

# SERMON SERIES

## *“Extravagant Love and Welcome: Uniting All in One Community”*

August 6 – September 3, 2017

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ  
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*“DO Justice, LOVE Kindness,  
WALK Humbly with God!”*

*(Part I of V in sermon series,  
“Extravagant Love and Welcome:  
Uniting All in One Community”)*

*Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 13*

*Micah 6:1-8; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21*

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens  
Senior Minister

*August 6, 2017*

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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Proper 13, 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, August 6, 2017 dedicated to Rylan Antonio Ahrens, newly baptized into Christian Faith, Rev. Earl Fritz, 90 years old and going strong and to the blessed memory of Frank Hussey, Joe Kufel and James Smith and always to the glory of God!

*“DO Justice, LOVE Kindness, WALK Humbly with God!”*

*Micah 6:1-8; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21*

On September 8, 2002, in a special congregational meeting, this congregation voted by 98% to become an Open and Affirming (ONA) Congregation of the United Church of Christ. We voted on the statement we have in our bulletin each Sunday. Please turn to it and read with along with me.

*We, the members of First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, believe the following represents our commitment and desire to reach out and welcome all those in need of and searching for God’s love: We believe that we are all created in God’s image, female and male, and we are called to love our neighbors as Jesus loves us. We believe we are many members, but one body in Christ, and called to unite all people in God’s love. We welcome and affirm all people. We invite those*

*who are seeking God's presence in their lives to join us on our common journey. Our faith community seeks to unite persons of all ages, races, nationalities, ethnicities, sexual orientations, mental and physical abilities, socioeconomic levels and political and theological backgrounds. Together in our diversity, and being empowered and directed by the Holy Spirit, we will "do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God." (Micah 6:8) (adopted September 8, 2002 by the congregation).*

Since September 8, 2002, we have tried to live into this covenant of love and grace. Over the next five weeks, I will reflect on where we have come and what we have done to BE open and affirming to ALL. We start where the statement ends – with Micah 6:8...

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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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In the 8<sup>th</sup> Century, BCE, a young Judean prophet arose from Moresheth, a small village southwest of Jerusalem who spoke clearly for God. His name was Micah, which means, "Who is like Yahweh?" or "Who is like God?" Micah offered the

promise of peace in war time, telling the people to *“beat their swords into plowshare and no longer make war upon each other”* (Micah 4:3). He spoke of ruler of the people who would be born in the little town of Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). And then, when faced with a people who were all wrapped up in trying to bring the right sacrifices to worship in order to cover all their sins and transgressions, Micah framed his answer in a positive statement and proclaimed clearly for all to hear:

The Lord has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
And what does the Lord require of you  
But to do justice, and to love kindness,  
And to walk humbly with your God?

In other words – God is interested in US! God is interested in the essence of who we are and how we live in relationship to God and all humanity. It's about relationship! What does God require about these relationships? The command is clear – *“DO justice, LOVE kindness and WALK humbly with your God.”* What is less clear (perhaps) is HOW to do all this...

Let's look at Justice. Justice is a very complicated concept. It is important to consider that there no less than four significant discourses on justice today – retributive, restorative, distributive and procedural – are all addressed creatively and substantively in Hebrew Bible, New Testament, Quran – and the religious traditions that grow from them. I have preached extensively on retributive, restorative, distributive and procedural justice. I am not going to do that today...lucky you.

Justice in Micah is “**mispat,**” or something people DO. It is not enough to complain that justice is lacking. Rather Micah is calling us to a dynamic concept that calls us to work every

day in every way where we live our lives for fairness, equality and dignity for all – especially for those who are exploited and poor. The takeaway for justice is one in which we live daily in just relationships and work constantly in our own little ways and through the justice work of our community of faith – to change flow of the river of life. Years ago, I saw this quote, *“You can’t change the wind. You can only adjust the sails.”* Justice is the work we do to adjust the sails, catch the wind, and move closer to doing the right thing in God’s name and spirit.

**“Loving Kindness”** comes from the Hebrew word, **“hesed.”** It is a common word in Hebrew Scriptures. It is a complicated, multi-dimensional word. It has to do with **love, loyalty and faithfulness.** It defines the key element in relationships – whether in marriage or friendship between human friends and God.

So, how are you doing on the “Hesed” scale? How is your **loving kindness** quotient going? How are your human and divine friendships? Have you been loving, loyal and faithful to God and your neighbors and friends? Micah would tell us that there is direct connection between doing justice and being in loving relationships. They are closely related to one another. Let’s be clear: The relationship of “hesed” is driven by love: **Love of God. Love of other people.**

Finally, the holy trinity of doing what God requires is completed when we “walk humbly with our God.” I love what the scholars have written about this phrase. The word “*humbly*” in the Hebrew is better understood as “carefully” or “circumspectly.” And the key word in this phrase is “walk” – “**halak**.” We are to walk with God carefully. We are to walk with God careful to put God first and to live in conformity to God’s will. Our entire life pilgrimage is likened to a walk with God as our constant and abiding companion.

So, how do you walk with God? May I recommend that you walk carefully. All of us have, at some in our lives, learned to walk. If you need a memory of what this might have been like, watch a baby beginning to take first steps. Or watch a person who has knee surgery or hip replacement surgery beginning to step again. It is a careful process – perhaps even a patient process. Attempting to avoid a fall, this careful walk seems precipitous to one who is watching and frightening to one whose steps are making time. But, in the eyes of God, these “baby steps” are watched and received with loving kindness by a grateful God who knows we are trying to move into God’s loving arms. We are making an effort to walk to and walk with God.

As you walk with God, do so with care – the same care that you give to your doing justice and loving tenderly and kindly. If you do, all will be well in our walk with God.

Essentially, three Hebrew words written over 2800 years ago from a small-town Hebrew prophet have guided our faith community's steps through open and affirming for the past 15 years - "*Mispat*," Doing Justice; "*Hesed*," Loving Kindness; and "*Halak*," careful walking with God.

As we begin with the end of our ONA statement today, let's remember the sentence we have embraced: *Together in our diversity, and being empowered and directed by the Holy Spirit, we will "do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God."* We don't do this walk alone. We are fueled and fed, empowered and directed by Ms. Holy Spirit. That means we have to trust our steps in faith to one who gently, kindly, and lovingly clears a path for us into unknown and uncharted territory. I have often said it took us 150 years as faith community to proclaim we were "Open and Affirming" and now it has taken us 15 years to figure out what that means. We got this far by the power of the Holy Spirit. Let us celebrate her gifts to us – gifts of openness, kindness and love.

