of us -- wonder the same? Could God possibly love me if God knew just how broken and dark my life can be? What do I possibly have to offer that God wants to be a part of? What if I’m not good enough? What if someone really finds out the truth about me? If God is pleased with me, than how do I become more fully the person God is calling me to be?

These are just some of the questions of the season of Lent. These sorts of questions help us reorient our lives. I think we have a head start walking into the darkness and solitude if we first acknowledge that we are “Beloved, Children of God.”

Being loved is, on one hand, having wonderful blessing and great worth bestowed. On the other hand, we don’t start it, God does. We don’t start it and we can’t make it leave. Like the water on your head, or all around you, the claim of being named “Beloved, child of God,” never leaves you.

So maybe the best starting place for all of us on this first Sunday of Lent, is in the water like Jesus. In the sacrament of Baptism, we profess the unconditional love God has for us. We claim to a little child and her family that we will teach her the stories of Jesus, that we will show her the ways of God’s never ending work for justice and mercy and peace in the world. We claim the love God has for her before she can claim that for herself. We name the child by her Christian name…but we know that the first name from God is always, “Beloved.” In our baptisms, we are joined to God in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection and God promises never to let us go.
That claim is the claim of love. It’s a claim that God loves us no matter how screwed up and complicated life seems. No matter how challenging the darkest times of our lives are. Even if we fear that God abandons us. Even if we know someone who walks away from God. Love never lets us go. It is a love that is strong enough to catch us when we fall. A love that comforts us when we weep. A love that points us to a new beginning and to new life when we think there is no way out. That wondrous love from God, never lets us go.

I’ll share with you a favorite hymn of mine that speaks about the love given to us by God in Baptism. It says this:

Child of blessing, Child of Promise,
Baptized with the Spirit’s sign,
With the water God has sealed you
Unto love and grace divine.

Child of joy, our dearest treasure.
God’s you are, from God you came.
Back to God we humbly give you,
Live as one who bears Christ’s name.  

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“We are reminded that Jesus came into darkness and violence precisely in order to be joined to our brokenness and then, to redeem it. Lent reminds us that whenever we find ourselves in the wilderness of disease, loneliness, joblessness, depression, or all the other things that challenge us, Jesus has been there before and meets us there in order to bear our burdens with us and for us.”

It’s been said that during Lent, God is in the laundry business; washing, cleansing and recreating our lives. If we walk close to Jesus; follow just as closely as we can and as deeply as we can, we’ll hear words that God has for us.

Don’t get me wrong, following Jesus isn’t easy. In Fact, following Jesus can be downright scary. He leads us right to Jerusalem, to betrayal, arrest, crucifixion and burial in a tomb. But then, He will be with us when He rises to new life. It means being vulnerable enough to share with another person that we know they are Beloved. It means getting out of our comfort zones and loving who God loves.

\textsuperscript{4} David Lose, www.workingpreacher.org, 2012
So, listen for the voice from Heaven that calls you, “Beloved.” Share the name with others so that they may know that they are cherished in God’s sight. Ask the questions in the season of Lent that will bring you closer to who God is calling you to be. Live your life shaped by the love that first claimed you.

Hear the words again for yourself, “You are my Beloved; with you I am well pleased.

Amen.

A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent II, March 1, 2015, dedicated to Neela and Ashlesha Onawales as they come to us from our mission partners, Deep Griha in Pune, India, to Tom Luff for his dedication and love through 3 ¾ years of service as our Building Manager and always to the glory of God!

“Following: Trusting Enough to Move”

*Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38*  
(Part III of VIII in sermon series, “The Essence of Christianity”)
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.

Following God is a tall order – just ask Abraham and Jesus. First, Abram whose name is changed by God into today’s text to “Abraham” once he starts following God… “Father Abraham,” the father of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, is the first person named in the 20th generation of human beings. He is not spoken of as one who is righteous or even particularly special. By the time we meet him he is 99 years old. He seems unsure. He makes mistakes. In a Genesis text which is absorbed by and focused on creation, Abram is not able to create. His story is dominated by childlessness. It is almost as if he is so unlike the Creator, that this makes him special. He is utterly human! As such, he is completely in need of God (reference: Abraham by Bruce Feiler)!

While many in the human race, especially in our generation, strive to be Godlike, powerful, and in control, in so doing, they lack what Abram possesses. They lack absolute humanness. Jewish German poet and Nobel Prize winner, Nell Sachs viewed Abraham as a representative human being, looking out at a decimated landscape, peering
beyond the flames, aching for just a piece of the divine. She writes of Abram speaking with God, "You have called me, Abram. And I long so much for you" (Ibid, p. 25).

By the 20th Generation of humans, God certainly needs one such as this – one who is so fully human, yet one who longs so much for the divine. As much as we are like Abraham – so human, and yet so longing for the divine – we too will find our rest in God.

Beyond his absolute humanness, two things set Abraham apart. First, he worships God as One! He is the first monotheist. Second, when God calls, he answers. God says “MOVE” and he gets up and goes. God chooses Abraham but Abraham also chooses to follow God. In essence, God chooses this man and throws an olive branch to all generations. God is saying, "If you put your life in my hands, if you follow me, you will be rewarded."

He gets up and moves, completely trusting in God. He goes forth completely submitting himself to God. He does this through what he does best. He sets off walking. But, this time, he walks with God. He leaves these footprints for us to follow. First, he doesn't believe in God! He BELIEVES God. He doesn't ask for proof. He provides the proof. He
moves! He follows.

Jesus follows too. He gives his life to God. He lays down his life for GOD and for his friends. Moreover, in Mark 8, as well as in Matthew, Luke and John, Jesus uses one word for “following” 26 out of the 30 times he calls others to follow him. That word is “Akoloutheo” (ak-oI-o-theh-o) which can be best translated, “walk with me in the same way I am going,” or “accompany” me.

I feel this translation changes the way we hear how we follow Jesus. It is more a hand offered to a friend to come with; to walk beside, to be with or to travel alongside. Have you ever had something you discovered that is beautiful, priceless and a wonderment to the eyes and spirit? Have you found a form of prayer; a flower blooming in the early spring, or a flower in barren places that you wanted to show a loved one? Have you discovered new meaning in life? New beauty? New joy? All you wanted to do was show it to someone and share it with someone? “Come, accompany me!?” “Come and discover this with me!”

