

# *“Listen to the Stones”*

Reformation Sunday

*Job 42:16-10-17, Hebrews 7:23-28, Mark 10:47-52*

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 28, 2018, Reformation Sunday, Proper 25, dedicated to the 11 dead, the six wounded and all effected forever at the mass killing at Tree of Life Synagogue, Squirrel Hill, Pittsburgh, PA, to Tad and Nancy Jeffrey, to Tom Worley, Charlie Weaver and their families, and to all the individuals, families and organizations who made it possible to open the Washington Gladden Social Justice Park on the corner of Cleveland and Broad in Columbus, Ohio and always to the glory of God!

*“Listen to the Stones”*

*“I tell you, if these (disciples) were silent, the stones would shout out.”*

*Luke 19:40, NRSV*

*Job 42:16-10-17, Hebrews 7:23-28, Mark 10:47-52*

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

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I love stones. I have always loved stones. I have collected stones from places all over the country and the world all my life. I was even doubly blessed to marry into a family of Stone Lovers when I married Susan Sitler, whose father was the late Dr. Robert Sitler, professor of Geology at Kent State University. And I will tell you, some of the most beautiful stones in the world can be found right here in Ohio.

Being the pastor of First Church makes you think even more about stones than being the pastor of most other churches. After all, the Neshaminy Rock out of which our entire church is built was quarried 89 years ago, 600 miles away in Neshaminy, PA. and shipped by the ton to 444 East Broad beginning in 1929. And those are just the outside stones. Take a look around you – the inside stones are magnificent as well! I am absolutely sure that our Gothic Beauty contains more stones than any church building in central Ohio. We are surrounded by stones – reaching 8 stories high. There must be some stone-loving part of every one of us here – don't you think?

This is the year when stones have really taken center stage once again at First Church as every single stone in our Parish House has been reset and as we have been building a park a few yards outside our beautiful stone-laden church. Stones have been on my mind for all year long. Most specifically, I have been

thinking about stones in the earth of our parking lot and now stones being laid throughout the park. Charlie Weaver and his team have unearthed some huge stones and boulders under the asphalt of the west lot as they have dug deep into the earth of Columbus. They have discovered stone and brick foundations of buildings and more much more buried for well over 85 years under the property formerly known as 404 East Broad. They pulled tons of stones out of the earth so that we could put up many more tons of cement and lay more stones down to beautify our corner.

In a few hours, we will dedicate the sacred ground now known to us as the Washington Gladden Social Justice Park for a sacred purpose. We will bless and dedicate the Park for the purpose of celebrating and remembering the work of social justice in this world. With 40 trees, hundreds of bushes, even more plants and yards of grass, we will bring green space back into the heart of our city. We will do this to remember and hold as sacred the work and ministry of Social Justice – a very appropriate act for a church whose roots are in the abolitionist and underground railroad movement. Even more appropriate, we will do this to commemorate forever the memory and the legacy of the Father of the Social Gospel movement, The Rev. Dr. Solomon Washington Gladden. We will do this through

trees and grass; art and story; and the pathway of justice winding through the park.

So many people have asked me to define Social Justice. So here is my attempt. Social Justice is the call of God to set God's world right – to do the right thing. Social Justice is the work of bringing balance, fairness, equity and dignity to people and all God's creatures in this world. Social justice happens when the scales of justice are truly in balance. When those scales are not in balance, Injustice is all too often the tipping of the scales to privilege, power, wealth, and elitism. Justice is leveling the playing field and creating opportunities for all where before there were only opportunities for some. A reset to the scales of justice brings joy and gratitude to those who have suffered from inequality and can create upset and outrage to those who have benefitted from the imbalance tilted their way. Again, social justice is God's call to set the world in balance.

A pathway of Social Justice will soon be winding through the park on the corner of Cleveland Avenue and Broad Street. With 59 stones set aside and blessed by the quotes of justice makers through the ages, this pathway will We call them guide stones or bluestones. They are cut in the size of 3'x1.' They will weave through the park and bring a message of hope in uncertain times. Along with these guide stones will be

smaller stones with Morse Code spelling out words of equality, freedom, knowledge, respect, peace.