When I was a first-year student at Yale Divinity School hundreds of years ago, there was a saying posted in our

homiletics (or preaching) classroom. It read, “Preach to the people who are not here and they will come.” I always thought that odd when, as 24-year-old, my eyes beheld those words for the first time. However, it has happened for the past (2)35 years of my life. When preaching to those who are not present, somehow Ms. Holy Spirit gets the word out and people come.

It happened last summer during August. I offered a sermon series on Mental Illness – which is addressed in our extravagant love and welcome of our ONA statement. Many, many people who we had never seen before came to worship. They came to listen and learn; to heal and help. Some stayed and some returned to their own faith communities or to their lives away from our faith community – but for a moment in time, Ms. Holy Spirit touched us all and brought us all together to worship and receive God’s love and grace.

Over the next few weeks, there will be words spoken that seem directed to those who are not here. I believe they will come. You will pass the word. You will share with people you know that this a safe place. And whenever you miss opportunities to talk, to share, to reflect on “*Mispat,*” Doing Justice; “*Hesed,*” Loving Kindness; and “*Halak,*” careful walking with God, Ms. Holy Spirit will carry the word to those who need it most. I will simply be the vessel who preaches to those who are not here...

I pray we begin our careful walk with God this week, empowered and directed by the Holy Spirit to DO justice and to Love Tenderly and with Kindness. Next Sunday is “**Loving and Welcoming ALL Ages and Races.**” Come and join us and spread the Word... Amen.

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*“Loving and Welcoming  
ALL Ages and Races”  
(Part II of V in sermon series,  
“Extravagant Love and Welcome:  
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*Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 13*

*II Timothy 1:3-7; I Kings 19:9-18; Romans 10:5-15;  
Matthew 14:22-33*

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Proper 14, August 13, 2017, dedicated to the memory of Rev. Tom Higgins, pastor of the United Church of Christ, to David Kellermeyer in his battle with cancer, to Marsha Keith on her 60<sup>th</sup> Birthday, to all our FCCUCC 90+ year-old members and our Millennials, to the 33 injured and the three dead in Charlottesville, VA. in the aftermath of the violence there on Saturday, August 12<sup>th</sup>, to all who work daily to overcome racism in our times & always to the glory of God!

*“Loving and Welcoming ALL Ages and Races”*

*II Timothy 1:1-7; I Kings 19:9-18; Romans 10:5-15;  
Matthew 14:22-33*

*(Part II of V in sermon series, “Extravagant Love and Welcome: Uniting All in One Community”)*

Today, we come to the second sermon in the series, “Extravagant Love and Welcome: Uniting All in One Community” I will focus on Age and Race.

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*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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**AGE:**

Our congregation has changed in so many ways since September 8, 2002 – the day we voted to become an Open and Affirming (ONA) church. Allow me to share a few numbers. Since, 2002, we have added 628 new adult members, 233 births for a total of 861 new people in our fellowship (virtually doubling our membership). We have also had 167 deaths and 232 baptisms. In a timeframe when five of the 11 downtown churches closed, and a few others have struggled to keep growing forward, we have doubled in size and become at least 12 years younger on average. We have grown...younger.

Right now, we have 48 children three years and younger in our fellowship. We also have 365 Millennials – those born between 1983 and 2003 (they make up 1/3 of our members... more on this coming up). By the end of this month, we will

have baptized 21 new babies, infants, youth and adults into Christian faith this year – running ahead of our 31 baptisms 12 years ago – our greatest year of baptisms since the baby boom generation in the 1950s (we baptized 8 adults that year).

While babies are being born and rising up among us at a fast pace, we also currently have 11 members who are age 90+. Plus, we have two more – Ed Koetz and Nell Cole – who will join the ranks in the next few months, making thirteen 90-year-olds! Twink Starr is our oldest member at 95 years young. We also have 52 members over the age of 80 in our fellowship. Our older adults in this congregation are shining lights and examples of what Mary Catherine Bateson has written about in her book, “Composing a Further Life: The Age of Active Wisdom.” They show us all how to live fully with what Bateson calls, “*an improvisational art form calling for imagination and willingness to learn.*” These spiritual “youngsters” compose their lives in new patterns – and thus inspire us all. Truly amazing!

As you see, at First Church, we are young and old and everything in-between. We welcome ALL ages and celebrate all people. What a blessing.

As some of you may know, I completed my doctorate two years ago and focused the study of Millennials (now those

between 14-34, born between 1983-2003). The study also addressed the student debt crisis which hangs as a ball and chain on this generation. **We are blessed with 363 Millennials in our congregation 33% of our adult members.** Our 33% of Millennial members compares to 17% in most Mainline Protestant Churches across the country. Furthermore, First Church has a larger Millennial presence than Muslims (29%) and Mormons (24%) for the percentage of our church that is 14-34 years old.<sup>1</sup> I have been told, we have more Millennials than any UCC church in Ohio. The First Congregational Church, UCC Millennials are racially, ethnically and economically diverse. They are 88% white; 8% African-American and 4% other races and ethnicities. Between the ages of 15-24, 98% are in public schools or college. The older Millennials are employed, under-employed or unemployed at undetermined rates.

As a generation, Millennials are complex. In some ways, they are elusive, beautiful, gentle and just. In other ways, they are self-concerned and pre-occupied. Unlike the Pew Study which says they are “detached from institutions,” our Millennials are “in the house...periodically.” Of our Millennials, about 35%

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1. [D'Vera Cohn](http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2010/12/20/baby-boomers-approach-65-glumly/) and [Paul Taylor](http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2010/12/20/baby-boomers-approach-65-glumly/), “Baby Boomers Approach 65 – Glumly,” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (December 20, 2011), (<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2010/12/20/baby-boomers-approach-65-glumly/>).

attend church “regularly,” which means one and maybe two Sundays each month. The other 65% attend even more sporadically. But they are networked in relational ways. Through Facebook and social media, they find each other and communicate frequently.