Have you had your child take your hand and pull you to see a new exhibition at the Zoo; a new puppy at Pet Land (watch out for that one!), a newborn pony or lamb or baby?
“Come, mommy!” “Come, daddy?”

This is the spirit of the Christ at work in this phrase and in our lives. He says, “come and take my hand… come and walk with me… come on this journey of love and discovery.” Come on… you will love it, too!

But, too often we pull back. We hold off. We mistrust or distrust the source of wonderment. It can’t be that good. It can’t be that beautiful. So, we dig in our heals and stay where we are.

On the wall of her counseling office, one of my friends has the word, “MOVE.” It is strategically placed for those who are sitting on the couch and contemplating their lives—or perhaps complaining about everybody else. It is a simple wooden carving of one word—“Move.” We would all do well to follow such an admonition.

Are you wallowing in self-pity? Move. Are you wondering how do you apologize or self-correct something you have done that needs correcting or resetting? Move. Are you struggling to sort out the present or the future? Move.

When you move, I recommend you move with Jesus,
that you accompany Jesus on the steps of discovery and the
journey of faith. He is a great travelling partner. He will not
disappoint or abandon you.

Soren Kierkegaard, in an essay entitled, “Followers, not
Admirers,” writes:

_It is well known that Christ consistently used the expression
‘follower.’ He never asked for admirers, worshippers or
adherents. No, he calls disciples. It is not adherents of a
teaching, but followers of a life Christ is looking for…. His
whole life on earth from beginning to end was destined solely to
have followers and to make admirers impossible._

_What is the difference between an admirer and a follower?
A follower is one who strives to be what he admires. An admirer
keeps himself personally detached. He fails to see that what is
admired involves a claim upon him, and thus he fails to be or
strive to be what he admires._

_(On the other hand) the follower aspires with his whole
strength to be what he admires. And then remarkably enough,
even though he is living amongst a ‘Christian people,’ he incurs
the same peril as he did when it was dangerous to openly confess
Christ. …. In the face of this, the admirers will be become_
agitated with the follower. Even these words will disturb many – but then they must likewise belong to the admirers (Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard, compiled and edited by Charles E. Moore, Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 2003).

If you find yourself irritated, you may be discovering the admirer within you – yearning to become a follower. If you find yourself inspired by Abraham and Jesus to “accompany God on the journey of faithful discovery,” then, MOVE. Follow him.

At the heart of Christianity, in the essence of discovering who we are and to whom we belong, we must get up and move. We must raise our hands and offer our services to others. We must make the coffee, give the gift, open the door, step out of troubling or toxic situations and become partners with Christ on his journey of joy.

“Trust enough to follow him.” This is the essence of Christianity. Or in the words of Jesus, “walk with me in the same way I am going.” Amen.
A baptismal meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 8, 2015, Lent III, dedicated to my daughter Sarah Ruth Sitler Ahrens who was baptized 17 years ago today, to my grandfather Rev. Hugo Carl Kellermeyer who baptized me 57 years ago, March 10, 1958 and for whom I was named, to father and son, James “Trai” Wellington Blanks and Dominick Wellington Blanks who were baptized today and always to the glory of God!

“Justice: Words and Actions for Change”

*Exodus 20:1-17; I Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22*

*(Part 4 of 8 in the sermon series, “The Essence of Christianity”)*

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.

At the heart of Christianity is a strong desire to bring about “the Kingdom of God.” At the heart of this belief for social and political transformation throughout the Holy Scripture is God’s dream of justice, God’s passion for the earth and its
care, and God’s protesting and fighting the nightmare of injustice. The battle against injustice and the unconditional love of humanity and all creation is an essential part of Jesus Christ and his commitment to coming of God’s Kingdom on earth.

God’s passion for justice leads those who follow Christ to get real about this: the Bible is political as well as personal. By this, I do not mean the Bible belongs to a political party, or the “ism” of any one nation or economic system. Rather, the drive of the Bible to bring about the peace and justice of God’s kingdom or “realm” is everywhere present (drawn from Marcus Borg, The Heart of Christianity Harper and Collins, NY, NY, 2003, p. 126).

"The claim that the Bible is political and that the God of the Bible is passionate about justice is surprising, even startling to many Christians”, writes Marcus Borg in The Heart of Christianity (p. 127).

Every Sunday, as we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we pray for the coming of God's Kingdom and thus, the end of the reign of human kingdoms as we know them to be. The Gospels tell us that Jesus' vision of God's kingdom coming is expressed as both a transformational experience of heart and mind within a person AND the transformation of the social order. Changing my spirit and your spirit AND changing our economy and social order so that injustice
against God's Earth and against all the other children of God with whom we share God's earth were BOTH focuses for Jesus' ministry. Unfortunately, they are not BOTH focuses for all of us who claim to be Jesus' ministers and disciples who have followed him and continue to proclaim his message.

Let's be honest - when it comes to the transformation of souls or systems, where has the Church Universal pitched its tent? You know the answer. The church has focused on saving souls almost 100% exclusive to the focus of transforming social systems of injustice. Most preachers in America today can't stop talking when it comes to plans and designs for saving your soul and offering you a purpose driven life. However, most of my sisters and brothers in pulpits across this city and nation are mute when faced with injustices created by drones sent by our President and indiscriminately striking innocent victims worldwide, young women being trafficked as sex slaves on the streets of Columbus this weekend during the Arnold Classic, guns out of control in our schools and society in general, a public education system which leaves all too many children behind (especially boys and young men), policies which split immigrants (whom I call new Americans) and their families as they seek to find a home in the United States of America, putting an end – once and for all time to laws
which exclude gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons from marriage in our state or any state, turning around an infant mortality rate in our city which tops most third world nations, addressing the $1.6 trillion dollar student debt crisis sinking an entire generation coming out of college right now and closing forever an economic system in which the gap between rich and poor grows steadily every day leaving a shrinking class in the middle, a growing class of working poor, and a happy class of super rich.

Whose kingdom are we advancing when we are silent in the face of such injustice? Certainly not God's.

