

“Some Clear Winning Words of Love”

Jonah 3:10-4:1, Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

The Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time/Proper 20

Legacy Sunday

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens
Senior Minister

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From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy Carl Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 25th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Proper 20, September 24, 2017, our 165th Birthday as a congregation, dedicated to the thousands women, men and children who have counted First Church as home over the past 165 years, to all our pastors and staff who have served so faithfully and well across the generations, and to the memory of Jacob Dorn, Washington Gladden's biographer 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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Our biblical narratives today begin with a pouting prophet named Jonah perched on a hillside whining because God is graceful. Our God, the same God who created the Universe and each one of us is defined by Jonah as *“gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.”* But, Jonah reflects the antithesis of God. He is ungracious, unmerciful, quick to anger, limited by lovelessness, and ready to punish. He is peeved that God has forgiven the Ninevites. God’s prophet proves to be a bigger pain than the sinful city. God kindly admonishes Jonah, telling him to *“get a life and get over himself.”*

You may remember that Jonah was spit out of the belly of the whale on to beaches below the city and sent to Nineveh to declare they must *“repent or be destroyed.”* The 120,000 people repent of their sins, God forgives them and the city is spared – along with all the animals (one of my favorite lines in scripture). So, Jonah actually ends up being one of the most effective prophets in scripture. People listen to him, repent and turn from their evil ways. They give their hearts to God - but Jonah doesn’t. The vengeful prophet is chastised by our graceful God.

What is the lesson in this for us? We may be standing on the side of God when a story begins, but, are we standing in the place of grace, mercy and love when the story ends? Self-

righteousness (as opposed to God's righteousness) has no place in the Kingdom of God. And our forgiving God always holds sway over God's unforgiving prophet. **God's story ends with a clear winning word of love.**

Flash forward thousands of years to a prison cell in Rome. Here we find a joyful prisoner named Paul reflecting deeply on living and dying for Christ Jesus. For Paul, writing from prison and no doubt on the minds of these good friends and supporters (who have provided generously to the wider mission of the church at that time, and have earned his gratitude), his present circumstances put him in a win-win position. If he dies, he gets to be united with Christ. And yet, even in life, caught up in his mission and his call, he lives and breathes in Christ, too. That is all that matters. So, living or dying, he knows, he is one with Christ. And in this truth, joy abounds. The prisoner for Christ has a much different consciousness than the pouting prophet of Nineveh. He lives in the joy of God's grace and love.

A few weeks ago, I had the moving experience of watching an account of "the last day" before September 11, 2001, when, as we say, "everything changed." There was a film clip from the last homily delivered by Father Mychal Judge, the fire department chaplain who was one of the first to die on September 11. In a sense he was speaking to all of us, as Paul

was, when he exhorted his congregation of firefighters (extraordinary/ordinary people), to do the work they were called to do, to respond to the call, not knowing what will happen but trusting that God holds their lives in God's hands and will take care of them.

They showed the wrenching photograph, then, of several firefighters carrying Father Judge's body away from the wreckage, just hours later, held by their strong arms but undoubtedly held even closer in the arms of God, this ordinary/extraordinary man having made a generous gift of his life for others, living--and dying--in a "manner worthy of the gospel...." Father Judge and the Apostle Paul lived fully into a clear winning word of love.

In Matthew 20, Jesus tells the parable of the Generous Employer from the stuff of common life. The grapes are ready for picking. When grapes are at their prime, a vineyard owner he needs extra workers to harvest them quickly. So, the owner goes to the village marketplace and hires day-workers for the harvest. They agree to work for a fair day's wages (or a denarius) from sunrise to sunset.

Concerned that all the grapes might not get picked in time, the owner gets more workers at the morning coffee break, lunchtime, the afternoon coffee break and even one hour

before quitting time. The owner offers to pay what is fair, presumably an appropriate portion of one denarius. There is no hint in this story that any of the later workers deliberately delay their availability so to presume upon the owner's goodness. In fact, Matthew 20:7 tells us that the workers who began at 5 p.m. said they were unemployed because no one had offered them a job.

So far, all is normal. Nothing is unfair about the conditions or the offer of pay for labor done. Everyone seems content until the payroll at quitting time, when the exhausted stalwarts who had labored 12 hours under the broiling sun learn that the barely sweaty one-hour workers will receive the same pay. They scream, *"This is not fair!"* The grumbling on the part of the full-day workers seems justifiable. It seems like atrocious economics. But, the owner's reply is clear. He says, *"Are you envious because I am generous?"* The literal translation is: *"Is your eye evil because I am good?"* No one has been denied, no one cheated, no one has given less than what was agreed upon.