The Millennials are defined as anyone born from 1983-2003 by William Strauss and Neil Howe in *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*. This means a generation which is now coming of age between 14-34 years old. This generation is the largest generation since the Baby Boomers (1946-1964 births). It is also a generation now fully coming into their own in church and society. In *Millennials Rising* Howe and Strauss address this new generation of leaders calling this a generation where “*hope abounds...and the future holds great possibilities.*”<sup>2</sup> Continuing on, they say, “*With Millennials rising, America needs to start thinking bigger. Test them. Challenge them. Put difficult tasks before them and have faith that they can do themselves, and their nation, proud. Lead them. Love them.*”<sup>3</sup>

Who are these Millennials? In March 2014, the Pew Research Center issued a report entitled, “*Millennials in Adulthood.*” The report’s subtitle says it all, “*Detached from Institutions, Networked with Friends.*” This is the most racially diverse

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<sup>2</sup> Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, (New York, N.Y., Vintage Books, 2000), 367.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

generation in American history with 43% of Millennials as non-whites. The report tells of a generation entering adulthood with less trust than their generational predecessors. Only 19% of Millennials say most people can be trusted. This compares with 31% of Gen Xers; 37% of Silents, and 40% of Baby Boomers. Interestingly, researchers point to the racial diversity of the Millennials as influencing their low levels of social trust. This coming from previous studies in 2007 that found minorities and low-income adults have lower levels of social trust than other groups.<sup>4</sup> Racial diversity and social trust are not the only measures of this generation. The report says Millennials are somewhat more upbeat than older adults about America's future. 49% of Millennials saying the country's best years are ahead though they're the first in the modern era to have higher levels of student loan debt and unemployment. The report opens:

*The Millennial Generation is forging a distinctive path into adulthood.... They are relatively unattached to organized politics and religion, linked by social media, burdened by debt, distrustful of people, in no rush to marry— and optimistic about the future. They are also America's most racially diverse generation. In all of these dimensions, they are different from today's older generations.*

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Taylor, "Millennials in Adulthood: Detached from Institutions, Networked with Friends," *Pew Research Center*, Washington, D.C., (March, 2014), [http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2014/03/2014-03-07\\_generations-report-version-for-web.pdf](http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2014/03/2014-03-07_generations-report-version-for-web.pdf)).

*And in many, they are also different from older adults back when they were the age Millennials are now.* <sup>5</sup>

In August, 2014, the Pew Research Center released another important finding entitled, *“Nones on the Rise.”* In this report Pew Researchers revealed that Millennials are much less likely to practice organized religion than older generations, and are more likely to be skeptical of religious institutions. While the majority of American Millennials are religious, one in three is “not religious,” continuing a trend towards “irreligion” that has been increasing since the 1940s 29% of Americans born between 1983 and 1994 are “irreligious,” as opposed to 21% born between 1963 and 1982, 15% born between 1948 and 1962 and only 7% born before 1948. *“Irreligion”* is best described as *“the absence of religion, an indifference towards religion, a rejection of religion, or hostility towards religion.”* <sup>6</sup>

In *Millennials Rising*, Howe and Strauss point to a generation comfortable in their own skin when it comes to God and God-talk.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, “Nones on the Rise,” *Pew Research Center, Religion and Public Life*, Washington D.C., (October 9, 2012), [www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/](http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/).

*Millennials are growing up a spiritually driven era, when newsweeklies announce God is back, politicians chatter incessantly about faith, and when adults help kids seek faith-based answers to secular questions...At church, today's teens can get bored and turned off when modern services get too casual, too MTV-style. They're pulled in a new direction. Anything that seems very old-fashioned, that's where they are going...Intimacy, Interactivity, tradition and getting out of the pew attracts them.*<sup>7</sup>

In a changing religious climate in America, the challenge for the Mainline Protestant Church is to engage Millennials and meet them where they are. The Millennials may be the last remaining hope for Mainline Protestant churches to get back on the playing field of American religious life.

20% of our First Church Millennials were born, baptized, confirmed and/or married here. 80% have come as young adults who came on their own and chose our church as their first adult choice for worship and witness. Some of them have had babies and are now raising their children in the church. When new members join, at least 75% claim that our social justice heritage and current witness have drawn them. They have responded by showing up. Others name our classical music and traditional worship as a draw. Still others love our

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<sup>7</sup> Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 235-236.

Gothic Cathedral in the heart of the city they call home. Some claim all three draws to First Church.

Our Millennials are eager to understand and reinterpret the Social Gospel for a new day. There are very few Millennials at First Church who don't articulate a passion for social justice. They "get" justice and they are engaged by it. They don't run and hide from the intersection of art, faith and social justice.

The Millennials tend to get fired up about justice and they are less active – on the whole – in the leadership and life of the church. We are working to integrate our Millennials more and more into the leadership of the church. Rev. Dan Clark co-led our Long-Range Planning Committee with Steve Sterrett (and half the committee started out as Millennials). Brian Cave was our First Millennial Moderator last year and Alec Dietz is our First Millennial Senior Deacon. Last year, half our Council was filled by Millennial leaders or late Generation Xers (born 1965-1983). I am very proud and amazed by our Millennials at First Church. They make us a growing, energetic, dynamic and getting younger congregation in the heart of a growing, dynamic and thriving center city neighborhood in our Capital City of Ohio.

But, I have a word of warning to all of us who are aging into the time of the age of active wisdom, we need to allow the

Millennials to lead! They will do it in ways that make us uncomfortable and ways we do not understand. However, I have watched (and studied) the fear of failure in our denomination has actually produced failure in many ways. Our denomination is dwindling and dying. I contend this is a direct result of NOT turning over leadership to Millennials. The UCC needs a whole new model of leadership...another sermon for another day.

I also have a word of calling out and calling forth for our Millennials. Step up and bring your best gifts, your best ideas, your best faith forward. In the words of Howe and Strauss, we need you to pull us in a new direction. As you care about “Intimacy, Interactivity, tradition and getting us out of the pews, step up and lead us forward.” Don’t wait. We need you now. Find your voices and your pathways to leadership. Bring your new ways. Do things differently. We need you to. Bring us hope and change.

As I have said, Millennials are elusive, beautiful and gentle and just. That is a scary great blend for guiding the church. In the words of the Apostle Paul to his young understudy, Timothy, *“Remember, God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline” (II Timothy 1:7).*



## RACE:

Our ONA welcome also addresses Race. I had a lot on race prepared for today but I put it aside in the aftermath of deadly confrontations yesterday in Charlottesville, VA. As White Supremacists, white nationalists, the KKK, and Neo-Nazis descended on Charlottesville again to protest the name change and possible removal of a statue of Gen. Robert E. Lee, they were met by counter-demonstrators – 19 of whom were injured (five critically) and a 32-year-old, Heather Heyer murdered when 20-year-old James Fields of Maumee, Ohio drove his car at high speed into the crowd of counter-demonstrators. Fields' mother, Samantha Bloom said that she knew he had driven to Charlottesville for a “Trump Rally” but knew nothing about the white supremacists marching. *“He told me it was about Trump and Trump is not a white supremacist,”* said his mom. I hope and pray that Samantha Bloom is correct – that Mr. Trump is not a white supremacist. But, he needs to speak out clearly and specifically against white supremacists and white nationalists. He also needs to remove “Alt-Right” leadership from his inner circle of White House advisors.

Rev. Seth Whispelway of Sojourners United Church of Christ was one of a number of clergy linking arms and peacefully resisted the KKK entrance into the park. Rev. Whispelway

said, *“We are here to counteract white supremacy and let people know it is a system of evil and system of sin.”* Thanks be to God for his and others’ peaceful resistance to evil and sin. He is my hero this morning.