This almost singular focus on the salvation of individual souls to the almost total abandonment of transformational social structures has been going on in our faith since around 326 AD. When faced with an uprising among his own ranks, it is reported that the Emperor Constantine saw a vision of Christ in the clouds. After he led his troops to a crushing victory, the Emperor declared that Christianity would become the religion of the state. In this moment, the kingdom of God became the exclusive right of soul savers and was forsaken by those who believed Jesus was also about changing the society. While that's seemingly simplistic, it is also true.
For Jesus, it is never a kingdom without God and it is never God without a kingdom. In the words of New Testament scholar, John Dominic Crossan, "God's kingdom is what life would be like on earth if God were king and the rulers of this world were not." How would God in Jesus Christ, run the world if God was on Caesar's throne and not Caesar - or Obama, or Netanyahu, or Abbas, or Jinping, or Putin, or any other human leader of any other nation? What would the world look like if all were under the Kingship of God? It would be a just world order! All special interest groups would have to pack up and go home. All lobbyists would have to pray for forgiveness and find new work. In the Kingdom of God, all legislators would have to answer one question - "Is this law that you are creating just and fair for all?"

When Jesus continues his (Lord’s) prayer, he calls for "God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven." In the kingdom coming business of God, we all know that heaven's in great shape and earth is where the problems are. On earth, people (and nations) don't have daily bread. On earth people (and nations) are sunk deep in debt (although many would prefer to focus on trespasses and sins, for these also sink the human condition). As we read scripture, we know that God is always about the work of building justice, equality, and dignity. God is about
righteousness rolling down, not trickling down like a drip of water (ask the prophet Amos about this one).

**God's justice is deep in the heart of our Judeo-Christian faith.** About one hundred years ago, a Christian activist named Vida Scudder, a contemporary of Washington Gladden in the Social Gospel movement, listed three ways Christians can respond to a growing awareness of human suffering: **direct philanthropy, social reform, and social transformation.** Scudder said, "Direct philanthropy means giving directly to those who are suffering, social reform means creating and supporting organizations for their care, and social transformation is about justice - changing society so that the structures do not privilege some and cause suffering for others" ([Ibid, p. 201](#)).

The first two are about charity. The third is about justice. All three are important. Charity is always good and will always be necessary, but historically Christians have been long on the first two and short on the third. One reason is that charity never offends, while a passion for justices too often offends. To paraphrase Roman Catholic Bishop Dom Helder Camara from Brazil, "When I gave food to the poor, they called me a saint. When I asked why there are so many poor they called me a communist" ([Ibid, p.201](#)).
Charity means helping the victims of injustice (again a very good thing to do). Justice asks, "Why are there so many victims?" and then seeks to change the causes of victimization. Justice works to restructure the way the system is stacked against the poor. Justice is not about Caesar increasing his charitable giving or Pilate increasing his tithe. Justice is about social transformation.

But how do you get to transformation in a church and a world which works against it? I contend you get there one conversation at a time. You get there by talking and listening to others about the reality of their lives. In so doing, you will hear their stories of pain and where injustice has torn their soul and empowers them to act for change.

This is the BREAD model (Building Responsibility Equality And Dignity). BREAD listens to the voices of people speaking to what makes them angry. I have had thousands of these conversations throughout my life. They have changed me. Two of these conversations stand out in my mind. Each happened 18 years ago when BREAD was being born in Columbus.

One was with my brother and friend, The Rev. Jeffery P. Kee, Senior Pastor of New Faith Church of Christ on Oak Street. With a look searching deep into the pain of his memory, Jeffery shared how his brother had been gunned
down at a young age and how drugs and crime had claimed the lives of other family members and friends on Columbus' eastside. For him, drugs and crime were death, justice was life. Violence was visceral. Evil was his real enemy. Out of his own personal ashes Jeffery rose to stand for justice.

Another important conversation happened with Jack Bush. Jack had survived the Great Depression and WWII in the European theater - including the Battle of the Bulge where one night his company was pinned down inside a village inside a church. All night Jack prayed the Lord’s Prayer. In the morning he dug out of the rubble to find that the only wall still standing in the church was right over him. He turned his life over to Christ that day!

Nevertheless, Jack struggled in life with his own personal battles with depression. With great passion and directness he said to me, "Tim, no man should ever be denied work and the opportunity to feed his family. I saw what it did to my father. I know the struggles I faced for my family. Fighting for the equality and dignity of each working man is worth the struggle." With this, Jack was resolved to fight for justice.

37 years ago, on the fifth anniversary of the end of Viet Nam War, I heard something that stuck in my heart and soul and made sense. Speaking at a symposium at
Macalester College on the fifth anniversary of the end of the war in Vietnam - April 30, 1978 - Dr. Robert MacAfee Brown of Union Seminary in NYC said, “Stand up and speak out on behalf of the poor and those who need your voice in this world. Remember that: 1) where you stand will determine what you will see; 2. whom you stand with and listen to will determine what you hear; 3) and what you see and hear will determine what you say and how you act.”

So how do we do justice? Go to the place where God’s children and our brothers and sisters are crying. Stand in the midst of their tears and listen to their stories. Listen to what makes them sad and angry and I guarantee – if you are truly open and you are listening – you will hear the “Just” and “Still Speaking” Voice of God yearning to breathe and speak and cry and do the right thing for another human being. DO not be afraid – for no less than The Kingdom of God is calling you to “do justice, love with tenderness and walk humbly with our God.” Amen.
A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 15, 2015, Lent IV, dedicated to the custodial and nursery staffs of First Church and all the work they do day in and day out, week in and week out for our congregation and the care of our building and our children as they do this with compassion and love and always to the glory of God!

“Compassion: Moving the Wall”*

Numbers 21:4-9; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

(Part V of VIII in the sermon series, “The Essence of Christianity”)

The Essence of Christianity – we opened with Courage, Beloving, Following, Justice, Compassion….Still ahead Hope, Love and Resurrection Faith. Today, we focus on Compassion -which is first and foremost the comingling of heart and mind to change the way we receive and interact with our friends, with strangers and with enemies. Compassion defined Jesus as much as he defined compassion.

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.
It is said that during the Second World War some soldiers serving in France wanted to bury a friend and fellow soldier who had been killed in action. Being in a foreign country they wanted to ensure their fallen comrade had a proper burial. They found a well-kept cemetery with a low stone wall around it, a picturesque little Catholic church and a peaceful outlook. This was just the place to bury their friend. But when they approached the priest he answered that unless their friend was a baptized Catholic he could not be buried in the cemetery. He wasn’t.

Sensing the soldiers’ disappointment the priest showed them a spot outside the walls where they could bury their friend. Reluctantly they did so.