Let me more specific. There are now 21 guide stones that have been so far designated – so there are 38 more for you or others to designate. Already we have a number of the quotes for these stones. Listen carefully to words which will soon be chiseled in the sacred ground just outside our walls.

*“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”* - Rev. Theodore Parker, abolitionist.

*“Social Justice = The Golden Rule = Social Justice.”*

From Michelle Alexander, *“If we want to put an end to the history of racial caste in America, we must now lay down our racial bribes, join hands with people of all colors who are not content to wait for change to trickle down, and say to those who would stand in our way, accept all of us or none.”*

*“To handle yourself, use your head, to handle others, use your heart”* - Eleanor Roosevelt.

From Harvey Milk, *“Once you have dialogue starting, you know you can break down prejudice.”*

*“Wherever a beautiful soul has been there is a trail of beautiful memories.”* – author unknown.

Denny Griffith, *“Art is a bridge to human understanding. More than providing simple adornment, it can quite literally alter our culture and change our lives for the better.”*

Micah 6:8, *“What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?”*

The third stone to arrive was to honor A. Philip Randolph, *“The essence of Trade Unionism is social uplift.”*

The second stone to arrive came from my sisters, the Dominican Srs. Of Peace, to honor St. Catherine of Siena, *“Preach the Truth as if you had a million voices. It is silence that kills the world.”*

The very first stone came from my beloved friends and family at Congregation Tifereth Israel - *“Love your neighbor as yourself.”* Leviticus 19:18 (In English, Hebrew, Spanish and Somali). Like Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, PA where 11 people were murdered and six people were wounded yesterday (including three police officers). Tifereth Israel is also a Conservative Jewish Congregation. Conservative defines the movement in Judaism, The “Conservative Jews,” not necessary the political views of its membership. I want us to always remember this day, and for all time, our Jewish sisters and brothers were the first ones to purchase and dedicate a stone in our park.

Other stones will be coming – with quotes from Dr. Marian Wright Edelman, Rev. Jennifer Butler, Bill Willis, Sr., Sojourner Truth and perhaps Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg. There is a pattern I am picking up. Women’s voices and scriptural prophetic voices speak first – in a world which have too often silenced them and marginalized them. Note: we only have quotes from Hebrew Scripture so far. Local voices are beginning to emerge with Michelle Alexander and the late Denny Griffith and soon Bill Willis, Sr. The voices of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century leaders are coming forth – Harvey Milk, A. Philip Randolph & Eleanor Roosevelt.

The stones are beginning to come together and they are beginning to talk. The stones are crying out. They are speaking of hope and equality. They are speaking of doing justice and loving one another. They are speaking of beauty and healing. They are talking to each other and all of us. On a day, in a week, when the din of the narrative has focused on sick people doing evil and terrible things to innocents and leaders, the voices of the stones are calling *us* to higher ground. They are calling us to find a way to build bridges and not walls; they are speaking boldly and telling us not be silent; they are telling us to lift people up and change lives. These stones have a message for all time – for all people. Listen to them.

Just days before his execution on the cross, Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey to the cheers of many. He was proclaimed Messiah crowds and then belittled by people in power. When challenged by the powerful to silence his disciples, Jesus said, *“I tell you, if these (disciples) were silent, the stones would shout out.”* There will be days when the disciples are silent as followers of Christ and in the face of challenge from power and those who seek to silence the truth. On those days, the voices of the stones will cry out praise and glory to God. On the days when people bicker and divide themselves; the stones will cry out justice and mercy. On the days when injustice seeks to drown out justice, when hate seeks to gain the upper-hand over love; when vitriol and poison spew venom from the mouths of those who would seek to end all that is good, the stones will cry out for God words of unity and hope; words of community and peace.

You see, the stones speak for God. So, if you lose your voice, lose your nerve, lose your relationship to God, lose your relationship to yourself or to others, if you lose your way, lose your purpose, lose your design to shine, even if you lose love, God will use the stones to call you back. Even if all of us lose our way along our pathway of life, the stones will cry out: *“Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace among all people!”*

Based on what I have witnessed with the building of our park, I know the stones will be speaking more and more. Perhaps these words of Margaret Meade will be chiseled somewhere, some day. She wrote: *“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”*

Listen to the stones. They are speaking to us as the very voice of God. They are speaking and they will not be silenced.  
Amen.

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