“Voting Values”

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

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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 30, 2016, 31st Sunday of Ordinary Time, Proper 26, dedicated to our UCC President, The Rev. Dr. John Dorhauer, Swiss Reformer, Ulrich Zwingli and all the reformers who down through the ages have pushed us to be reformed and reforming and always dedicated to the glory of God!

“Voting Values”

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4; II Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12;
Luke 19:1-10

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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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You and I measure things every day – all day long. We use the word “measure” as a noun, a verb and an adjective. As a noun, we “measure” as a plan of action, a standard unit to express size, amount or degree. It is a quantity – a rhythm of a piece of poetry or music.

As a “verb”, the Oxford Dictionary says we measure to ascertain the size, amount, or degree of something. As an
“adjective,” we “measure” to assess the importance, effect, or value of something or someone. We measure someone/thing against someone or something else. We judge someone or something by comparison with a certain standard. Did someone reach a certain goal or expected standard – did they measure up? (We do that a lot with grades in school). We also measure someone up scrutinizing them in order to form our assessment of them.

We measure height and miles; music and poetry; standards and grades; polls and people - all day long. We measure life – our lives and the lives of others. Speaking of measuring lives, T.S. Eliot wrote, “I have measured out my life with coffee spoons.” How many of us can relate to Eliot’s measure of life in coffee spoons?

But, how do we really measure a man or a woman? Luke’s Gospel measures Zacchaeus as a “little” man. Besides being short, Zacchaeus had severely taken advantage of the people around him. As a tax collector, he was exacting and unforgiving in collecting what was owed him – gouging the poor in unrelenting ways. He was a “little” man - inside and out.

Luke 19 tells us he climbed a tree to see Jesus. Who knows, he may have been getting out of the way of the crowds he had abused through his relentless tax collecting measures. Jesus spotted the “little man” up a tree. He called him out of the tree
and ended up going to his house for a meal (an unpopular action by any measure). As you all know, Jesus loved eating with others. He had no money, so free meals were a necessary part of his keeping alive and keeping going. And it must have been a great dinner party because in the end, Zacchaeus turned his life around – giving back half of all his possessions to the poor (read just about everyone in the region!) and granting four times that amount to anyone he had defrauded. He turned his life around by all measures! On that day, this man was measured in new and rewarding ways. He was headed to heaven on the nonstop train from hell!

In his book, The Measure of a Man, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote: “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.” How true! It was true for Christ and the little man of Galilee – Zacchaeus. In the measure of each of them as men, each ended up giving all they had for all around them. They stood in the face of challenge and controversy and gave their full measure of devotion and resources. They both enriched lives through their resources – one of healing and teaching, the other making right with measures of economic justice.

Today, we are certainly standing in times of challenge and controversy. How can we measure up in these times? How can we measure the two men and two women running for
president of the United States of America? Challenge and controversy envelope the news cycle every single day and each candidate for the Republicans and Democrats. There are mounting charges against both presidential candidates. On one side, there are expanding investigations into the abuse of email servers and on the other side growing charges of sexual abuse against women. There are questions of inappropriate use of foundation funds on both sides. (Remember - you need to be a multi-millionaire to have a foundation around which questions can rise!). Lies, intrigue, more lies and more intrigue cloud the shortening horizon (nine days left) which stands before us and November 8th at 7:30pm when the polls close in Ohio. I feel like we will be able to breathe again at 7:31pm – but the air quality has changed tremendously during this campaign.

I don’t care who you are or where you stand and which candidate you like, the toxicity and political and personal slime oozing all over this presidential election campaign will leave lasting effects on our democracy and generations of children growing up in America. In 40 years of voting and working in the democratic electoral process, I have never witnessed such a mess. I don’t know about you, but I am embarrassed as a citizen of this nation in relation to our global community. We the people must do a better job in selecting our next president.

But here are. So, how do we measure the value of voting in this electoral cycle? On Reformation Sunday 2016 (the 499th
Anniversary of Martin Luther’s pounding the 95 theses into the church doors in Wittenberg, Germany) - what can we learn about the values we carry forward as Reformed Protestant Christians?

One of Rev. Corzine’s all-time favorites -John Calvin- had some brilliant insights into our roles in church and society back in 1536. In Calvin’s Institutes, he made the case that “Christianity was neither a priestly communion with God nor a voluntary fellowship of love and freedom, but rather a social religion.” Calvin’s theory of the church was an elaboration of the principle that the Christian faith would be incomplete without an institutional structure to express religious convictions effectively in the society, possessing the power and control needed to insure the solidarity of the group. The Calvinists viewed Martin Luther’s church as too vulnerable to political interference from the princes and kings of the times. Calvinists aimed at self-sufficiency without divorce from political life. They put forth a mandate for active membership and strong leadership without papal and clerical domination. There was to be a close connection between Ecclesiastical and civil government.

John Calvin often spoke of the church as a commonwealth, a counter-polity to the state, which cohered fundamentally by virtue of a transcendent spirit working through the “saints,” who had joined Christ to form a corpus mysticum, activated and
disciplined enough to “take on the earthly kingdom and transform it.”