The next morning the soldiers returned to pay their final respects to their fallen friend but could not find the grave. “Surely we can’t be mistaken. It was right here!” they said. Confused, they approached the priest who was gardening nearby. He took them to a spot inside the cemetery walls. “Last night I couldn’t sleep” said the priest. “I was troubled that your friend had to be buried outside the cemetery walls, so I got up and moved the wall.”

Compassion means moving the wall.

How often have you moved your walls in changing in your heart and mind? If you ever have and when you did - Compassion was at the core of this action. Every time I have seen
the eyes of someone in need and moved “my wall” I know at the heart of the move was the presence of God in Christ.

**Jesus embodied compassion.** Like the Buddha and Confucius 500 years before him, like Hillel one of the most famous of all rabbis born just before him in 100BCE, Jesus lived and taught the Golden Rule. The Buddha said that we are called deeply into the four immeasurable minds of love. They are “loving kindness” which is friendship for everyone; “compassion” which desires all creatures to be free of pain; “pure joy” which is bliss in following love; and finally, “even mindedness,” which is a love for every being on the planet. Buddha’s close contemporary, Confucius, spoke of the Golden Rule first in the negative form, “Never do to others what you would not like them to do to you.”

Hillel was such a great Rabbi that Jews have named all their college campus centers after this wise and progressive rabbi and thinker. Hillel spoke of the Golden Rule in this way, “What is hateful to yourself, do not do to your fellow man. This is the whole Torah and the remainder of it is but commentary. Go study it.”

Jesus says in the Gospel of Luke, “Do to others what you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31). In Matthew’s Gospel he says, “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:31).

600 years later, Mohammed came along and said, “Not one of you can be a believer unless he desires for his neighbor what he desires for himself.” To this day, five times a day, every recitation
of the Quran begins with an invocation to God who is “merciful and compassionate.”

Unfortunately, many people today would rather be right than compassionate. They would rather lift up themselves and their successes than move their walls. They would rather follow the “me first” school of thought than the wisdom of the ages – the sages, prophets and mystics of vast spiritual traditions which do not consider compassion an impractical dream but a way of life and living.

From a word which has its Semitic roots in the womb of a woman – acknowledging compassion comes from the life blood of our mother’s womb – too many people have lost track of our birthright to compassion.

Compassion derives from both the ancient languages of Latin *pateri* and the Greek *pathein* – which together mean to “suffer, undergo, or experience.” Compassion means “to undergo or suffer an experience with another person. It means to “be in their shoes,” to “feel their pain” as though it were our own and to “enter with generosity of heart” into another person’s point-of-view. Compassion can be defined as an attitude of principled and consistent altruism (*Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, Karen Armstrong, Alfred Knoepf, New York, NY, 2011, p. 9).

In her 2011 book, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, Karen Armstrong calls for all men and women everywhere to
take five steps to live compassionately and thus, help alleviate the suffering of people everywhere. She joined with thousands of global citizens from every religious tradition all who called themselves people of conscience, in five different languages, to draft The Charter of Compassion. Here are the five principles:

*We therefore call upon all men and women:*

1. *To restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion;*
2. *To return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate;*
3. *To ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions, and cultures;*
4. *To encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity;*
5. *To cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings - even those regarded as enemies (Ibid, p.7).*

Moreover, Karen Armstrong goes 12 steps further by giving us 12 practical steps to a compassionate life. Her path to compassion is practical, yet spiritual and philosophical in its grounding.

**First, she says, learn about compassion.** Become educated about the depth and story of compassion.

**Second, look at your own world.** The sages of the past were always applying compassion in the present moment. Jesus’ admonition that the person without sin should cast the first
stone or his parables of faith – all pointed to present day questions and realities.

**Third, have compassion for yourself.** Rabbi Albert Friedlander, while a prisoner of the Nazis at 8 years old, made a list of all his good qualities, put that list upon his heart, and believed in them in the midst of being daily vilified and hated. Part of the success of “self compassion” is being able to name your shadow side. We often attack others or become defensive in relationship to the qualities we least like in ourselves. Learn to have compassion for yourself and then you can extend it to others.

**Fourth, develop empathy.** At the foot of the Cross, we meet the Crucified Christ who redeems the world. When our eyes gaze upon the crucified Christ, our hearts break in sympathy and love. Here we meet the interior movement of compassion and it is empathy for the other’s suffering that ultimately saves us.

**Fifth, Mindfulness.** This is truly recognition of the positives in our lives. Quite frankly, we are torn down by negatives. They wear us down to the bone. Mindfulness helps us name the pain that is within us and in so doing, we have the motivation to change. Mindfulness makes us less anxious about tomorrow. It helps us center in the goodness of this day.

**Sixth, Action.** One act of kindness can turn a life around. Call it grace. Call it a random act of kindness. Call it what you
will. But, if you want to be a force for good in this world, shield yourself with mindfulness and do not allow another’s destructive tendencies to tear you down. Lighten their lives with acts of friendship and kindness. Remember, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” This action mode is also a pattern changer in your life. Change from resentful to grateful. In the favorite words of Mark Williams, “Choose your attitude.” And if your actions for the day fell flat, go to bed and start again tomorrow.

**Seventh, How Little We Know.** Often we have no idea what the condition of another has been. When I was 20 and 21 years old, I worked in the Housing Projects of St. Louis’ north side. I was given leadership for eight weeks of 75 - 5 and 6 year olds. Although I had junior helpers, I was in charge. I was one of two white people among the children or helpers. There was one five year old who swore all the time. I tried to stop him from cursing, but to no avail. I went to our director and told her about me struggles. She looked at me and said, “James’ mother is a prostitute and his father is a pimp. He lives in an apartment where his mother is turning tricks. He is using the language he knows. So, Mr. Ahrens, why don’t you dedicate yourself to teaching him 8 new words this summer – a word a week? Then you will increase his vocabulary and make a new friend.”

That is exactly what I did and I ended up with a new friend and he had eight new words. How little we know. We need to
recognize and appreciate the unknown and the seemingly unknowable. We need to become sensitive to overconfident assertions of certainty in ourselves and others. We need to make ourselves aware of the spiritual mystery of each human being we encounter. And we need to admit how little we know.

