

# “Reconciling Light Shining”

*Transfiguration Sunday*

*Exodus 34:29-35; II Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-36*

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens  
Senior Minister

*March 3, 2019*

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: [home@first-church.org](mailto:home@first-church.org)

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Transfiguration Sunday, March 3, 2019, dedicated to all the children and to all the LGBTQ members and friends of our congregation and the Christian faith who seek the light of God in Christ each day and always to the glory of God!

*“Reconciling Light Shining”*

*Exodus 34:29-35; II Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-36*

Today, we come to the end of a very long season of Epiphany. We have been particularly attuned to the ways and times in which God is manifested in our lives and in the life of the world. We stand on the edge of Lent which begins in three days on Ash Wednesday. In the season of Lent, we will turn with Jesus toward Jerusalem and the mount of Calvary. Before we go to Calvary, we pause on another mountain for one of those “peak experiences.” We find ourselves today on the Mount of Transfiguration in

which Jesus is turned to light. Here our deep longing, our hungering for God’s transcendence shines through. We begin the journey in the valley with a Bible and a newspaper...

+++++

*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.*

+++++

Over 50 years ago, the great 20<sup>th</sup> Century theologian Karl Barth was quoted in Time Magazine saying, “*Take your Bible and take your newspaper and read them both. But, interpret newspapers from your Bible*” (Time Magazine, May 1, 1966). I couldn’t agree more with Dr. Barth. As people of faith, we must always live in the times and the tension between the Ancient Word of God and the present news of humanity.

This week, there has been plenty of news to interpret. Names like Michael Cohen, President Trump and Kim Jung Un bring to mind opportunities to speak about the news – with the Bible in hand. But, two news stories really raised the stakes about the newspaper and the Bible had to

do with the Roman Catholic Church and the United Methodist Church. Each were global and local stories. Based on my reading of both, a great host of Biblical people have plenty to answer for this week in relation to the news they themselves have generated.

Finishing a four-day Conference in Roman last Sunday, the Roman Catholic Church faced even tougher and tougher questions about transparency and accountability as the Church looks to turn around many, many years of abuse by priests against children and women and just as many years of cover-ups by bishops, cardinals and popes.

Then, on Friday, the Diocese of Columbus' retiring bishop, Bishop Campbell released a list of 34 priests with certifiable claims of abuse – including many that some of us know. There were accompanying articles talking about priests who were not on the list but should have been. In a conversation with Catholic friends yesterday, this story really hit home. The priests listed – in many cases – had been their parish priests and some counted them as friends and spiritual and inspirational men. Others talked of children and priests from various stages and places in their lives of faith who had been victims and abusers. It was heartbreaking. It was heart-wrenching.

Meanwhile, in St. Louis this week, the United Methodist Church met and once again voted to uphold church policy opposing same-sex marriages and opposing the ordination and support of LGBTQ clergy. The vote was 438-374. This decision came after intense debate and a closer vote than before. But, ultimately, they didn't move the needle after years of voting against gay clergy and against gay marriage. They still have one policy which is to be universally implemented across the world for 12 million+ Methodists. Back home, many Methodists and former Methodists grieved (and celebrated) the decisions coming out of St. Louis showing how this denomination is really split over the extravagant welcome of LGBTQ clergy and all those for whom "love is love."

Let me address the Methodist news first...

This is really tough for us at First Church and in the United Church of Christ. Our denomination has ordained openly gay clergy since 1972 – that is 47 years. We were joined by The Lutherans joined us in 2010 and the Presbyterian Church USA in 2012. Others do this as well including the Disciples of Christ and the Episcopal Church in America. At First Church, the pastors of our congregation have been performing same-sex marriages since the mid-90's with the support of our Church

Council. When the Supreme Court's decision came through on marriage for all on June 25, 2015, it was our congregation that welcomed the entire community for a service of celebration that night. As an Open and Affirming Congregation since 2002, we have openly received and fully celebrated our sisters and brothers who are blessed and created by God as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning. I am so sad and hurt for you who are LGBTQ and for of you who are family and friends.

We worked out and addressed the Biblical questions and issues related to LGBTQ people and concerns close to 20 years ago. Personally, I have been preaching about our extravagant welcome to all people since 1993. I truly don't get the United Methodists and others withholding full welcome and full communion for their clergy and members who are LGBTQ. It literally makes no sense to me. So, I only pray that the United Methodists can figure out a way to change what is broken around gay clergy and marriage.

God's word speaks clearly to both situations – Catholic and Methodist. It is never okay to hurt a child or abuse women or other human beings. It is never okay to lie about it or cover-it-up. There is a reckoning with God

which comes to those who hurt the little ones, the vulnerable ones, the innocents in any place and any time. There is also a reckoning which comes with those who fail to call the police on crimes against children and act as though nothing happened. When Jesus said, “let the children come to me and do not hinder them, he meant it.” When he blessed them and healed them, he meant it for good. No one who “hinders” a child, hurts a child, or stops the criminal investigations into such abuse should be allowed to walk free and do it again. No one.

I see the faces of the children who have been abused and whose lives were devastated and destroyed by priests they trusted and I get really angry. I think there is no other way to reconcile the church to this senseless story involving tens of thousands of priests and hundreds of thousands of children and women than to hit the “reset” button. The church must do more than say “we are sorry.” The church must change – welcoming women into the priesthood, accepting men who married, and encouraging priests who are gay or straight to marry the men or women with whom they loving and meaningful relationships. It is time to have a healthy sexual ethic in the priesthood of the church.

