

# *“Friendship”*

*26th Sunday in Ordinary Time*

*Jeremiah 32:1-3a. 6-15; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31*

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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, September 25, 2016, Legacy Sunday, the 164<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of our Congregation, dedicated to the Senior and Associate Ministers of First Church, to all the staff members through all the generations, to all the moderators, lay leaders and to all the members of our congregation through all the years, to my son Daniel Robert Sitler Ahrens who turns 26 on the 26<sup>th</sup> and always to the glory of God!

*“Friendship”*

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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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Today’s scripture passages speak to us of buying and selling, the nature of material possessions and the value of true faith and true riches. Jeremiah speaks of buying land in a time of economic depression and war as an act of faith and an investment in hope. I Timothy speaks of greed in the Christian community that leads people away from faith and into the infliction of grief and pain. And Luke weaves a “can’t-take-it-with-you” tale concerning a rich man, a beggar and none other

than Father Abraham. Ultimately, all three passages have to do with friendship and relationships – or the lack thereof.

Let's jump into Jeremiah 32. The year is 587 BCE. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, has his armies laying siege to city of Jerusalem. The armies **intend to starve all the city's** inhabitants and force corrupt King Zedekiah to surrender. Zedekiah calls upon his prophet Jeremiah to pronounce a word of hope. **After all, when Jeremiah proclaimed "hope" 10 years** earlier, the **Pharaoh's** army marched north out of Egypt and saved the day. This time, Jeremiah simply says, **"You will not succeed."** For speaking truth to power, Zedekiah puts the prophet in prison one last time (You see – Jerry has been jailed before for speaking the truth). With his prophet behind bars, the King decides to start relating to God and cries out, *"Why?"* He wants to know, *"Why does Jeremiah say these things? Why does the prophet threaten the king? Why are they being attacked?"* If the king had been listening to the prophet, he would know **the answer to all his "why" questions.** His corruption has created his downfall. Now, only silence accompanies cries of "Why?"

While God ignores the whining king, Jeremiah is listening to his poor cousin Hanamel, who begs him to buy their **family's** ancestral home and farm in Anathoth, a village just north of the Jerusalem wall. Today, Anathoth would be located on the high ground around The King David Hotel and the

YMCA in center city Jerusalem (you couldn't touch this land today on an imprisoned prophet's salary!).

More "whys" cry out from the text – this time coming from all of us – the faithful listeners! We think there is absolutely no benefit to the imprisoned, soon to be deported or beheaded prophet so "Why Buy?" Moreover, why would anyone buy land in a time of economic depression and war? Why, when the city is soon to fall and Anathoth will be in the possession of the Babylonians, would Jeremiah buy his family's plot?

While everyone is crying "why" around him, the famous weeping prophet says nothing. Instead, his actions become his answer. In other words, his actions speak louder than words. Jeremiah simply weighs out the money – 17 shekels of silver. He sets out the terms and conditions for purchase. Then, in the presence of Baruch, cousin Hamamel, and witnesses who sign the deed of purchase, in the presence of Judeans who can see, and hear, and smell, and taste the Babylonian assault, Jeremiah buys the family farm. In the end, it is God who answers all the "whys" swirling around this text. Jeremiah 32:15 records, *"The God-of-the-Angel-Armies, the God of Israel says, 'Life is going to return to normal.' Homes and fields, and vineyards are again going to be bought and sold in this country"* (*The Message translation*). The words, "bought again," translated from the Hebrew mean the economy will "resume"

and “regain its strength again.” Destruction and judgment are not God’s final word. Restoration, mercy, salvation and hope are God’s final words. Life returning to normal is the sign of God’s economy.

By his prophetic actions, Jeremiah teaches us to live into the belief that, *“If we have faith in God, all will be well.”* He teaches us that true riches are discovered by faithful action. He teaches us that matching our investments in dreams coupled with our faith claims is the way to boldly buy into the future, even in the darkest times. In fact, it is exactly in the prophet **and the nation’s** darkest hour that faith and future development inspired by investments come together and find meaning. We know the specifics of land acquisition by reading the prophet’s blueprint in Jeremiah 32. Every Biblically grounded real estate broker should know this story. In each generation, God blesses us with men and women whose prophetic faith claims match their economic investments in future hope!