We were the ones who should bring the best of God and the Gospel to daily life and political discourse. There was a strong belief that our Christian faith contained the best values, the best teachings and the best motivations to build a just society. There was a theocratic structure commended to people in 16th Century by French lawyer turned theologian Jean Calvin that measured success in society by the Gospel of Jesus Christ – admittedly not a bad measure of faith and fairness until and unless it was used as “Gospel Gun” loaded and pointed against those who had no grounding in the faith (by Thomas Gale, International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, 2008, based on John Calvin (1536) 1960 *Institutes of the Christian Religion.* Edited by John McNeill. 2 vols. Philadelphia: Westminster Press. → First published as *Institutio religionis christianae*). Too many of you for too many reasons have been shot by this same “Gospel Gun.” It hurts and drives people away from the deep values that actually transform life and society.

A century later, in the late 1600’s Rhode Island’s founder and first governor, Baptist Pastor Roger Williams spoke of the separation of church and state in positive ways. He said that there should be a dividing wall between church and state – but a wall like those New England stone walls a few feet high separating farms. You could talk across such a wall, easily step
over it, but it was established to quote Williams “to protect the state from the church.”

John Calvin, Roger Williams and so many others were thoughtful proponents of the church fully engaged in society. They wanted our values and leadership to positively influence the commerce and governance of the nations in which we lived and in which we were engaged as citizens.

Even our own Dr. Washington Gladden in speaking to the Ohio Penal Systems annual meeting of guards, wardens and caregivers to prisoners proclaimed in 1888, “The Christian Church should run the prisons. It is the mandate from our Savior to care for the prisoners. Running the prisons would make us better Christians and make the prisons a better reflection of the Gospel of Love and Justice.” We know this didn’t happen. But, what has happened tremendous ministries of God’s love and grace within prisons that have transformed the lives of thousands of men and women. For example – Kairos Ministries, of which a number of our members are active leaders – changes lives on the inside and the outside of prison.

What is the measure we should use in voting our values in 2016?

In an article, I wrote and published as a contributing editor to the Columbus African American News Journal in October, 2016, I said, “our greatest measure as “values voters” should be The Golden Rule.”
The Golden Rule is THE critical centerpiece for Faith in Action as Christians and Jews. Moreover, The Golden Rule is a guide that should direct every human being in relationship to every other human being. The Golden Rule calls us to “treat other people the way we want to be treated ourselves.” (There are equivalents to the Golden Rule in each of the World’s Religions. See react-text http://www.religiotolerance.org/reciproc2.htm).

In Matthew 7:12, Jesus says, "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets." The Gospel of Luke boils it down more, "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:31). In Leviticus, the law of Moses reads, “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord" (Leviticus 19:18).

Somewhere in the politics of fear and distain, the Golden Rule has been lost and forgotten. It time to resurrect the Golden Rule for each of our lives. It is certainly time to bring back the Golden Rule for the 2016 election.

This election presents an important opportunity to reflect on our deepest values and commitment to the common good. I believe elections should be about more than partisan divisions, the latest poll numbers, Super PACs and billionaire donors. Politics as usual is insufficient for the urgent task of addressing
the defining moral issues of our time: growing economic inequality; mass incarceration that devastates communities and targets people of color; gun violence in our homes and on our streets; climate change and environmental devastation; a broken immigration system that tears apart families and confronting terrorism without abandoning our values.

All of these challenges require policy responses, but at root they raise moral questions about the kind of nation we want for our children and grandchildren. The soul of American democracy can be found in our sisters and brothers of faith who have stood up and stand up still for what is right and just. They have marched, bled and even died for voting rights, equality and human dignity. They have inspired us and should inspire us still this their prophetic witness. It is our time and place to be the prophetic witness for our generation – if we haven’t already stepped into the fray. As faithful citizens, may we be committed to justice and compassion, responsibility and community.

There are candidates that command our respect as they seek to follow the Golden Rule. Find out who they are and get behind them. Work for them. Vote for them. There are issues on our ballot – like the Columbus School Levy and the COTA continuance levy that call us to vote “yes” for our children’s and our region’s mass transit future.
The Golden Rule — as Pope Francis reminded us during his historic address to Congress in September of 2015 — has political implications and requires action.

Pope Francis said:

*This Rule points us in a clear direction. Let us treat others with the same passion and compassion with which we want to be treated. Let us seek for others the same possibilities, which we seek for ourselves. Let us help others to grow, as we would like to be helped ourselves. In a word, if we want security, let us give security; if we want life, let us give life; if we want opportunities, let us provide opportunities.*

At a time when some demonize immigrants and Muslims, exploit economic insecurity and sow division to score political points, most Americans are looking for responsible leaders who unite citizens around a better vision.

In the tradition of Christ and Calvin, let us move forward into the fray and be undaunted in so doing. Jesus never ran. He never climbed a tree to hide or get away. He put his nose into the wind and walked forward. We can do the same.

On Friday morning, sitting in the Fanning Room here at First Church, Sr. Simone Campbell of the Catholic Advocacy Group Network and founder and leader of Nuns on the Bus said to a group of 25 people that we are all called to four things in our times. We are called to be people of Joy. We are called to **Holy Curiosity** – which means asking questions, seeking
truth. We are called to participate in Sacred Gossip – which means tell your sacred story and share the sacred stories of others who are suffering in our times and in this economy. Finally, we are all called to “Do Our Part.” Not one of us can do it all. But each of us can do our part and through so doing make this world a better place.
May these and other measures move us forward as we vote our values in the coming days. Thanks be to God!

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