As for our sisters and brothers in the United Methodist Church, my heart breaks over and over again. I know your hearts are breaking, too. When Jesus doesn't speak at all to homosexuality (because he has no interest in judging people concerning their sexual orientation) and the seven passages which do are specific and almost always interpreted poorly, there is no Biblical basis for exclusion for LGBTQ persons. It isn't there. We have to stop acting like it is and thus it becomes okay to judge our gay sisters and brothers simply because of their sexual identity or sexual orientation.

With the Bible in one hand and the newspaper (or news in some form) in the other, we move from the valley of this week to the Mount of Transfiguration. We carry the news and Bible with us. Here we find the earliest form of the church – not sitting at tables making decisions about what God says or doesn't say – instead they are climbing a mountain. We experience transcendent scriptural texts delivered from two mountaintops in a desert long ago. Both Exodus 34 and Luke 9 tell us that God sees his beloved ones and shines light and glory through their transfigured reflections to all of us.

**God's Light is shining in these texts – and in our lives!**

How you and I perceive people and life around us is directly related to light shining. We see because the spectrum of light breaks open when it shines on objects. “Light reflects, refracts and absorbs in ways that allow us to discern shapes and movement. God created light first – because without light, the rest of creation would have no definition or vibrancy. We humans see only a tiny fraction of all the light that God made, yet we persist in the presumptuous notion that only what we see exists – that only a 300-nanometer piece of (light) spectrum is real.” (Adam Thomas quoted in “The Living Word,” The Christian Century, February 9, 2010, p.18).

Jesus blows away our presumptions when he ascends the mountain with Peter, James and John. In the moment of his transfiguration, Jesus doesn't change his form or shape or hue, but he does change the disciples' perception of his appearance. Jesus gives his disciples the gift of seeing him as God sees him – a glorious being of dazzling white light. Instead of reflecting the blues and reds and yellows of the visible spectrum, Jesus reflects God's light. He shows himself to be luminous (Ibid). In other words, Jesus is shone by God to be the pure shining light of God that he truly is.

When Jesus opens the eyes of the disciples wider than ever before, they perceive two other people, Moses and Elijah. Elijah is the great mystical prophet who battled the false prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel and later disappears in a chariot of fire. It is Elijah who is expected as a guest at each Passover Seder. Ever since his being carried into heaven so long ago, a seat is open for him at every Passover celebration as Jews anticipate his return in glory. He is God's pure light.

Moses, the strong deliverer of freedom and the law, comes down from his own mountaintop experience with God and delivers the tablets of the law. Having spoken with God and received the law, his skin is shining God's pure light. Aaron and the Israelites are afraid to come near him because of his dazzling appearance.

We wrongly assume Moses saw the face of God (largely because Charlton Heston's face is changed in "The Ten Commandments"). This is not true. Exodus 33:23 records God's words to Moses, "*You shall see my back, but my face shall never be seen.*" So, Moses isn't shining because he saw God on the mountaintop. **Moses is shining because God saw him.** (Ibid).

**Elijah, Moses and Jesus all show us that God sees us.** No matter who we are or where we are on life's journey, God sees us! God sees us not through our limited visual spectrum, but through the shimmering expanse of God's glorious spectrum. We may be visible to one another simply because we reflect and absorb great quantities of white light, but God created each one of us to do much more. **God created us to shine. (Ibid).**

**That's right - we are designed by God to shine God's light.** Each of us is designed by God to shine. Over the years, our luminosity tends to fade. Every unkind word, every poke, every jab, every neighbor mistreated, every gift hidden, every resource hoarded adds layers of grime over our radiant light. Every hand not extended, every gift squandered, every road not taken, every opportunity missed adds layers of apathetic dust to our radiant light. Grace gives way to grime. Light and luminosity are covered in the shadows of loss.

**In our shining for God, we need to remember two things.**

**First, God never forgets us.** In spite of our aging, our grime, our dust, despite our scars and our fears, our upsets and setbacks, God sees us as light shiners. God knows we

have buried our luminosity beneath layers of stuff and issues which mount. God offers us the gift of transfigured eyes, so that we might see as God sees. When we see ourselves struggling to shine, we can wipe off the grime and dust and begin again, each and every day. With God's help, we can become radiant again.

**Second, God gives us the power to reverse our radiance decline.** Each kind word spoken, each embrace extended, each gift given, each neighbor treated well, every road now taken, every opportunity answered – all strip away grime, all embrace grace. Apathetic dust is swept away and light and luminosity reveal lives healing and pain dissipating. Every day, every step of the way, radiance increases and becomes our reality once again.

Radiance is never far from us because God made each of us to shine just as Elijah, Moses, and Jesus shone. Each of us is designed by God to shine.

On this Transfiguration Sunday, I pray that God gives you eyes to see in the glorious spectrum of God's light. I pray that God gives you eyes to see yourself as God sees you – a luminous being in need of some scrubbing and dusting. I pray that with the Bible in one hand and news

in the other, you will learn to interpret the love of God and the light of God in all you say, see, and do.

I pray that as God has created you as beautiful and beloved, you will shine God's light now and through all eternity. Amen.

Copyright 2019, First Congregational Church, UCC