**Eight, How should we speak to one another?** First, before we speak, we need to listen. This will help us hear the pain that surfaces – especially in rage and hateful speech. When my dog Dug goes down the street on a walk or plays in the Dog Park, he tilts his head and tries to hear the pain or anger in the barks of his fellow dogs. You may think this is crazy. But, he has a deep empathy for dogs and people. If Dug can do this, I can do this. You can do this. Let our words reflect listening to the suffering and pain of others. Antagonism will only produce greater contempt, hatred and more antagonism.

**Nine, Concern for Everybody.** In our early days as humans we relied on our tribes to defend and attack others. While tribalism is alive and well and often manifests itself in nationalism, we see repeated time and again this truth: destruction of our neighbor ultimately leads to our own suffering. When the voices of hate or vitriol spew – as they did this week on Iran – we need to come to together and say, “Enough!” We cannot lead our nation or live on this planet with threats being our way to address challenges. What do we know about our enemies and distant neighbors which can help us build
relationships? Compassion seeks to understand more than to be understood.

Ten, Knowledge. Like Education, this step calls for to understand the other and their full story. Karen Armstrong ends with a Buddhist poem, “Let all beings be happy!” In this we are reminded that the noblest way of living is to have love in your heart and to cherish all creatures as a mother cherishes her only child.

Eleven, Compassion calls us to Recognition. Karen tells the story of Christina Noble who grew up as an abused and neglected child in Dublin, Ireland. As she came out of her home and out of her pain, she chose to become a crusader for children in Viet Nam. She had a Moment of Recognition one day – in which she saw herself and her pain in a child’s face and realized there is no “us” and “them.” There are images of pain everywhere. We are bombarded by suffering. Like Christina Noble, we look suffering in the eye and meet it as an opportunity to embrace the other and show concern for all or we can run away. But, when we run away, compassion stays behind. It has just lost your presence and your elegant being in the moment of greatest need.

Finally, Compassion calls us to love our enemies. This is hardest step and the last step. I was asked about it the other day. Do I love ISIS? How about loving Osama Bin Laden? Hitler? Do I love suicide bombers and those who open gun fire on
children and adults in schools, malls and movie theatres? I don’t have all the answers. But, I trust Jesus. I follow him. I listen to him. According to Jesus, loving our enemies is our greatest act of compassion. We are called to love our enemies and offer the wicked man no resistance. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Only goodness can drive out evil and only love can overcome hate.” Love under extreme circumstances brings us to the ultimate place of making room for the other in our lives. As we reach the 12th step, we have moved far along the path of compassion. But, the journey is long and we have miles to go before we sleep.

I pray that we may we covenant one with another to restore compassion and the hard work of love to center of our lives in these times filled with vitriol and angst. So, let’s move our walls in the work and way of compassion. Perhaps we begin to move our walls by simply learning one new word a week for compassion. And that is enough for now. Amen.

*This sermon draws its wisdom from the writing on Karen Armstrong on Compassion, Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life, Alfred Knoepf, New York, NY, 2011.*
Jesuit priest Gregory Boyle is the founder of Homeboy Industries in the Delores Mission of Los Angeles. Since the 1980s, Father Boyle has worked to provide jobs and education as alternatives to the gangs and senseless violence found on the streets. What Father Boyle found was a lethal absence of hope that led kids into gangs and the perpetual cycle of gang violence compounded people’s despair. Homeboy Industries, is the largest, most comprehensive and most successful gang intervention, rehabilitation and re-entry programs in the country. They have helped over 120,000 gang members since they began. 

It’s a training program and a business. Homeboy Industries operates as a symbol as much as a place of concrete help. It started by asking the city of Los Angeles, “What if we were to invest in gang members, rather than just seek to incarcerate our way out of this problem?”

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Father Boyle is convinced that not much in his life makes any sense outside of God. A place like Homeboy Industries is all folly and bad business unless the core of the endeavor seeks to imitate the kind of God one ought to believe in. ....and in the end, he is helpless to explain why anyone would accompany those on the margins were it not for some anchored belief that [God] thought this was a good idea.\(^2\)

Boyle shares stories of his work at Homeboy Industries in a book called, *Tattoos on the Heart*. One story is about a 15 year old named, Rigo. Rigo is in a county detention facility outside of Los Angeles, called Camp Paige. Boyle meets Rigo before he is about to take his first communion in the prison gymnasium and learns more about his family. Rigo’s father was a heroin addict and an abuser. He would repeatedly hit Rigo with a pipe. The violence left a profound impact on Rigo. He cannot share this story without breaking down.

When Boyle asked about his mom, however, Rigo composes himself and points across the Gymnasium to a tiny woman standing at the entrance. “That’s her over there,” Rigo says, “There’s no one like her.” I’ve been locked up for more than a year and a half and she comes to see me every Sunday. You know how many buses she takes every Sunday?” Then

\(^2\) Ibid, 21.
gasping through his tears, he says, “Seven buses. She takes…seven…buses. Imagine.”

Father Boyle reflecting on that exchange says, “How then, to imagine, the expansive heart of God—greater than God—who takes seven buses just to arrive at us. We settle sometimes for less than intimacy with God when all God longs for is this solidarity with us. The desire of God’s heart is immeasurably larger than our imaginations can conjure. This longing of God’s to give us peace and assurance and a sense of well-being only awaits our willingness to cooperate with God’s limitless [generosity].”

“A place like Homeboy Industries is all folly and bad business unless the core of the endeavor seeks to imitate the kind of God one ought to believe in.”

Another story of a man who made a bad business decision. His name is Jeremiah. If you read a little further from the passage that was just read a few moments ago, you come across this story (in Chapter 32: 6-15). I had clearly forgotten about it until a colleague reminded me of it a few weeks ago. (READ Jeremiah 32:6-15)
It seems like a fairly odd text to but it is a story of hope. During Jeremiah’s long prophetic career, God often called upon him to deliver messages of judgment and doom. Babylon had become the strongest power in the Middle East and had attacked Judah. Jerusalem was under siege. The old king, along with many other prominent citizens had been deported. The new king was tired of Jeremiah and his prophecies so the new king threw him in jail. From his prison cell Jeremiah got the word that his relatives wanted to sell some land.

And God told Jeremiah to buy that piece of land. In the middle of a war, with the enemy closing in, God told Jeremiah to purchase a piece of land. Any way you look at it, buying a piece of land in a war zone was an utterly foolish thing to do. The Babylonians were at the gate. Buying land at that time would have been a bad investment. It is like investing a shopping mall in Aleppo, Tikrit or Eastern Ukraine today.