The Bible’s brashness on themes of wealth and material **possessions continues in Paul’s** first letter to Timothy. Throughout the letter, the apostle has been laying boundaries around the Christian faith. He has been trying to give structure and form to how we live as Christians. As the letter comes to the end, Paul focuses on the ultimate folly of collecting wealth. Aware that a growing number of first Century Christians are

hoarding the wealth that they accumulate (some things never change) he writes to Timothy, *“A devout life brings wealth, but it is the rich simplicity of being yourself before God. Since we entered the world penniless and will leave it penniless, if we have bread on the table and shoes on our feet, that’s enough.”*

(Peterson’s The Message). He continues, *“To live for money brings trouble and nothing but trouble. Going down that path some lose their footing of faith and live to regret it bitterly ever after.”* Paul implores Timothy to **“Run for his life”** away from attitudes that cling to money and lose track of righteousness and eternal life. He tells his friend (and each of us), *“Pursue a righteous life – a life of wonder, faith, love, steadiness, and courtesy. Run hard and fast into this faith. Seize the eternal life you were called to”* (I Timothy 6: 11-12). Paul finishes his letter with a return to addressing Christians who have wealth (and from my ministry in poor neighborhoods of Columbus and travels across this planet I would say that is all of us). Paul writes, *“(My dear) Timothy, tell those rich in this world’s wealth to quit being so full of themselves and so obsessed with their money, which is here today and gone tomorrow. Tell them to go after God who piles on all the riches we could ever manage – to do good, to be rich in helping others, to be extravagantly generous. If they do that, they will build a treasury that will last, gaining eternal life – life that is truly life”* (I Timothy 6:17-19).

When will we “get” this? Why can’t we get this? What is keeping us from understanding that true wealth comes from relationships with God and our fellow human beings? True wealth comes from friendship.

The “When will we get it?” and “you can’t take it with you” carries over into Luke’s Gospel parable about the rich man, Lazarus, and Father Abraham! Lazarus never speaks in this story. His silence speaks volumes. As a poor man, Lazarus hovers **under the table** of “the rich man”- whose name we never know. **While Lazarus’** best friends, the street dogs, lick his open sores, he eats **scraps tossed off the rich man’s** table. Please allow your mind to visualize this scene for a moment. This is a child of God – a human being - eating scraps under a table. And there he dies in this dreadful condition. Angels carry him to heaven and place him beside Father Abraham.

The rich man dies and goes to hell. The tables are turned. Now he is eating scraps from under **the Devil’s table** (if you will). From the torment of hell, he sees Lazarus (probably for the first time!) sitting in heaven on the lap of Abraham. So, now the dead rich man calls out to Abraham to have mercy upon him. *“Please, send Lazarus to me and let him cool my tongue from fires of torment with just a dip of water on his finger.”* Abraham is kind and clear, *“You had your chance in life to make different choices. Now the chasm between heaven and hell is so*

*great that no one can traverse it. Nor can anyone cross over from hell to heaven.”*

Clearly that didn't work. So the rich man changes his approach. Since he cannot be saved from eternal torment, he begs Father Abraham to send Lazarus back to warn his five brothers of their future fate (you see this is a family of Narcissistic rich men). Abraham says, *“They have Moses and the Prophets (like Jeremiah). Let them listen to the law of Moses and the prophets of God. That is all they need.”* So the tormented rich man responds, *“They aren't listening to the Word of God or his prophets! But, if someone came back from the dead, they would sit up and pay attention!”* Looking with love at Lazarus, Abraham shouts back from heaven, *“Hey, if they don't listen to Moses and the prophets, they are not going to be convinced simply by someone rising from the dead!”* Note that Jesus gives us a foreshadowing of our Savior's resurrection and how people receive that later. But, here the story ends.

I feel like these texts are looking us all in the eyes and speaking directly to us. From a prison cell with his city under siege, a prophet buys the farm; in a letter about what really matters, another prophet (Paul) says it is about relationships with God and other people not about hoarding money and from heaven shouting to hell, Father Abraham says wake up and pay attention before it's too late!

If we have been sleepwalking in matters of money and faith, compassion and serving others, the meaning of life and eternal life, friendship, loyalty and love - our texts today wake us up to the meaning of true faith and true riches. **If they can't do it – I can't do it!**

I feel like God gave us these texts today as a wake-up call on our 164<sup>th</sup> Birthday. I feel like God is calling you and me to invest our lives and resources in the present and future ministry and mission of this place through which God has blessed generations of faithful followers. We all have lots of excuses as to **why we wouldn't** stretch ourselves in this time and place to invest our time, talents and treasures in the present and future ministry and mission of First Church. After almost 17 years, I have heard most of the excuses. And I have come up with some you never even thought of.

But, then, I read the words of Jeremiah, Paul and Jesus. The word of God trumps the vanity of this pastor and all your vanities and our poor excuses vaporize around us in this cathedral of grace, this house built for justice.