Here we are today, once again torn by racial hatred and violence. While words and fists, weapons and cars were flying around Charlottesville yesterday, a helicopter crashing – leaving over 30 injured and three dead (including the two officers who died in the copter crash (H. Jay Cullen and MM Bates), I received a call from LuAnn Stoia of Channel 6/28 who ended up interviewing me on the front steps of First Church. I commended to her (and to you) that we would be wise to follow the admonition of the Prophet Isaiah in chapter 58:12. He calls us to be “restorers of the breach.” We are called to fix what is broken. In the Message, Eugene Peterson interprets Isaiah 58:12 like this: *“Use the old rubble of past lives to build a new, rebuild the foundations from out of your past. You’ll be known as those who can fix anything, restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate, make the community livable again.”*

I commend this to you in prayer. We need to make our community and our nation “livable again.” I am asking each one of us to spend one minute in prayer at noon each day for the next 30 days. Set your alarms and give a minute to God at midday. Ask God to guide you to be a restorer of the breach.

Where have you witnessed racial hatred? Where can you do one thing to fix what is broken? Then in the 24 hours between each one-minute prayer, do one thing to reach out across the divide of racial breakdown. Join with others and invite them to pray with you. Form a prayer circle for one minute each day at lunch.

We have to find a way past slavery and racial bigotry and racial hatred. In his autobiography, in 1885, our 18<sup>th</sup> President Ulysses S. Grant concludes his two volume Memoirs with these words, *“The cause of the great War of Rebellion against the United States will have to be attributed to slavery... We cannot be half slave and half free. All must become slave or all free, or the state will go down...I have come to the conclusion that this saying is quite true.”* What will it be? Will be all be slaves? Is that what we want? Or will be finally all be free? I hope this is our goal.

We are still a nation divided. We have broken apart even further in the past year. We have to create ways to come together.

Yesterday, 132 years later, our 44<sup>th</sup> President, Barack Obama, quoting South African Freedom Fighter and first Black President, Nelson Mandela, tweeted in three tweets (BTW: This is how to use tweets effectively and well): *“No one is born*

*hating another person because of the color of his skin or his background or his religion ... People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love... ...For love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite."*

We must find a way to face and overcome the racism that is in the bones and DNA of this nation. Hate can define us and divide us any longer.

What will it be First Church? Will we be repairers of the breach; those who fix what is broken? Will we share the love we have come to know in Christ and from God and witnessed between one another? Or will we simply head out the doors today and continue in our paths of life without making a difference?

Take one minute to pray and each day find a way to heal and mend the breach that has become a part of the American landscape.

Next Sunday, I return with: **“Loving and Welcoming ALL Sexual Orientations and Ethnic and National Backgrounds.”**

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# *“Extravagant Love and Welcome: Uniting All in One Community”*

*(Part III of V in sermon series,  
“Extravagant Love and Welcome:  
Uniting All in One Community”)*

*Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 15*

*Isaiah 56:1,6-8; Psalm 133; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32;  
Matthew 15:21-28*

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens  
Senior Minister

*August 20, 2017*

From the Pulpit

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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 20, 2017, Proper 15, 20<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time, dedicated to Jill Ford who passed to eternal life on Thursday, August 17, to Angela Trautman on her baptismal day, to all the young people considering confirmation for 2018 and always to the glory of God!

*“Loving and Welcoming ALL Sexual Orientations and Ethnic and National Background”  
Part III of V in the sermon series:  
“Extravagant Love and Welcome:  
Uniting All in One Community”*

*Isaiah 56:1,6-8; Psalm 133; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32;  
Matthew 15:21-28*

Today, we come to the third of the sermon series on *“Extravagant Love and Welcome: Uniting All in One Community.”* Let me just say a few words...as I walk through my reflections on “Sexual orientations, ethnic and national backgrounds” I cannot possibly capture all the meaning and depth which these words grasp and encapsulate in our ONA statement in a matter of minutes. I see these words as I see the words at the base of the Statue of Liberty:

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

“The New Colossus,” written by Emma Lazarus in 1883.

By declaring we are open and affirming our congregation wants to lift the torch for all to see. We want to say, “come here if you don’t feel safe, or wanted, or embraced by others and by God’s love. If you yearn to breathe free – come here.” Perhaps this week, of all weeks in our 15 years of extravagant love and welcome, these words speak most fully. I hope so....

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*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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## SEXUAL ORIENTATION:

On December 18, 2011, following our glorious Service of Lessons and Carols, I was greeting people in the Narthex by Broad Street, when I saw someone I had not seen in years. She had been a member at North Congregational Church,

where I had served as senior pastor from March, 1989-early January, 2000. She approached me, we embraced, wished each other Merry Christmas and then she said, *“I need to talk with you after everyone is gone.”* She patiently waited and when all had taken off into the cold air of that December night, we sat down together in the sanctuary.

She opened her purse and pulled out a sermon I had offered almost 20 years earlier. It was worn and torn but somehow still barely held together by a single staple. She gently put it in my hands and said, *“This sermon saved my life.”* It was a sermon on “Homosexuality and the Bible.” It was the first sermon I had ever preached on the topic.

She preceded to tell me that she had made a plan for suicide because she could no longer bear the judgment and hate she felt as a Lesbian in the “Christian family” in which she had been raised. In deep despair and as a last-ditch effort, she came to church. She had planned to end her life that afternoon. On that Sunday, I preached a sermon of extravagant welcome for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons. For the first time since childhood, she felt loved by God. She saw this as a sign from God to live and for the past 20 years she done just that. She said, *“You need to preach that sermon again. That sermon saved my life. Perhaps it could save someone else’s life,*

*too.*” As a result, I preached two sermons in February 2012. It has been a while since I have preached “that sermon.”

To all who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender persons, I am truly sorry for the ways in which the church throughout your life has hurt you. I am ashamed of Christian houses of worship that judge, condemn, demonize and destroy lives of children, teens, and adults because of their sexual orientation and/or sexual identity. I am so sorry. It is my hope and my prayer that you feel welcome and safe at First Church. It has been our practice and policy (through our ONA Statement) to truly welcome all people. But, we can only guess and imagine all the wounds you carry into this Cathedral of Grace. Please know, we are genuine in extending our love and welcome to you. God loves you. I love you. We love you.