But that is precisely what Jeremiah did. Jeremiah got all the witnesses, signatures, seals and copies of the deeds. All parts of this real estate transaction were meticulous. He even put the deed in an earthen jar (the ancient version of a safety deposit box). All of this made it seem like this real estate
purchase mattered. Jeremiah knew how bad things were for the nations. The situation was tenuous. But here’s the thing, he acted like a person who had a future; he acted as though the people of God had a future. He invested in hope. It is as if he said, “Things will be rough for a while. You’ll have to leave your homeland but it won’t last forever. Someday you’ll return.” Scripture (Jer.32:15) reads, “For thus says the Lord of host, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.”

Jeremiah didn’t preach on hope. He didn’t write inspirational articles on hope. He bought a piece of land. People of faith have a unique gift to share with the world: the gift of hope. It is not a foolish or naïve hope. Like Jeremiah, we know just how bad things are, just how deep the problems go. We know there are no easy solutions to ISIS, peace in the Middle East, immigration, racism. We know our communities are riddled with gun violence, human trafficking and high rates of infant mortality. We read story after story of hopelessness.

But Jeremiah reminds us that these problems will not always be with us.

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3 With profound thanks to Rev. Amy Miracle, Broad Street Presbyterian Church, Investing in Hope, sermon Thanksgiving Day 2008. This sermon inspired today’s sermon.
“For thus says the Lord of host, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.” (Jeremiah 32: 15)

Our future rests with God. That knowledge is the source of our hope. Our hope comes as a light shining in the darkness. Life overcomes death. Death will not have the final word. The One who came to redeem the world is our hope. The One whose path we follow, the One who would take on human suffering in the form of a slave, the One who died and yet rose again--That One!!! That One is Jesus Christ, and is the One in whom we have hope.

Hope is placed in our hearts by a gracious and loving God, who reminds us of something bigger than ourselves. It’s a hope written on our hearts and rooted in the very nature of God. That hope can be trusted. That hope, we can carry with us.

What do you hope for? Many this weekend hope they still have a team in their basketball bracket? Some hope for an acceptance letter or call back for the next round of interviews. Maybe you hope for an end to a personal struggle? Guidance and help for a family member? Peace
after a long, tumultuous divorce? Clarity for what the next steps are after a terrible diagnosis? . . .

Unitarian Universalist pastor, Rev. Victoria Safford, tells the story of her friend who is a psychiatrist and who was deeply affected by the suicide of a young college woman whom she counseled. When her friend finally spoke out of the ashes of that day, she said:

“You know I cannot save them. I am not here to save anybody or to save the world. All I can do—What I am called to do—is to plant myself at the gates of Hope. Sometimes they come in; sometimes they walk by. But I stand there every day and I call out till my lungs are sore with calling, and beckon and urge them in toward a beautiful life and love…”

Rev. Safford goes on “there’s something for all of us there, I think. Whatever our vocation, we stand, beckoning and calling, singing and shouting, planted at the gates of Hope. This world and our people are beautiful and broken, and we are called to raise that up—to bear witness to the possibility
of living with dignity, bravery and gladness that befits a human being. That may be what it is to “live our mission.”

Rev. Safford wrote a poem called “The Gates of Hope” in response to her friend, she writes:

Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of Hope –
Not the prudent gates of Optimism,
Which are somewhat narrower.
Not the stalwart, boring gates of Common Sense;
Nor the strident gates of Self-Righteousness,
Which creak on shrill and angry hinges
(People cannot hear us there; they cannot pass through)
Nor the cheerful, flimsy garden gate of
“My everything is gonna’ be all right.”
But a different, sometimes lonely place,
The place of truth-telling,
About your own soul first of all and its condition.
The place of resistance and defiance,
The piece of ground from which you see the world
Both as it is and as it could be
As it will be;
The place from which you glimpse not only struggle,
But the joy of the struggle.

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And we stand there, beckoning and calling,
Telling people what we are seeing
Asking people what they see.

—The Gates of Hope by Rev. Victoria Safford,
UU minister

So what if we planted ourselves there…firmly at the Gates of Hope. Would we sense the intimacy that God is calling us into? The sense of deep awareness of God’s love and care for each of us just as we are? Can we name for ourselves the times when God’s overwhelming grace poured over us and reminded us that we are important and valued and loved? What would it be like plant ourselves at those gates, calling and crying out into a world that so needs to see the beautiful life and love in Jesus Christ?

Living into the Hope that is placed before us is what God calls us to do. God calls us to live lives shaped by that hope. God calls us to act on that hope. That’s why Rigo’s mom took seven buses each Sunday. That is why Jeremiah bought a piece of land. That’s why we do so many of the things that we do…why we volunteer, why we recycle, why we advocate for issues of justice for all people, why we bring children into the world. God calls us to live and dream and act as a people who have a future.
We live into Hope together. Hope is what holds us together as a Christian community. Together, we stand at those gates of Hope….sharing with the world what we see and asking others what they see. Someday, God will take this battered and broken world into God’s tender care and into God’s expansive heart and will make all things new.

Hope is a matter of the heart. It’s an essential part of the Essence of Christianity.

So stand at the Gates of Hope.

Amen.

**Benediction**
May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Romans 15:13

Prayer for Illumination:
Let us Pray: Gracious God in the quietness of these moments, silence in us any voice but your own. As Scripture is read and your word proclaimed, let us hear with joy and challenge what you have for us this day.
Our Gospel Lesson comes from the Gospel of John Chapter 12 verses 20-33.

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus.’ Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

**Jesus Speaks about His Death**

‘Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—“Father, save me from this hour”? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.’ Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.’ The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, ‘An angel has spoken to
him.’ Jesus answered, ‘This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Palm/Passion Sunday, March 29, 2015, dedicated to the memory of my friend David Shaver and always to the glory of God!

“Love: Laying Down Your Life for Your Friend”
Mark 1:1-11; Philippians 2:5-11; and Mark 14:43-15:47
(Part 7 of 8 in the sermon series, “The Essence of Christianity”)

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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Today’s Palm/Passion Story is one continuous story of disappointed expectations. From the palms being lifted, waved and laid down before the Almighty King on Sunday to the crucifixion on the Hill of Skulls on Friday, no one seems to get what they want in this week we call Holy.