The lack of economic sense in Jesus' story is exactly his intent. Jesus wants to show that the only offense lies in the Employer's generosity. **He commits an offense of grace.** The offense of grace is never in the **treatment** we receive from those who offer us unconditional generosity. Grace becomes

offensive when we **observe** that others are getting more than (we believe) they deserve.

But, that is the way of God's grace. Atrocious Economics makes for Amazing Grace. And it undoes good people. It shakes the foundations of those who live orderly lives. God's grace offends those who follow the rules, measure life carefully and calculate outcomes perfectly.

Do you “get” God's grace? Well. We all get it through receiving it! But, I am asking do you ever desire to teach God his lessons? For all our talk of grace, how many times has “un-grace” marked our words and actions. I hear and see it all the time. I must confess that I sometimes join the refrain. I sound like the 12-hour workers. I say things like: “**They**” don't come often enough. “**They**” don't work hard enough. “**They**” don't give enough in proportion to their ability to give. “**They**” don't offer their time and talent and treasure- and they have a lot of all three!” Do you ever do that?

The “Us” and “Them” nature of conversation and un-grace has poisoned the church and society through the ages. It has become a dominant narrative in present day. Just ask any DREAMER – who seeks only to be a part of our great nation and has been called out by the present Administration and others as “illegal” and “undocumented” – words that have no

place in the atrocious and beautiful economics of God's amazing grace.

Often, newness, bad behavior, long time absence, or a whole host of offenses are rolled out in our words and deeds of un-grace as rationale for cutting off folks in church, at work, in schools, and in our society writ large. But, you and I are guided by the new math of God's grace. Scripture tells us in God's words and actions at Nineveh, in the joyful words of Paul in a Roman prison and in the parable of the Generous Employer that people are drawn in by kindness and grace.

It's true! Every person I know responds to Love Not Judgment. They respond kindness not unkindness. They respond to Grace, not Un-grace.

God doesn't differentiate between the 12-hour worker and the one-hour worker. God is generous and wishes only to share God's abundance, wealth, joy, and happiness. God's goodness and generosity should inspire us to be good; to be generous, to be faithful givers to others. We need to open our eyes to the power and promise of God's grace! God grants us a winning word of love through these grace rich passages.

165 years ago, today, September 24, 1852, 42 people signed a charter to become the Third Presbyterian Church of Columbus, Ohio. They could no longer abide in a Christian

faith that supported and drew economic gain from slavery. They were abolitionists and some were conductors on the Underground Railroad. They were our forbearers in faith. They believed that God's love and justice prevails over all human lovelessness and injustice. They stood for something and refused to be part of people who fell for anything. If it wasn't for the mighty 42 we wouldn't be here today.

27 years later, in 1879, a pastor at North Congregational Church in North Adams, Massachusetts penned a poem entitled, "Walking with God." We know the poem as a hymn and as our church's anthem of faith and love – "O Master Let Me Walk with Thee," by Dr. Washington Gladden. In his hymn, Dr. G. appeals to God to "*help me the slow of heart to move, by some clear winning word of love.*" Gently, graciously, with kindness but with clarity, Dr. Gladden gives voice to that which I hope and pray is embedded in each of our souls – the desire to win people over with love and kindness as opposed to anything else.

On this 165th Birthday of First Church, when we should all reflect on what our Legacy of Love will be here – here in this church and here on this planet – I appeal to you to always lead with love. Love has been the guiding light of this congregation for 165 years. It is the Christ light that burns within each one of us. Love has served us well. Love of God, love of neighbor, love of self. We are called to live in the Amazing Grace of God's atrocious economics. We will end up better for having done so. God delivers on God's promise of grace! Truthfully, you are a blessed part of the body of Christ! Are you aware of that? You have a multitude of gifts and graces you possess and share with others.

We need to remember that Grace is often born with tremendous labor pain. And, Divine grace never rests on a merit system. As a result, those of us who are insiders, who show up before dawn and end the day after sunset, are prone to grumble. We may second-guess God who practices atrocious economics. God's way is not like our way. Our way is to share a little bit of our hard-earned cash. God gives it all! Our way is to share a little bit of our hearts and minds with those who need love and intellectual stimulation. God gives it all!

In the atrocious economics of God, in the new math of God's Kingdom, thanks be to God who is our Generous Employer of

Grace. Even when and if we don't "get" it, it doesn't mean he doesn't "give" it. As we go forth today, may we act like Jesus. And may Jesus' words in this passage be the last we hear and the first we employ through the labor pain of Grace: "The last will be first, and the first will be last."

"Help me the slow of heart to move, by some clear winning word of love, teach me the wayward feet to stay, and guide them in the homeward way... With thee O Master, let me live...." Amen.

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