We have a way to go and grow in our ONA statement. Since September 2002, much has happened with research, knowledge and education about sexual orientation and gender identity. Particularly in relation to Transgender and Transsexual persons, we have learned a lot and the language and welcome to the “Trans” community has deepened and grown. I would like us as a community of faith to revisit our ONA statement **this** fall and adjust it the times in which we are now living. While conservative Christians, in the name of Jesus, are trying to shut doors and pathways to the “Trans”

community, we need to open doors and have open minds. Such openness will show us our ONA statement is lacking a full and extravagant love and welcome to “Trans” members of our greater Columbus community. A simple example would be our statement that God created us “Female and Male.” If we simply said, “God created us” – period – that would be MORE inclusive. We could also speak more completely to what it looks like for us to be more welcoming. In a great document entitled, “Transitioning to Inclusion,” we can discover ways to more completely embrace Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning youth and adults in our faith community. Even though we may not understand the design and beauty of God’s creative ways, we need to agree that God doesn’t make mistakes. So, let’s explore this together and rewrite, rework, and then renew our commitment to extravagant love and welcome in the coming months.

## ETHNICITY

There is a reason why the Kirwan Institute for Race **and Ethnicity** has its name (NOTE: Brit Kirwan was a member of First Church when he was President at OSU). It is not enough for us to address racial issues in our nation and world. We must also and always look at Ethnicity as well. In a wonderful piece by Kwabena Agyeman, Graduate Research Associate at the Kirwan Institute, Mr. Agyeman writes:

*“In the light of the current political upheaval in Kenya, it is important to shed some light on the role ethnicity plays in instability, civil conflict, and poverty in Africa. Ethnicity is a very broad term which can be defined in different ways depending on the context. However, in this context, I am borrowing Crisford Chogugudza’s definition which states that ‘ethnicity is defined as a shared cultural identity involving similar practices, initiations, beliefs and linguistic features passed over from one generation to another.’*

*The paradox is that while politicians in Africa characterize ethnic rivalry as a colonial tactic designed to ‘divide and rule’ and keep them under subjugation, many of them continue to use ethnicity to promote themselves and inflict maximum political damage on their opponents. The situation in Kenya today is evidence of how far politicians are prepared to go in using the ethnic card in politics.”*

Let’s be clear. Ethnicity can be a beautiful thing. The feelings of cohesion and love felt in ethnic community can be a real blessing. However, using Ethnicity to divide people and nations is one way we separate and deeply hurt people. As Mr. Agyeman points out, people who wish to divide (and conquer) nations, states, tribes, and people, will call on the ethnic origins of people to separate them from others – often calling on the worst nature of people to do this. As a nation of global

immigrants combined with slaves brought from all sorts of West African and Southern African nations and tribes against their will, the United States is truly a beautiful quilt\* of vast and various ethnicities and nationalities. It is easy to tickle the ethnic nerve and fiber in each of us to bring out a certain response.

But, I think Ancestry.com and other DNA tests have been good for us. We have found that we are Not simply German, or Irish, or Kenyan or Cuban or Filipino or African-American. We are not from one island or one nation in one corner of the world. Many of us (most of us?) are a beautiful mix of races, ethnic and national origins. We are families that reflect the nature of humanity much more than the focused nature of one group of people.

Ironically, this is probably also true as well for people and nations where ethnic wars and “ethnic cleansing” has brought on bloodbaths of human devastation. They are more mixed than those who seek to divide them will admit. At First Church, we continue to believe and always will that ALL ethnicities and nationalities– whatever our blend of beautiful humanity – is welcome here.

## **NATIONALITIES**

In an article appearing in Today's Sunday New York Times, **“What White Nationalism Gets Right About American History”** R. Derek Black, the child of white nationalist parents (whose godfather is David Duke), write:

*“My dad often gave me the advice that white nationalists are not looking to recruit people on the fringes of American culture, but rather the people who start a sentence by saying, “I’m not racist, but ...”*

He continues, *“The most effective tactics for white nationalists are to associate American history with themselves and to suggest that the collective efforts to turn away from our white supremacist past are the same as abandoning American culture. My father, the founder of the white nationalist website Stormfront, knew this well. It’s a message that erases people of color and their essential role in American life, but one that also appeals to large numbers of white people who would agree with the statement, “I’m not racist, but I don’t want American history dishonored, and this statue of Robert E. Lee shouldn’t be removed.”*

In addressing white nationalism, Mr. Black says that those with whom he grew-up counted as a huge victory, Mr. Trump’s words that “good people on both sides” were at Charlottesville. He points out that, in fact, the rally was a White Nationalist Rally celebrating White Supremacy. No one there, says Black, had any illusions about a statue in a

park. They were there with the explicit purpose of “Making America White Again.” Continuing, he writes that Mr. Trump completely validated them in their efforts with his words.

*“On Tuesday afternoon, the president defended the actions of those at the rally, stating, “You also had people that were very fine people, on both sides.” His words marked possibly the most important moment in the history of the modern white nationalist movement. These statements described the marchers as they see themselves — nobly driven by a good cause, even if they are plagued by a few bad apples.”*

Do you see where nationalism is the slippery slope of believing your nationality (as you define it) is superior to others? Nationalities, like Ethnicities, can be a blessing when pride is placed in the right perspective. It can be a curse when it dominates all your transactions and interactions in life.

To welcome all ethnicities and nationalities to First Church is not a statement in favor of any ethnic or national agenda. Quite the opposite. It is a welcome of an inclusivity agenda — one which welcome all the vast and beautiful varieties of our ethnic and national origins and mixes. I am reminded of the Apostle Paul’s words to the Galatians, [Galatians 3:28](#): “*There*

*is neither Jew nor Gentile, **neither** slave nor **free**, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”*

As the prophet Isaiah has said, “we are a house of prayer for all people.” As we, who are ONE in Christ, are called beyond the things that separate us, let us dig deep to make our house of prayer a safe house for ALL people who pray. And let us confess what we have done to cause any pain and separation in the body of Christ and ask for God’s amazing grace and healing – so that we may be part of the healing of the church and the nations in our day and time. May it be so as we live and grow in the love of Christ – a love that is unconditional and filled with grace! Amen.

- In the original sermon, I called us a “melting pot.” Bruce Panek convinced me in the greeting line, to change it to “quilt.” A better image. I have also heard “tossed salad.”

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*“Loving and Welcoming ALL with  
a Range of Mental and  
Physical Abilities”*

*(Part IV of V in sermon series,  
“Extravagant Love and Welcome:  
Uniting All in One Community”)*

*Twenty First Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 16  
Isaiah 51:1-6; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20*

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens  
Senior Minister

*August 27, 2017*

From the Pulpit

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A baptismal meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 27, 2017, 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time/Proper 16, dedicated Kai Michael Oberschlake and Elliott Ann Hayler on their baptismal day and always to the glory of God!