In a story of disappointed expectations, someone you admire refuses to be who you think they should be.

The crowds know what they want and what they need. The people believe they NEED a hero, a triumphant warrior king – a liberator from the Roman rulers. The poor are suffering greatly under Roman oppression. Even the well off are living a circumscribed life, allowed to succeed or flourish within the confines of a foreign culture and its values. Let’s be honest. How can you be “the chosen people of God” when you have the boot of the oppressor on your neck?

In such circumstances as this, Jesus rises up from the hills of Nazareth and enters the scene. He makes his way to the Sea of Galilee where he spends years teaching and healing among fishermen and their families. The crowds want him to fix them. They cling to him and grasp at him to make their lives better. And the “BIGGEST” better of all is for Jesus to save them from oppression - just like he saved so many from sickness unto death and ignorance unto oblivion. As he heads to Jerusalem, they expect Jesus to save
them from the Romans – as he has attempted to save them from themselves. Jesus is their superman! They believe he can do it all!

But, in this story of disappointed expectations, we come to see that Jesus is not Superman. He is the Messiah. As the Messiah, he loves everyone. He does not hate anyone. He heals anyone. He does not kill anyone. He implores everyone. He impales no one. He yields tears when he weeps. He does not yield weapons as he wipes out. He prays for God to forgive his enemies and his friends who abandon him. He does not destroy friends or enemies with putdowns or judgments. In the end, he is alone and his mission to save the world is bloody and dirty and seemingly dead as he hangs on a tree and suffers excruciating death. But Jesus of Nazareth is never to be counted out. What we see as dead, God sees as waiting for the right time to rise again. It takes the Centurion – a nonbeliever – to proclaim the absolute truth of the Gospel of Mark – “Truly this man was God’s Son!” In these words, God is not disappointed. God is glorified!

But before we reached this declaration of faith, Jesus must go through his own week of disappointed expectations. The truth we discover in Holy Week is that Jesus is alone on earth. Heaven and he are the only ones who know the agony he is facing. Even as he rides into
Jerusalem surrounded by the crowds, he is alone because he knows what awaits him. Like a prisoner making his last march to the electric chair in modern times, Jesus is a dead man walking through the Golden Gate – except he is mounded on a colt. He knows this as he makes his way into Jerusalem.

This story is one in which he is betrayed by Judas, a disciple who believes him to be the Warrior King, abandoned by the other disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, denied by his closest friend, Peter while facing a monkey court and then in the midst of all this, scourged by Pilate in the name of “justice,” and rejected and turned on by the same crowds who loved him and worshipped him days before.

Finally and worst of all, Jesus receives the “silent treatment” from his Father in Heaven. God who appears to proclaim their relationship at his birth, his baptism and his transfiguration is silent. When Jesus needs his Father most of all – in the garden of Gethsemane and the cross of crucifixion, he hears nothing in reply to cries during this time of agony unto death. Talk about disappointed expectations! In the end Jesus is utterly and absolutely alone.

Why does he go through this? How does he go through this?
In the answer to these two questions, we discover the essence of the essence of Christianity. Jesus loves us so much that he lays down his life for us. Here is the heart of our faith. Here we meet God’s love that will not let us go.

Jesus says it before he does it. In John 15:13, Jesus says to his disciples, “There is no greater love than to lay down your life for your friends.” If you “get” this, if you do this, then you overcome all disappointed expectations. You become one with God in Christ in his agony, in his suffering and ultimately in his rising to eternal life.

Lay down your life for your friends. If you are not sure how to do this, listen very carefully. Mark’s passion narrative, which you are about to receive as a gift from God, tells you how Jesus laid down his life for his friends – which includes each of us. Listen and learn from our Savior what “extravagant love” looks and feels like. As our hymn text proclaims, “What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss to bear the heavy cross for my soul…”

To God be all the glory as we step into this most holy of weeks.

And I pray that your expectations for salvation and hope are not disappointed as our Lord of Love and Life lays down his life for you. Amen.
An Easter sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter Sunday, April 5, 2015, dedicated to Sarah Garbe and to the memory of Gunter Garbe who rests in eternal peace on this Easter Sunday, to my wife Susan Sitler and all the women of First Congregational Church, UCC who teach me everyday what resurrection faith is all about & always to the glory of God!

“Resurrection Faith: Modeled by Easter Women Rising!”
Acts 10:34-43; Mark 16:1-8
(Part VIII of VIII in the sermon series:
“The Essence of Christianity”)

Today we come to the end of the sermon series, “The Essence of Christianity.” Beginning in the snow and cold of Ash Wednesday and trudging through the five Sundays of Snow in February AND March 1, Emily and I have lifted up seven themes: Courage, Loving, Following, Compassion, Justice, Hope and Love as the Essence of Christianity. Now we come to Resurrection Faith. Each sermon and service is available on CD, on-line or printed in our information racks.
Would you join me in prayer?

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.

Amidst the fanfare of this day, our Easter Gospel lesson from Mark has a stark and strange ending – “they were afraid.” You just heard it a minute ago, Mark 16:8: “The women fled and said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.” Fear - not faith - grabs the last word in the gospel. So, what is going on with Mary Magdalene, Mary, James’ mother and Salome?

They rise earlier than all of us did today to go to the place where Jesus’ body has been laid so that they might anoint his three day-dead body with spices. As they get closer, their conversation becomes increasingly more practical: “How are we going to get that boulder away from the entrance to the tomb?” (Aside: Remember, all the big strong fishermen were hiding!) Surprisingly, when they arrive the stone has been rolled away. That in itself should create some fear and suspicion because it takes about four men and some serious leverage to move those tomb stones.
They enter and find no body. No “Jesus” body – but there is some-body – a young man, dressed in a white robe (an angel we wonder?) who says, “He is raised. He is not here. Go. Tell the others!” He continues, “He is headed to Galilee (home to everyone). That is where he will meet you, just like he promised.”

This is a truly radical beginning to a day that will never be the same for the rest of human history. But, instead of going and telling the others, Mark’s Gospel ends, “They went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” The words for “terror” and “amazement” are even stronger in Greek: tromos – trauma, and ecstasis – ecstasy.

