

“The Commandment to Love”

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Acts 10: 44-48; 1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens
Senior Minister

May 6, 2018

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

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 6, 2018, the Sixth Sunday of Easter, dedicated to Benton Myles and Rylan Antonio Ahrens, to our BREAD organizers Rob Sievert-Wagner, Clarissa Epps and Cora Harrison who live the commandment of love in their work and to all men, women and children in this world who live each day into Christ's commandment of love, whether they be Christian or some other faith or no faith at all – but they love one another – and always to the glory of God!

“The Commandment to Love”

Acts 10:44-48; I John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

+++++

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

+++++

Every other Friday morning, Susan and I rise at 5 a.m. and begin the journey to Cleveland, Ohio. We have been doing this since September 2015. We arrive a little after 8 a.m. at the apartment of our son Luke and his wife Kirsten on the campus

of Case Western University. The door opens and there before us are our two grandsons, Benton and Rylan. Four faces light up. Four loves ignite. We begin what will be 8 ½ hours of sheer love and delight.

At the end of our day of bliss, we pack up and head home to Columbus. We call my mom to tell her all about her great-grandsons. She asks a lot of questions about the Cleveland weather and we make our way through Friday rush hour traffic and eventually end up at home welcomed by Dug and Charlie – our two Doodle dogs who also greet us with joyful smiles and kisses. Does love get any better than this?

Grandsons to the North! Doodles to the south. Love is spoken freely and all day every other Friday!

We come home filled with love and Joy!

Packed in the 8½ hours of time with Benton and Rylan are times of lots of dancing, singing, reading books, playing games, walking, meals, and regular trips to the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Natural History Museum and the Cleveland Botanical Gardens (they live about one mile from all these great places).

Most important, we exchange hugs, kisses, hand-holding and then more hand-holding, hugs and kisses. If you can't tell, I

absolutely love and adore my grandsons. They are pure joy and delight. I abide in their love and they abide in my love.

Also, Susan and I are fulfilling our duty to love as Jesus commanded us to do. It is easy peasy to love these two. Bring on all the other commandments!

While the world around us spins seemingly out of control, Susan and I are filled with bliss, love, joy and delight every other Friday as our little family unit of four imbibes in love and joy. And even some ice cream occasionally (please don't tell their parents).

So, what happens to following the commandment to love the other 28+ days of the month? I will say it is a little harder to fulfill it so completely.

Since becoming a first-time grandfather almost three years ago in June when Benton was born, I have tried to figure out the formula of "unconditional love." Of course, "unconditional love" begins with adoration. My first words about my firstborn grandson were, "He is perfect." That opening feeling has never changed. It has only intensified. Then, we doubled perfection with Rylan's birth in March 2017. Once again, I proclaimed, "He is perfect...too!"

I can (barely) see their mistakes, but nothing about them is a mistake. I can see their very slight and tiny imperfections, but I have a hard time believing they really exist. Parents can't see what we see as grandparents. We have eyes of pure love. Parents don't have the same vision we have. Am I right?

So, what do we do with this love? How can it translate to the billions of others who walk this planet with us? Can it be bottled and used as a serum to inoculate the world against hate, vitriol and judgment? Perhaps.

This is where today's gospel comes to play on the playground of grandparents' love and delight. Jesus is sharing what can only be described (in my mind) as a "grandfather's love" for all people everywhere. He is incredibly unique and blessed Being who can love THE WHOLE WORLD like I love Benton and Rylan. He is able to translate unconditional love into a global experience. We need to drink deep the medicine of the world's greatest medicine man.

Jesus says, *"Love one another as I have loved you.... So that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete."* He is concerned not only that we love one another but that our JOY is complete as well. It is in loving that we come to experience joy.

So, what is holding us back?

Years ago, in reading Jim Wallis' book, *Call to Conversion*, Jim described something that happened at a conference in New York City on social justice that included religious leaders of all kinds. He writes: *"At one point, a Native American stood up, looked out over the mostly white audience, and said, 'Regardless of what the New Testament says, most Christians are individualists with no real experience of community.' He paused for a moment and then continued: 'Let's pretend that you were all Christians. If you were Christians, you would no longer accumulate. You would share everything you had. You would actually love one another. And you would treat each other as if you were family.'* His eyes were piercing as he asked, *'Why don't you do that? Why don't you live that way?'"*

Maybe living into our call to love one another simply begins with a game of pretend. ***Let's pretend we are all Christians.*** Playing pretend can be fun. So, let's try it.

What would that look like, in this world? How might it be different from the way we live today? While we too often act like our church membership is something **we choose**, much as we shop for other needs in our lives, maybe we should behave **as those who have been chosen by Jesus**. He chooses us and names us and claims us and calls his "loves." He looks at us with eyes of love. He speaks to us like we are his grandchildren – unconditionally loving us and pulling us close.

Rather than expecting our church to fill our needs, aren't we called instead to seek to fill the needs of others and in so doing, find our own deepest needs met? How does being a part of this beloved community afford us the possibility of both space and time for friendship, for caring about one another- for loving one another? Isn't this what love really looks and feels like?

In my last few sermons, **I have been calling us to share our love** in the BREAD Nehemiah Action – which is NOW only 30 hours away– tomorrow, May 7 at 6:45 p.m. at the Celeste Center at the Ohio State Fairgrounds.

You may not see it, but I do. I ask you to trust this grandfather. We are being called to share our love with others.

I am haunted by the families I see in our community – more 54,000 families of them – who are struggling daily to pay their bills and barely scratch out a living – who are at risk in shaky housing situations in our community.

I see other people's grandchildren who are not eating well, living in unstable home environments, who move from apartment to apartment, from school to school, and struggle to stay awake in the daytime because of the terrors of the night. They are wounded in body, soul and spirit. They need a stable home – not just a place that is scary in all types of ways.

I am haunted by the image of opening their doors and seeing eyes of fear and anxiety. I imagine no dancing and no singing; no laughter and no joy. It breaks my heart.

And I hear Jesus “commanding” me to love **THESE** grandchildren like I love Benton and Rylan. I hear him commanding me to lay down my life for **THESE** little ones who have no home or perhaps unstable ones; no parents, or perhaps unstable ones; no love and no joy in their daily living, or perhaps so little of it that is hard to see.

I hear him giving one commandment to me and you: “Love one another as I have loved you.” While the Hebrew Scriptures are packed with 613 laws and ten commandments, this is **THE ONLY** commandment Jesus gives. He keeps it simple.

“Love one another!” It is the only commandment that matters. So, as we turn to the Lord’s Table of Grace, let us love one another.

And I know what this love looks and what it feels like. It is amazing. It is unconditional. It pure. It is joy! It is – LOVE. Amen.