*“Loving and Welcoming ALL with a Range of Mental and Physical Abilities”*

*Isaiah 51:1-6; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20*

*Part 4 of 5 in the sermon series,*

*“Extravagant Love and Welcome: Uniting All in One Community”*

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

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**MENTAL ABILITIES**

Last August, a miracle happened at First Church. Light was shining in and through our congregation. Following an article

in the Columbus Dispatch in which I announced a book study and a sermon series on Mental Illness, people came from all over the region to worship and study with us. For five weeks of Sundays, the hot and stuffy Fanning Room (large Conference room) was packed wall-to-wall with people who came to talk and to share their own stories of mental illness and/or the struggles of family members struggling with mental illness – as we all opened and read Sarah Griffith Lund’s book, *Blessed Are the Crazy*. In addition, Jonathon Miller met with people each Sunday after 11 a.m. worship to hear more stories and share more insights.

In worship, I looked out each week on sea of new faces knowing that many of those who had come among us were in need of one healing word about mental illness and the stigma and struggle they bring each day to their living struggle with their mind and spirit. In this room, there was a spirit of welcome, love and grace that swept over us as people spoke and heard for the first time in a church – words of hope and words of love – for themselves and loved ones who suffer daily from a range of diagnoses -including anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and more. One young woman from our congregation told me, “as a mentally ill person, it was the first time in my life here I really felt understood, loved and welcomed by you and our congregation.”

Then, September came. The sermon series and book study ended. We got back to our daily routines. Some of our guests went back to their churches or no church at all. Several ended up in the hospital in their cyclical struggle with schizophrenia and suicide. Their families had no church. They called me to visit and I did. One family lost two family members to early death due to the opiate crisis – neither of whom was the member struggling with mental illness.

For us, many of our own members who daily struggle with mentally ill family members do so in private – quietly continuing the often stigmatizing and paralyzing journey experienced with mental illness. Not long ago, I had a veiled conversation with a man about his son who needs special care because of mental illness. We were alone but nevertheless, we whispered as though we were talking in a crowd of people. Most of my conversations with people about mental illness take on a hush-hush quality. Mental illness can do that to people.

**Even though a miracle happened and light shined on us in August 2016, we still live in the shadows in August 2017.** We have so much more to do as a congregation for those with mental illness and their family members who struggle. I see it every day. One in four persons in our society is afflicted with some form of mental illness. Therefore, in a family of four all

are affected by mental illness. One in 17 Americans live with a serious and persistent mental illness.

At the UCC General Synod in 2015, The Rev. Dr. Alan Johnson shared his story of becoming engaged with mental illness support in the church. *"It began with my son's first psychotic break down from bipolar disease 23 years ago, my own episode with depression and my brother's suicide,"* he said. *"The sound of silence about mental illness can be profound."* At the same Synod, Eric Kendall of our OK-KS Conference asked everyone in the room who was affected by mental illness in their family or circle of friends to stand. Almost the entire room of over 3,000 people stood silently as a witness (UCC Website, [www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org), "WISE Congregations gain Synod support", July 2015).

**Today, I would like to challenge each and every one of us as members and friends of this congregation to deal with this piece of our love and welcome in a much clearer way. There is a clear way to make the miracle of 2016 step into the light from the shadows of 2017. Just as there are ONA churches, our denomination also has WISE congregations. I would like us to become a WISE Congregation of the United Church of Christ. [WISE means - Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive, and Engaged.](#) WISE congregations use 12 steps to involve mitigating the shame and stigma that mental illness**

engenders. In one church a committee member noted, *"As church, we are considered armies of compassion."* *With rapidly shrinking public services available, "churches are where those who suffer turn."* To become a WISE congregation, I need a few good soldiers in the army of compassion. I need anywhere from 3-10 people to join me in working on this. If you have a friend, a family member or a co-worker – or you yourself – struggle in any way, shape or form with mental illness, please join me in this effort. Right now, our WISE proposal sits with the Justice and Mercy Commission. But, they have a plate full of work to do. We need people who can guide us to become WISE and mental illness. Please see me very soon. Let's get started on this immediately.

## PHYSICAL ABILITIES

*"Outside the door of every congregation, there are those who cannot enter, or once in, do not feel welcome. Through your outreach, you will be fulfilling God's mandate to make the House of God fully inclusive for ALL people of God!"* These were the words of Reverend Dr. Harold H. Wilke, UCC pastor and Founder and Director the Healing Community over 40 years ago. The questions I ask behind the behind Dr. Wilke's words is, *"How are we doing as a congregation to open our doors and*

*welcome our sisters and brothers who do not have access to church AND how have done – once we have welcomed them – fully integrating them into the life of our congregation?* These are questions of **servi**ng persons with physical and mental disabilities.

In a beautiful article written by advocate and theologian, Joan Huyser-Honig, “*All God's Children Have Gifts: Disability and Worship,*” we hear about exceptional congregations which are doing great things for persons with disabilities.

Fellowship Christian Reformed Church in Edmonton, Alberta is one such congregation. Fellowship has two young adults, Marlow Witten and Dena Ruiters-Koopmans, who are deaf and have mobility challenges. Dena spent her first eleven months in the hospital and was given little chance to survive. But she made it! Fellowship stood by her and her family from the first hours of life. She has become central to Fellowship’s ministry and mission. Because Fellowship has always provided a sign language interpreter, Witten and Ruiters-Koopmans sometimes lead parts of the liturgy. They sign and the interpreter speaks. Witten has also designed art work for a youth service.

At Alberta School for the Deaf, Dena Ruiters-Koopmans performed in dramas and acted as mistress of ceremonies.

Since graduating as valedictorian, she has volunteered as a storyteller for younger students there. She shares the same gifts in worship at Fellowship. *“I told a story during children’s story time, using a cardboard model of a church building to show the children that the people are the important part of church. Even if the building was gone—and I collapsed the model flat to show this—we could still meet in another place and continue worshiping God,”* she says.

*“People at Fellowship accept me just the way I am and encourage me to become involved in story time, nursery care, youth group, and so on. Some are curious to learn sign language. Sometimes the minister will ask the interpreter the sign for a particular word and use that as a symbol for his or her topic...or just for fun,”* Ruiter-Koopmans adds. (Joan Huyser-Honig, *“All God’s Children Have Gifts: Disability and Worship,”* Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, January 6, 2006).

The conviction that God gifts every member flows naturally into [supporting members in using their gifts](#). “Fellowship actively seeks involvement from all members in all aspects of worship planning, the worship service, and member care. All members are valued for their contributions, period,” says Linda Ruiter, Dena’s mom. She and her husband, Dave Koopmans, say their small congregation never questioned the cost of hiring an interpreter or building a ramp to the front of

the sanctuary. How do you discover what a person needs in order to use his or her gifts in worship? The answer is embarrassingly simple. “**Just ask,**” advises Jake Heerema, minister of pastoral services at [Hope Network](#), which helps Michigan churches to [value and include people with disabilities](#) (*Ibid*).