You know I love to talk about the abolitionists of First Church (and you are saying, “**not now.... too late**” in the sermon!). But will our children, and children down through the ages love to talk about us and about this time and what we did here? Our choices for our legacy have been painted with a large brush stroke **across the canvas of today's biblical**

narratives. What I love about the puzzle pieces that lay leaders and staff have created and placed all around the church is that each one has an item on it but behind each item there is a name of a person or people who invested in this church and thus created a legacy of love here. Their love for this congregation is deeply rooted in friendship and loyalty.

They are our friends and in some cases our family – but in all cases our church family. Some of their names are not known to us – like the people who anonymously established our Good Samaritan Fund and our Major Projects fund which annually brings \$25,000 from the Columbus Foundation to work on creative and much needed major projects of the church.

Others, I never met. There are amazing women of faith - Alma Keeler, Lucetta G. Gearhart, Celia Jeffery, Jackie Owen and Jean MacNevin. These amazing women established legacies of love here for education, music, and social justice. I **didn't know** the Knights or the Perrys, but their gifts have helped some of you through tough times. All of them are family to me and you because they left a legacy of love so that we could worship here and more completely serve of our neighbors here.

I was honored to work beside Dorinda White and I am deeply thankful that Keith White lovingly established an education fund in her name dedicated to passion for the children of this church. Alan Wingfield was an amazing and creative man and Twink Starr established a fund in the name

of his beloved. Jane Werum gave a gift for the stained glass window in the narthex dedicated to honor G. Dene Barnard and his amazing ministry of thirty years as our Choirmaster and Organist. Sam Gordon was in worship every Sunday in his wheelchair at both services. Some of our children brought him coffee and sweets at 9a.m. Other children embraced him and served him at coffee hour after the 11a.m. service. A man who had so little saved so well and because of his amazing gift of \$121,919.88 – 30% of his estate – **we have our children's** playground and a fund to care for it for years to come. Who here knew that Sam had investments near half a million dollars? Thanks be to God for our friends who have shared gifts in love.

In the past year Bill and Gail Johannes established a landscape fund to care for our grounds and keep the church beautiful outside to inside. Sheldon and Becky Taft established a Stewardship Continuity Fund to help us maintain and grow **annual support for our church's ministry and mission.** Thank you!

The list goes on – from our two sanctuary organs, to all our stained glass windows to our glorious banner hanging art and up to this week when we received a challenge gift to restore the **women's restroom on the lower level given by Francille and John Firebaugh** and matched by Gail and Bill Johannes. (Do I hear a “Hurray” from all the women?). Then the great surprise

of June 2016 - a huge gift to create Gladden Park on the south side of Broad Street in our West Lot. It will be a social justice witness with beautiful trees and art that will accentuate the beauty of this beautiful church we call home and honor the name of our greatest pastor and leader of the social gospel movement, The Rev. Dr. Washington Gladden. This coming from a family that has loved and lifted up our church for over 130 years. We are so blessed with such great friends and family.

In significant ways, each one of the men and women just named have been friends to us as they have helped build our legacy of love in the heart of our capitol city. Near the end of his life, Dr. Gladden wrote these words in his autobiography, *Recollections (circa 1909)*:

*(And here is the sum of all I have learned) I am fain to believe that the time is drawing near when the Christian Church will be able to discern and declare the simple truth that religion is nothing but Friendship, friendship with God and with all people. I have been thinking about it in these last days, and I cannot make anything else, so far as I can see it, this is all there is to it. Religion is Friendship - friendship first with the Great Companion, of whom Jesus told us, is always nearer to us than we are to ourselves, and whose inspiration and help us the greatest fact of human experience. To be in harmony with God's purposes, to be open to his*

*suggestions, to be in conscious fellowship with Him - this is religion on its Godward side.*

*Then, turning manward, friendship sums it all up. To be friends with everybody, to fill every human relation with the spirit of friendship, is there anything more than this, that the wisest and best of Men (and women) can hope to do?*

Friendship.

If King Zadekiah had seen Jeremiah as a friend speaking truth with love and if the rich man had befriended Lazarus instead of treating him like dirt, the true riches of life and faith would have become self-evident to both – and to us as well.

Simply stated, the world needs THIS church to be a shining witness for an inclusive, tolerant, loving, grace-filled and friendship rich Christian faith in the heart of Columbus, Ohio. God needs us to be strong and growing. So please breathe deeply the words of Jeremiah, Paul, and Jesus. And when you exhale, may you breathe out and share an extravagant generosity and a vibrant response of faith you never imagined possible. Amen.

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