

“The Precious Cornerstone”

Genesis 28:11-18; I Peter 2:1-10; John 10:22-29

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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, Legacy Sunday, October 4, 2015, celebrating the 163rd Anniversary of First Church, dedicated to the 42 men and women who formed this congregation on September 26, 1852, to all the pastors who have served so faithfully here through 163 years, to St. Francis on his feast day and to the blessed memory of the late Rev. Keene Lebold, pastor, friend and mentor who entered eternal life yesterday and always to the glory of God!

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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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When he spoke it was as if he was whispering God's truth. This man, who humbly dared to claim the name of Francis - the church's most beloved saint - as he carried the heavy mantle of Saint Peter, was standing before millions speaking in voice that was barely audible. His words were gentle and strong. They were delivered in a language of love and mercy. They were hushed but they were clear. Moreover, his actions of love and mercy for children, prisoners, the homeless poor, victims of sexual abuse and the victims and survivors of 9/11 were all reflective of the diminutive saint whose name he carries. These actions reminded me of St. Francis' words, "*Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary use words. Remembering this – your actions may be the only gospel some people ever hear.*"

In Philadelphia, Pope Francis quietly told the story of Saint Katharine Drexel - one of Philadelphia's finest saints. On one occasion, Katherine had an audience with Pope Leo XIII. She told him what was needed for the church's missions. The Pope asked her pointedly: "***What about you? What are you going to do?***" Pope Francis continued, "*Those two questions changed Katharine's life, because they reminded her that, in the end, every Christian man and woman, by virtue of baptism, has received a mission. Each one of us has to respond, as best we can, to the Lord's call to build up God's Body, the Church.*"

“What about you? What are you going to do?” was addressed to a young person, a young woman with high ideals. And these two questions changed her life. They reminded her to think of the immense work that had to be done, and to realize that she was being called to do her part.

But, these two questions are relevant to us as well. They ring in our ears, too. On this Legacy Sunday these two questions form a foundation for our texts.

In Genesis, Jacob is stuck for the night in a rocky desert place. There he dreams of Father Abraham and the people of God whom he, Jacob, has been called to lead. He is told he will be a blessing. He awakens to realize that God is in that place. Then he rises to live out his answers to the questions – ***“Jacob, what about you? What are you going to do?”*** (Genesis 28). He glorifies God, enshrines this holy place and goes forth to lead his people.

In the early church, Peter was a natural leader. His influence was enormous as this strong, larger than life figure rose up to lead. However, he knew his weaknesses more than anyone else did – except Jesus. Having stumbled, fallen and denied Jesus when he most trusted and needed him, Peter heard the voice of Jesus echoing in his mind, ***“Peter, what about you? What are you going to do?”*** So, he stepped back as a leader – choosing to stay out the center of things – always pointing others to his Lord and subordinating

himself to our Savior. Today, we hear Peter (whose name means “rock” or “stone”) calling Jesus, *“the stone that the builders rejected, the cornerstone – precious and chosen”* (1 Peter).

And of course -there is our Lord. While everyone in John 10 desires for Jesus to sing his own praises as, “King of Kings and Lord of Lords,” the Good Shepherd quietly responds, *“The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me. But you do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me”* (John 10). Essentially, our “precious Cornerstone,” Jesus the Christ quietly proclaims that **“actions speak louder than words”** while calling on the doubters who surround him to answer, ***“What about you? What are you going to do?”*** I love that Jesus our Christ and precious cornerstone asks each of us to answer this question for ourselves.

As you know, the actual precious cornerstone of this church was laid in the early 1930’s. The building was finished in 1931 and dedicated just before Christmas that year. It was built to the memory and the legacy of Solomon Washington Gladden – our seventh Senior Minister whose time of service among us lasted from 1882-1918. As many of you know, I spent part of this past summer researching and writing a book about Dr. Gladden. Through the grace

of God, some great luck and some even greater people I met along the way, I unearthly a number of Gladden jewels buried across this great land of ours.

This jewel I found in the Ohio History Connection's Archives. It is one of my favorites - written in a letter from Amanda Daniels Gladden to her oldest son following his announcement that he would seek ordination and follow the call to ministry. Amanda penned these words in 1858 when her son was 22. She wrote, *"I would much rather it be said of you that 'He is a faithful minister of Christ than that he is a great orator and remarkably smart man.' May God help you to be faithful and always keep you at the foot of the cross."* By all accounts, Amanda, your son answered his questions and answered God's call and was always faithful at the foot of the cross.

Now none of us need to be Jacob or Peter or Francis. We needn't be Katherine Drexel or Washington Gladden. None of us can be Jesus the Christ as we seek to follow him as closely as possible. But, each of us must answer the questions - ***"What about you? What are you going to do?"***

For nearly 16 years as your senior minister, I have been deeply touched and impressed by how you have stepped up and answered these questions with your lives, your treasured earnings and investments and your soulful trust. Many of you have given your time and talents to this church in

genuine and real ways – everything from teaching, to singing, to caring for our grounds and building to housing families in need to serving meals to the homeless and hungry, to witnessing for justice, to bringing geckos to pet blessings. Then you go out Monday through Saturday carrying your spirit and values into the world. You go out trying to figure how to answer the questions - ***“What about you? What are you going to do?”*** Thanks be to God!

Many of you have generously shared your tithes and weekly mission offerings for the ministry and mission of First Church. Thanks be to God!

Some of you have invested in the endowed funds of this church making it clear that generations to come may benefit from your generosity of dollars. Thanks be to God! I invite every single one of us present today to look carefully at the list of Endowment Funds of First Church and decide which fund we want to invest in for today and the coming years. My prayer is that every single one of us supports one or more of our magnificent endowment funds.

While you are looking at your books, look on page 19, too. There we see **the 214 members’ names** who we have listed that have made First Church their church home for 15 years and longer. Take a good look at those who have been members for more than 50 years. I count 33. That means you joined on or before October 1, 1965. I would

ask those in the 50+ membership group to stand again – or at least wave your hands! Thanks be to God for you!!! At the end of our days, all of us must stand - at the foot of the cross - beholding the “precious cornerstone of our faith” and all of us will answer for ourselves, ***“What about you? What have you done?”***

In the spirit of St. Francis, whose feast day is today, I pray that we will all remember his words to his brothers and sisters: ***“when you leave this earth, you can take with you nothing that you have received--only what you have given.”***

So, let us be givers! Amen.

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