Centreville United Methodist has a choir member with Alzheimer’s. His wife confided to the choir director that her husband, conscious of his losses, gets extremely embarrassed when corrected. So, the director is flexible with him. “We don’t count on him for solos, because he may be great in rehearsal and then forget to come on Sunday. We are grateful for whatever contribution anyone can make,” Karin Orr says (*Ibid*).

St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church, also in Grand Rapids, recruits members and college students to mentor parishioners who have disabilities ranging from severe rheumatoid arthritis and Parkinson’s disease to ADHD. “One of our members with cerebral palsy recently read a Scripture lesson. We spent time practicing with her, and it was amazing how easy she was to understand when she was relaxed. It was wonderful for all of us,” says Cindy Nawrocki, a St. Andrew’s pastor (*Ibid*).

In the Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities, in 2001, the Bishops called the church to an even deeper dive into our relationship with persons with disabilities. They wrote, *“When we think of persons with disabilities in relation to ministries, we tend automatically to think of doing something for them. We do not reflect that they can do something for us and with us...they have the same duty as all members of the community to do the Lord’s work in the world, according to their God given talents and capacities”* (no. 17, NOD, 2001).

Leading advocates for persons with disabilities talk about the evolution of congregations with ministries. They move from “FOR” to “WITH” to “BY.” You establish ministries FOR persons with disabilities. Then you work WITH them to craft ministry together. Finally, the ministries are led BY folks in your congregation. The other option is for congregations to stay “apart” from persons with disabilities. We must never be “apart” in our efforts to welcome people.

There is a huge gap between the spirituality of persons with disabilities and their presence in worship. The National Organization on Disability found that approximately 85% of people with and without disabilities state their religious faith is important in their lives, but only 47% of people with disabilities attend church at least once a month, most likely

due to architectural, programmatic, communication and attitudinal barriers. *“Of all the barriers to full participation and inclusion, the barrier of **unexamined attitudes** is the most difficult to address,”* states Ginny Thornburgh, director of the American Association of People with Disabilities' Interfaith Initiative (*Ibid*).

**Where do we begin?** Joan Huyser-Honig says, begin with questions – “Who are the people in our church with disabilities? How much or often do they participate in planning or leading worship? When did we last ask someone to tell their story about living with a disability...or ask how they'd like to serve in worship...or find out what prevents them from participating more fully in church life? Who keeps track of individuals and families who deal daily with disability? What structures do we have in place to offer support and respite? In what ways do these structures clear the way for more people to participate more fully in worship? Which words—apart, for, with, by—best describe your church's relationship to people with disabilities? (*Ibid*).

Deacons we can take these questions up tomorrow night. Church, we need to communicate together about how we welcome more completely.

Thanks to the creative work on behalf of our church by staff and lay leadership, two exciting barriers will be addressed in our building in the next few months. First, thanks to a generous gift from Gail and Bill Johannes and Francille and John Firebaugh, a wheelchair accessible restroom will be added to our lower level AND the women's room will be made beautiful and useable. Also, we are adding five wheelchair locations in the sanctuary – hopefully in place for our 165<sup>th</sup> Birthday celebration in one month. Thank you, Gail, Francille, Bill, John, House and Grounds, Church Council, the Deacons, and Mark Dahnke, our Building and Grounds Superintendent!

Let's continue to use our gifts of creative and extravagant love and welcome to figure out how we more fully integrate ministries FOR>> WITH>> BY persons with disabilities as we seek to become more and more the beloved community Christ has called us to be. Never "apart" always "together" - we can do this. Amen.

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*“The Parable of the Undocumented  
Immigrant in a Boat”  
A Parable for Our Times*

*(Part V of V in sermon series,  
“Extravagant Love and Welcome:  
Uniting All in One Community”)*

*Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew  
16:21-28; Luke 10:25-37*

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens  
Senior Minister

*September 3, 2017*

From the Pulpit

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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 3, 2017, 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time, 17<sup>th</sup> Proper, dedicated to all the men, women, and children who have died in and been devastated by Hurricane Harvey and to all the first responders and volunteers who have saved lives, raised money and made a difference in the aftermath of the storm and rains and to my friend, Harvey Hook, who has been a Good Samaritan all his life and always to the glory of God!

*“The Parable of the Undocumented Immigrant in a Boat”*

*A Parable for Our Times*

*Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28; Luke 10:25-37*

*(Part V in V part series on “Extravagant Love and Welcome: Uniting All in One Community”)*

One of the purposes of preaching is to reflect the times in which we live and move and have our being. We need to have a Bible in one hand and newspaper in the other hand. Today, I will be doing that. Today’s sermon – the fifth and final in the sermon series on Open and Affirming – was slated to

reflect on the part of our ONA statement which says we welcome and love all no matter what our socioeconomic background or political and theological differences.

What better way to reflect on the meaning of these words than to examine how this has been lived out in the real-world disaster of Hurricane Harvey. We have a crisis in Texas and Louisiana truly of Biblical Proportion. This has been called a once in a 1,000-year flood. In other words, we have never in our lifetime or the history of our nation witnessed anything like this before.

While a hurricane and the week-long rains that followed have devastated the southwest Gulf Coast, one of the defining characteristics of this horrific event has been the response of people throughout the region and across the country. It has been inspirational beyond belief. In a few minutes, we will all be given the opportunity to dig in our wallets and respond as best as we are able with an offering to address the horrors of Harvey. For now, let's reflect on the Good Samaritans in boats. We could lift up many stories – but the thousands of boat people of Harvey who have saved thousands of lives have proven to be an immeasurable blessing.

Let me begin by retelling a familiar story from the Gospel of Luke. It is rewritten in our context - a hurricane in 2017. You

know it as the Parable of the Good Samaritan. For today and our Times, I call it “The Parable of the Undocumented Immigrant in a Boat.”