Trauma and ecstasy seized them. With this, Mark’s Gospel ends in silence. Jesus never appears. Seems like we won’t be seeing Jesus today…. according to St. Mark, at least. Pick up your eggs and head for the exits. Right? Wrong! Please hang around just a little bit longer. To quote the great public theologian, Paul Harvey, “Now for the rest of the story.”

Here is the rest of the story - It is the midst of trauma and ecstasy Easter Women Rise! Consider the three Easter women of whom it was said, silence had seized them.
Mary, the Mother of James is Jesus’ mother! She gave birth to him in Bethlehem. Fearless throughout scripture and sinless throughout life, Mary was a teenage mom and now 47 and faithful to her son beyond belief - how long do you think Mary would stay silent?

Salome was Mary’s sister, Jesus’ aunt. Many believe she was present at Jesus’ birth and assisted as a midwife. She who NEVER abandoned her sister or her nephew and watched Jesus grow into the greatest rabbi of all the ages – how long do you think Auntie Salome would stay silent?

What about Mary Magdalene? She was by Jesus’ side through everything he faced. She was more faithful than Peter or any of the remaining 11 disciples. She was called by many, “The First TRUE Apostle.” Mary wasn’t going to let terror have the last word!

Just watch these three Easter Women Rise! Out of trauma comes Ecstasy AND GRACE! And we know that ecstasy cannot be silent for long. Consider their silence to be like Mary’s silence at Jesus’ birth. Luke’s Gospel tells us that Mary beheld her son and “pondered these things in her heart” before speaking them aloud. God knows that the greatest prayer each of us can offer is within our hearts. It is waiting to find the seed of stillness. It is waiting to grow into a great prayer of proclamation- from a heart that is given to God.
These Easter Women possess a “pondering silence.” These women’s silence is waiting to be born again. This **pondering silence** was like the silence of Mrs. Rosa Parks when ordered to move out of her seat on a cold December 1\textsuperscript{st} night in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955. Mrs. Parks sat quietly while city bus driver, James F. Blake did all the talking. He told her to get up. She gracefully refused. When he turned his order into threat of arrest, Mrs. Parks spoke. She simply said four words, *“You may do that.”* That is the kind of powerful silence we encounter here in Mark - silence turned into graceful and just action.

This is the **pondering silence** of a tune that won’t leave your head after the words are forgotten. It keeps moving around in your mind until your lips find new words that make sense - and then nothing can stop you from singing.

**Easter women’s silence in times of trauma produces action and justice.** Of all the Easter gospels, Mark’s story invites all of us to stand where those first trembling witnesses stood. Those three women didn’t see Jesus. Neither do we. They didn’t hear Jesus call their names. Neither have we. They weren’t invited to touch his wounded hands. We haven’t touched Jesus’ hands either. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome are our silent sisters. This narrative is left for us, the readers, to complete.
These three Easter Women can be our guides for telling the story and speaking words of faith. They can help us to bring the gospel into dialogue with our own lives. Mark couldn’t have done this because he didn’t know what our lives would be like. Between the women’s experience at the empty tomb and Mark’s writing, these three women did speak – or we wouldn’t know the story. They went back home to Galilee as Jesus had invited them (these thoughts inspired by Barbara Lundblad).

And there – my friends – is the rest of the story!

Whatever they said to the disciples, their testimony was shaped by two words: trauma and ecstasy. Theirs were not testimonies so absolute that they cancelled other possibilities. Theirs were not words that demeaned the experiences of others. Theirs was not a witness that proved they were right and everyone else was wrong. The testimony that grew from their silence was always invitation and never coercion.

This is the essence of Christianity. When our resurrection faith is real and beautiful and good and true to our Risen Savior – our faith invites others to join in. It is never coercive, it is always invitational. This is the resurrection faith that shines through our Easter Women as they teach us how to invite others to see the love and grace of God. Our lives have been shaped by Easter Women such
as Mary, Salome, and Mary - women who have silently and powerfully wrapped their arms around us and invited us to live good news.

For many of us, we need look no farther than our own mothers. But, all of us have been deeply influenced by women beyond them. These Easter women have held onto our children and the children of others. They have welcomed the orphans, the refugees, other women, those whom others have forgotten and the forsaken. They have invited in those traumatized by abuse, battered, beaten, and silenced by a world that hurts rather than helps. Silently, quietly, effectively, peacefully, justly and powerfully Easter Women have risen and delivered a faith in action that makes sense.

Their silence may be at sunrise pondered in their hearts, but by noontime it is transforming other people’s lives, by night it has delivered hope and new life. That is what these women do. It is what so many women do.

Like Rosa Parks looking into the eyes of James Blake, women of faith move us deeply as they work to change the trauma of a violent and violating world through a few words and a ton of ecstasy in action.

Each of us can name the women of faith who have inspired us to move from tromos – trauma and ecstasis – ecstasy - to faith and action. I begin with my mom. You
may begin with yours. These Easter women in our lives may be other mothers or grandmothers. They may be our sisters. They may be our wives or life partners. They may be our daughters or granddaughters. They may be our friends, our teachers, our co-workers or neighbors. They may be poets, prophets or problem-solvers who turn trauma into grace-filled ecstasy and grace. Give thanks to God for them today. Our faith was saved on Easter day by women such as these!

On the first Easter, God was wise to send three women to the tomb of Jesus. God knew that the women traumatized as witnesses of Jesus’ crucifixion would not mess up on his day of resurrection. They stayed present in prayer at the foot of the cross through each agonizing moment while men cowered and hid far from that hill of death. These same women were sure to find a way to get the story out! As poet, Adrienne Rich puts it, "The connections between and among women are the most feared, the most problematic, and the most potentially transforming force on the planet."

Watch out for Easter women! They will change the world! So as you leave here today, how will you live your resurrection faith? How will you tell this story? Will you leave space for those whose stories are different from yours? Will you insist that you alone are right and others are wrong? Will you invite others in or coerce them?
Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome are watching us today. They want to make sure we get it right. In their initial silence they remind us that the life of faith is shaped by trauma and ecstasy. In the end, they hold the key to the essence of Christianity – a resurrection faith that is unafraid – a faith that rises from trauma and moves to ecstasy and then to grace – a faith that is able to claim God’s resurrection in Christ Jesus our Savior! You can ponder in silence now, but by tonight I expect you to be living this story! It is the greatest story the world has ever known and we are blessed to call it ours. Alleluia! Amen.

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