

“The Reason I Was Born Was to Testify to the Truth”

Reign of Christ Sunday

*2 Samuel 23:1-7; Psalm 132:1-12; Revelation 1:4b-8;
John 18:33-37*

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens
Senior Minister

November 25, 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 sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 25, 2018, Reign of Christ Sunday, dedicated to Sarah Ruth Sitler Ahrens on her 23rd Birthday, to Edward Charles Emery, born on Thanksgiving Day to Dr. Matt and Rev. Lauren Emery and always to the glory of God!

“The Reason I Was Born Was to Testify to the Truth”

2 Samuel 23:1-7; Psalm 132:1-12; Revelation 1:4b-8;

John 18:33-37

“Fear and Truth” are two words that seem to run underneath all the talk of kingdoms and trials, glory and power in the readings for this “Reign of Christ Sunday” (formerly, “Christ the King Sunday”). This final day of the church year is the one in which we lift up our Savior as the One who is in this world “reigning” – the Alpha and the Omega – the Beginning and the End of all things for all time. Today ends a church year that began on the first Sunday of Advent, December 3, 2017. Next Sunday, we return to Advent again and begin a new liturgical year, “Year C” and with it a new cycle of readings. Please 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.

+++++

The clock is now ticking. As of today, we have only 30 days left until Christmas. While some of us would like to take our time and breathe in the season a little more deeply, there are those around us who are anxiously waiting for Christmas to come again.

On the day after Thanksgiving, I overheard my daughter-in-law Kirs say to my oldest grandson Benton, ***“NOW, you can talk about Christmas.”*** At 3½ years old, Benton has had Christmas on his mind since he stepped into the stores, listened to the music and witnessed all the decorations for the season that arrived the day after Halloween. He got out of his costume only to discover Christmas was taking over the aisles in the stores! God bless all of you who are challenged by raising smart little ones in our consumer-culture which delivers Christmas 55 days before it’s due date! Don’t you think that is more than a bit premature?!

But, before we deck the halls, sing the songs, and talk the talk about Advent and Christmas and the birth of Christ, we have the visitation of one more “Spirited” passage from this year’s

texts, John 18:33-37. In John, we are reminded that “**The Reason for the Season**” is actually “**The Reason for All Seasons.**”

Jesus stands face-to-face with Pontius Pilate. Governor Pilate is the fifth prefect of the Roman province of Judaea, serving under Emperor Tiberius. As the Roman governor and supreme judge in the province from 26-36 AD, Pilate had the sole authority to execute a criminal. It is the trial and pending execution of Jesus which drives this passage.

Pilate holds all the power and yet seemingly NONE of the power in this exchange which holds Jesus' life in the balance. While some in religious leadership are working to eliminate God's agent in Creation, the Messiah, the King of Israel, and they know they need Pilate to give the final execution order, Pilate becomes increasingly unable to judge Jesus. Pilate starts as the ultimate judge but loses himself and his power in the exchange. It becomes increasingly clear that Jesus is fearless. Pilate doesn't scare him in the least. Because of his fearlessness, the one with the true power is the prisoner Jesus. Pilate becomes lost in the honesty and the truth of Jesus' answers. In the longer narrative of John 18 ad 19, Pilate becomes increasingly unsteady and nervous. Jesus unnerves him. Jesus is clearly a King but not one of this power grabbing, power brokering domain. Jesus comes from a kingdom of truth. He

says, *“I was born and entered the world for the purpose of testifying to the truth...Anyone who cares for the truth, who has any feeling for the truth, recognizes my voice”* (John 18:36-37, The Message). **This is a different kind of power altogether!**

Let’s flip back a few pages to John 14:6 when Jesus proclaims, *“I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.”* Here he reveals the depth of his destiny in this world. He is the fullness and the fulfillment of God’s Way, God’s Truth and God’s Life in this world. He knows who he is and whose he is. He is fearless in speaking the Truth – after all – it is the reason he was born – to be such a witness.

Before we follow Jingling Bells and get giddy about holiday deals we purchased in the store or on-line, we need to let this sink in. **The Way which we follow is Truth and Life.** While other “Ways” are packed with full-blown lies and half-truths, while other “Ways” find their voice in fear and distrust; while other “Ways” are about the art of deals cut in the shadows of mistruth, **our Way** is Absolute Truth, Absolute Faith, and Absolute Light leading to Life. When we follow Jesus, we are following the Way of Truth and Life. It is as simple and as clear as that.

The other morning, I wrote this sentence during my morning devotions: *“The Pathway from Fear to Faith is lit by Courage and mapped out by Truth.”*

Our challenge as people of faith is stand with Jesus in the portals of power and speak truth with love. So, what is the truth we are called to speak with love? First, it is that which does not wish to deceive. Such truth is also not able to be deceived. Truth is that for which our souls long and thirst. Like the desert thirsts for water, truth is the most important thing. It is that which is verifiable. It is that which is often hard to hear but brings with it a hope that truly passes human understanding. Truth clears the senses like a hot sauce ingested on a summer day. As Soren Kierkegaard writes, *“Truth stands before me... not caring whether I recognize her or not and creates in me not a shudder of fear but a trusting devotion.”* When I see Jesus standing before Pilate, I see Truth standing for all time before the deceits and lies of this world and looking directly in his eyes, piercing the darkness with all the love that God can muster for this world.

Our challenge is to be Christ’s truth for one another. How do stand before this world and speak clearly what is right, and good and true? That is our challenge.

We need courage to do this. Courage is the light for our path. If we are strong and clear, courage will be guide us. The world around us wishes us to live in the illusion of truth. That is how power functions.

What if we were to flip the script of this story? What if you and I were to see ourselves on trial today? What if we were called to testify before Pilate? How would we stand up? How would we stay true to ourselves and our God?

These are questions of ultimate allegiance. As those who are in this world, but also separated from it through Christ, we are called apart to make our alliance with God which is opposite of idolatry; stands against fear and founded in love. To do this, we have to listen carefully to the voice of God. We have to trust his voice – like the disciples did, like the blind man did, like Lazarus did, like Mary Magdalene did, like Nicodemus did, like the mothers and fathers of all the children who Jesus healed did.

The truth is something we have a feeling for, a longing for, and we hope that the powers-that-be don't block our way to that truth. We have to face ourselves and look at ourselves and examine our lives carefully and honestly. We have to do this gently as well. We have to do it gently. This is something only

we can do. While others may want to do it for us, we have to do this for ourselves.

Whatever is trapping you or holding you back, take a look at it. Whatever causes you to freeze in the face of truth, reach out and hold it in your hands. Whatever keeps you from the cross, step toward it gently but purposefully. In so doing, please note you are not alone - that you do this with others in this community of faith.

On this Reign of Christ Sunday, we are not alone. We belong together. We step into the truth together. In this year now ending, we place Christ at the center of our lives as individuals and as a community of faith and know that He reigns over all creation in goodness and truth. He is a "ruler" we can approach without fear. We come to him knowing that we belong to this gentle and loving shepherd-king who leads us, and cares for us, and calls us home, where we belong. Truly, there is no need for fear. I pray that we might find the right words--and actions--to express the truth of our lives and the truth of who Jesus Christ is in our lives.

So, let us end this year and begin a new one with this prayer:
"Gracious God, give us courage to depart the pretend world of euphemism, to call things by their right name, to use things for their right use, to love our neighbor as you love us. Amen."

(Walter Brueggemann, *"Ours is a seduced world"* in *Awed to Heaven, Rooted to Earth*).

Copyright 2018, First Congregational Church, UCC