**Luke 10:25-37 – revised version, by Tim Ahrens,  
September 2017**

*Just then a religion scholar stood up with a question to test Jesus.  
“Teacher, what do I need to do to get eternal life?”*

*He answered, “What’s written in God’s Law? How do you interpret it?”*

*He said, “That you love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and muscle and intelligence—and that you love your neighbor as well as you do yourself.” “Good answer!” said Jesus.  
“Do it and you’ll live.”*

*Looking for a loophole, the religious scholar asked, “And just how would you define ‘neighbor?’”*

*Jesus answered by telling a story. “There was once a Texas Businessman traveling from Houston to Port Arthur. On the way, he was overwhelmed by a Hurricane named Harvey. The hurricane wiped him out, knocked him out of his truck and forced him to climb on the roof of a house as flood waters rose around him. Luckily, a pastor came by in a nice boat making his way to safety, but when he saw him he turned his boat away and acted*

*like he didn't hear him calling for help. Then an active layman in the local church showed up; he also went the other way in his boat – despite the man's cries for help.*

*Then, an undocumented Immigrant came by in his little rowboat. When he saw the man's condition, his heart went out to him. He gave him first aid, water and the only food he had in his boat. Then he lifted him into his boat, took him to a shelter, and made him comfortable. When he knew the man was safe, he gave the people at the shelter all the money he had in his pocket to feed the man, saying, 'Take good care of him. If it costs any more, let me know and I will pay you back. Now, I need to get back out there and see if anyone else needs help.'*

*Jesus asked, "What do you think? Which of the three became a neighbor to the man stranded in Hurricane Harvey?"*

*"The one who treated him kindly," the religion scholar responded. Jesus said, "Go and do the same."*

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*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 the devastation brought by the landfall and rainfall of Hurricane Harvey, people all over Texas and beyond came to the rescue of people they did not even know. Rescuers from Florida came by the hundreds saying, *“people are always coming to help us in Florida. It is high time that we help others.”* “Good Samaritans” emerged to help. They were Good Samaritans in boats.

Boaters grabbed their kayaks, aluminum skiffs, canoes, airboats, outboard-powered center consoles and more, cruising past street signs and powerless traffic lights to collect not only friends and neighbors, but also strangers and pets too. Social media lit up with simple posts that said so much, like this one from Texas native Diane Alston: *“People came with boats, supplies. People giving rides.”*

Average guys with a ski boat who might normally be at a local ramp on a Saturday morning instead prepped for launch from a street beneath an overpass, where a news camera spotted them. When asked what they planned to do, one boater said, *“go try to save some lives.”*

Ray Ortega, an oilfield tool salesman who usually fishes his 23-footer on the Gulf of Mexico, chasing speckled trout and redfish, pulled 10 to 15 people at a time out of the

floodwaters, according to [NPR](#). *“We rescued 53 people into the night,”* boater Ortega told the news agency.

A Texas A&M student told [Soundings Trade Only](#) that, *“We were actually launching boats off on I-45 on an overpass,”* adding that he alone estimated 200 to 250 people had climbed into his boat seeking help.

Then there was Louisiana’s Cajun Navy. The Cajun Navy, born in the floodwaters of 2005’s Hurricane Katrina, showed up in Texas with a flotilla of about 20 boats, organizing its efforts on Facebook and a [walkie-talkie app called Zello](#). *“Our goal is to help people get out if they are trapped in their homes or apartments, get them to safety,”* one of the boaters said.

As official 911 and 311 emergency channels became overloaded, social media became a makeshift VHF channel 16, with people posting their locations on rooftops and everyday “dispatchers” coordinating the arrival of volunteer boaters. A website called [Houston Harvey Rescue](#) popped up as a sort of Uber version of boating rescues, letting people with boats register right alongside people who needed help, so they could geographically find each other. Even as rain continued to pummel the region, thousands of rescues had been [logged on the site’s map](#).

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) calls this type of effort a “whole community response,” one that presumes people will help other people, instead of all of them being [categorized as victims](#). I call it a miracle.

Even commercial interests pitched in. [Bass Pro Shops](#) donated more than 80 Tracker boats to help with rescue efforts, while [Walmart bought 2,000 kayaks from KL Outdoor](#), which paid to ship them from Michigan to Texas.

*“I think you’re seeing the best in our country when we have these situations like what’s occurring now in Texas,”* KL Outdoors’ CEO, Chuck Smith, told WOOD TV. *“It lets you know that if you ever got put in that situation, the other folks around the country would step up and help you.”* (“Hurricane Harvey: Good Samaritan Boaters Help Save Lives,” By Kim Kavin, August 30, 2017, boat.com).

I am sure you have seen the boats – moving through the devastation and often fast-moving currents from the flood ravaged territory in center city Houston all the way to the rural Texas and Louisiana. It was a volunteer armada of angels. In one video, I saw a man lifting a Seik family onto his boat. When asked why he was doing this, he said, *“I am a follower of Jesus. He told us all to help all our neighbors so I am doing it.”*

Those without boats have been rallying people on the ground everywhere across the Texas/Louisiana coast. People are being good neighbors to those they did not know. The American Red Cross has put out a call for an additional 80,000 volunteers to come now in the efforts to clean-up after the disaster. We are far from done with Harvey.

**So, what is it about being a Good Samaritan?** Why does this story – 2000 years old – make headlines still to this day? There is something penetrating about it. It cuts through the stories about price gauging and taking advantage of neighbors. It cuts through the stories of selfish motivations for helping others.

We don't help to help ourselves. We don't help to "earn eternal life." We don't help to gain God's attention. We help because it is the right thing to do.

Even in the midst of helping our neighbors, some folks are looking for the loopholes. They want to know – "who is my neighbor?" The irony of the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Renamed today, "*The Parable of the Undocumented Immigrant in a Boat*") is this: The *Good* Samaritan was the least likely person for the religious scholar of Jesus' time to see as "the good guy" in this story. The Samaritan was a pariah. He was the outcast. He was the one that the people of his

times were trying to drive out of the land. I have named him “The Undocumented Immigrant” not to make a political statement but to truly define who he was in his time. He was shunned and judged by the society around him. And Jesus made a positive example of him. He was the undocumented immigrant of his time.

So how is it that the one we least likely see as a hero becomes the great hero of our story? How is it that we now name hospitals “Good Samaritan Hospital” and our funds for helping others as The Good Samaritan Fund? How is it that headlines NOW read, “Good Samaritans in Boats?”

**We love this story. But do we love the Samaritan or The Undocumented Immigrant?** Jesus knew this story would stick! He knew that by turning the world upside down – by making the pariah the hero – his followers would have to be different. He knew that scales would fall from the eyes of those who were blinded by their own self-serving ways and that people would have to see the world through different lenses.

To this day - our challenge is to get past our socioeconomic blind spots. Our challenge is to get rid of our political divisions and see the men, women, and children being helped and helping save lives as all equal in the eyes of God. Our

challenge is to overcome our theological and educational divisions keep us apart and not allow them to conquer us.

To overcome our challenges, we have to get in our boats and get to work. We have to rescue and not judge; serve all and not question who we serve; and pay forward, knowing full well we not get paid back. This is the way of Jesus. **The Apostle Paul got Jesus!** Writing to the early Christians who were persecuted in Rome, Paul writes these words – memorable for all time:

*9-10 Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.<sup>11-13</sup> Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality.<sup>14-16</sup> Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody.<sup>17-19</sup> Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it."<sup>20-21</sup> ...if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty,*

*get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness.  
Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.*

In the end, all that we need to become a truly open and affirming church, a church that welcomes and loves all people extravagantly is to follow Jesus. So, let's get in our boats. We have some lives to save – our own and our neighbors – Amen.

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