

# “Behold, One Columbus”

*6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Eastertide*

*Acts 16:9-15; Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5;*

*John 14:23-29*

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens  
Senior Minister

*May 1, 2016*

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, May 1, 2016, The Sixth Sunday of Easter, dedicated to the Rev. Dr. Carol Pinkham Oak as she retires from active ministry today, to Vic Campbell as he battles for life today with Steven Anderson his life partner by his side and always to the glory of God!

***“Behold, One Columbus!”***

*Acts 16:9-15; Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5; John 14:23-29*

+++++

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of one of hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

+++++

In a wonderful new book entitled, The Defender: How the  
Legendary Black Newspaper Changed America, author Ethan Michaeli tells the 100-year story of Robert Abbott’s Chicago-based newspaper. Taking us from the age of Pullman porters

through the age of Obama (as the Michaeli calls it), The Defender chronicles the story of America's #1 African-American newspaper. For more than 100 years, The Defender battled racism, economic injustice, lynchings, poor public education, job inequality and the rights of workers and soldiers fighting in and returning from three major 20<sup>th</sup> Century wars.

Born to former slaves and raised in Woodville, South Carolina where his step-father was a Congregationalist pastor, The Defender's founder and publisher Robert Abbott would rise to become one of the powerful men in Chicago by the end of his life. He had a vision for a better city and a better world for all people. He used to say, "If we take care of our community first, our community will take care of us." He once

wrote, “One day, Chicago will be one city – no color barriers, no divides. We will shine God’s light in this city of God!”

What a vision – a vision of one city, a vision of the Kingdom of God comes to earth. Why not? Why not hold on to a vision of a peaceful, prosperous, undivided city? Why not believe in the goodness of God and the goodness of humanity?

Revelation, the last book of the 66 books of the Bible ends with such a vision of one city. “The Holy city seen of John” is a city filled with dazzling light. It is light not provided by the sun, moon and stars but by the radiant glory of God! It is a city where all people come together – **bathed in God’s light** – to be one in loving and serving God. It is a safe city. It is a city with open doors – welcoming everyone who comes from every land,

every tongue and every color. There is no more night! There is no more fear in this city. It is a beautiful city which glistens with joy and abundant life. It is a city in which unity and diversity have found perfect balance. It is the holy city of God.

Throughout the ages, people have dreamed dreams and held visions of a better world. **We call them “dreamers and visionaries.”** Some of us look at the dreamers and visionaries **and think they are “not quite all there.”** Others of us look at them and find hope in their hopefulness and strength in their positive view of all that stands before us as struggle and challenge. They keep us going through the dark nights of the soul and the violent times of the city.

I believe there are really two ways to look at our world - and more specifically Columbus, Ohio and Franklin County. We can look through the lens of scarcity, fear (and anxiety) and despair OR through the lens of abundance, hope and promise. In other words, do we buy the narrative of leaders who cry, we don't have enough to feed the poor, house the homeless, employ the unemployed and under-employed and educate the poorest of our children? Or do we follow the narrative of those who proclaim that God is the giver of all that is good and we are here to serve God. I believe (and I hope) we believe in our church and in our city and county, we have enough resources to change the landscape. We can feed

everyone, house everyone, employ everyone, and educate everyone.

We are called to be people of abundance as we follow a God of abundance.

This is the vision of Generosity of which Rev. Corzine wrote this week in the newsletter.

A colleague of mine once told his congregation to empty their pockets and purses in church. He told them they had enough in their pockets to cover all the costs of the church, pay the staff an equitable wage, pay for the mission of the church and much, much more. **He said**, “If you simply used the money you carried into church today, we could pay our bills **and stretch our mission.**” He had a vision of abundance and

led his people to follow that vision. They changed their church culture from one of scarcity to one of abundance.

## Scarcity or Abundance?

This is an age old story. In Exodus, the second book of the Bible, the Pharaoh of Egypt governs through fear. He is a Scarcity Man. He is also a scary man (scarcity and scared come from the same root word). If we follow Pharaoh and Pharaoh's narrative, we are driven to embrace scarcity, fear, and despair. As Pharaoh followers, there is nothing more for you and me to do other than to "get as much" as we can for ourselves and our families. In other words, Pharaoh's narrative justifies greed. This is the basic impulse behind an awful lot of consumption.

If there is no hope for myself or others, then I ought to get as much as I can right now.

**God's story is different from this dominant narrative.**

**God's story is simple.** God says, "There is enough." We all rise together through abundance (manna in the wilderness), Hope and Promise. Furthermore, The Torah and the Great Commandment to "love God and love our neighbor as ourselves," unite us and teach us that meaning in life comes from our relationships with God and with one another. The biblical story shows that communities will prosper when we are in things together.

**Pharaoh's narrative is toxic.** Ask the people of Flint Michigan. They have become sick with toxic leadership and

decision-making. When we give in to the story that we can't fix something, when we become intoxicated by the thought that we can't afford to do the right thing, we allow the poison of this narrative to get into our blood system as a people.

For example, we look at children differently. We call some children "at-risk." We call other children "the future." More often than not, these labels are given by virtue of zip code and neighborhood. Kids who go to failing schools are "at risk". Kids who go to "excellent schools" are the future. In time, the attitude of "despair" allows the powers that be to write off and throw away millions of "at risk" children. This write-off is justified by "where" the kids live as if failing schools were divinely ordained.

It takes a lot of work to see beyond Pharaoh's narrative.

Most of the time our imaginations are captured by these stories of scarcity, fear and despair. When politicians tell us that there is not a \$1 million to support proven models of mental health care, that sounds very reasonable. But what we don't see, unless we really pay attention and work at it, is the tens and hundreds of millions given away by the city leaders to underwrite sports teams, to abate taxes or grant payoffs to people.

Just like the Pharaoh, these structures are built stone by stone. It should not be surprising that it is so difficult to escape this narrative. But, we called to follow God not Pharaoh. We are called to follow in the pathways of abundance, hope and promise.

It is not always easy to pitch out tents in the city of God. It is not easy to follow and stand with the visionaries and dreamers. But, if David Forney is right, at least half of you have dreams and visions of your own. Forney has written about the surprising results from a Gallup survey of Presbyterians in the 1990's (not the 1890's but the 1990's!) in which half of the Presbyterian church members, and even more clergy, had had a vision from God. This is a remarkable finding. I agree with Forney that we need to open our hearts and minds to God at work in our lives in the most dramatic and unexpected ways that might transform our lives and our ministries. We can see the city of God unfolding before us. We can have and hold a vision for the city of God.

Our vision may not be as complete as John's Revelation. It may not have been filled with light, dramatic and colorful creatures in the cityscape in which we live – but let us dream and see a place where there are no tears weeping from the pain of injustice and the effects of greed.

Let us pray and act in such a way that we become more like the city of God which John foretold. I pray that we see One Columbus, not segregated and divided; not scraping for a little when we can be the city of abundance, hope, and promise. It is my prayer that we stand up and be counted as those who act for justice and not just talk about it. To that end, I invite you once again, to join me at the Nehemiah Action on Monday, May 9. There is an information and sign-

up sheet in your bulletin today. Please fill it out and place it in the offering plate as one of your gifts given today. And then come and be a part of the vision and dream of a more beautiful city – a city seen of John.

I believe what Robert Abbott said many years ago about Chicago is true for us in Columbus today: “if we take care of our community first, our community will take care of us.”

Amen.

Copyright 2016, First Congregational Church, UCC