

“Jesus is Open and Affirming”

Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Proverbs 22:1-2,8-9,22-23; James 2:1-10,14-17;

Mark 7:24-37

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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 9, 2018, Proper 18, 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, dedicated to the memory of Mr. Gary Thomas and Dr. Wallace Giffen, to Senior Deacon Janet Newcity and all the Deacons in 2018 who worked hard on revising and improving our Open and Affirming Statement after 16 years, to the special committee now working on the next stage of the ONA 2018 process and always to the glory of God!

“Jesus Is Open and Affirming”

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The story I am about to share is done so with the agreement of the woman whose life story it is based on. I also do so anonymously to protect her in the telling of the story.

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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 salvation. Amen.

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She had not been to church in a long time. She always had excuses. At first, she didn't feel well. Then, it was lack of desire to be around people she deemed "to happy." Finally, she just felt like sleeping in or taking the day for herself. Or as she put it, "I needed my 'me time.'"

When first leaving church, she had wrestled with it a bit. She felt twinges of "missing" and then some slight sensations of guilt. But, as one Sunday became two and two became four and then a month became a season and the season became a year and the years added up and a decade and more had come and gone, she lost touch with everything and everyone related to God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit – three persons of the Divine nature of God that had always been important to her as a child and a young woman.

She met me at a justice rally outside the statehouse. She had heard me speak there and was fascinated that a "preacher of the gospel could believe in Jesus and justice" (her words not mine). She asked if we could grab coffee someday. I said yes and gave her my card (which happens a lot and the follow-up rarely happens).

But, a call came and before you knew it we found a time and date that worked out for both of us. And we were sitting coffee

cups in hand getting to know each other. After the usual small talk, she jumped right in to telling her story.

As her story of leaving church unwound, it all sounded similar to other stories of leaving church that I heard across the years. That is, she grew up in the church and loved it. She attended Church School, Vacation Bible School, she had gone through Confirmation and sang in the youth choir. She had loved singing the “old hymns” and learning new ones. In fact, she still sang in a local community choir. She had taken up the causes of social justice and knew that her pastor would not approve – too activist for his beliefs. But, in the midst of her story I didn’t hear what it was the “break point was” – what caused her to walk out the door the first time and never go back.

So, being me, I asked. She became silent. She started, “It wasn’t against Jesus. I love Jesus. I still do. It wasn’t against God. The mystery of God and the universe of God’s amazing presence has never left me. I never really Got the Holy Spirit back then, but now I do. I feel the Spirit in my bones when I sing. I feel the Spirit in the wind of the morning when I run. I love the Spirit, too.”

So pressed on, “What was it? Can you say?” Again, she became silent. She teared up. She spoke slowly. Nervously. “I have

never told a pastor before. I have held it in for all these years. The only time I have talked about it, I talked with a close circle of friends. But, they don't really listen. They just curse the church and the hypocrisy of Christians and pastors and priests. They go off a tangent of hate and I shut down while they ramp-up... I can't even talk with my parents. They wouldn't understand. They would chastise me for being graceless and unforgiving. My brothers and sister are no better. They would parrot what mom and dad say. They are all 'good Christians'... but you seem different she added (in my head I was thinking, 'what, I don't look like 'a good Christian?' but I uncharacteristically remained silent...).

Silence again settled in our corner of the café as the serving of coffee and the light chatter of mid-afternoon emanated from the other patrons sharing the space of this comfortable coffee shop.

She slowly started after a deep breath, "It all started with a Mother's Day sermon in my home church many years ago. I had gone home to be with my mom and dad for the weekend and Mother's Day always started with worship. Pastor stood up to preach and his opening words were, *"There is no place for homosexuals in the church. God's love and grace doesn't extend to such sinners as these."* At first I thought this was his opening joke of his Mother's Day sermon. If so, it was sick

humor. But, he was not kidding. He continued to spend his Mother's Day sermon attacking the LGBTQ community and all people, pastors and churches that would support them in any way as being heretical. He kept returning to his opening line, *'there is no place for homosexuals in church.'*”

“I don't recall any of the other sermons my childhood pastor preached, but those words are seared into my memory. Those words drove me from church because I am Lesbian. The minute I heard those words, I knew I wasn't welcome in church. The message was sent and received - there is no place for me in church. And that is why I have stayed away from church for the past 15 years.”

Again silence. Now was the time for me to talk...

I started to tear-up as I looked in this young woman's eyes. When the time was right, and with her permission, I reached across the table, held her hands and told her these words, *“I am so sorry that you have been so deeply hurt by the church. What the pastor said that day was not true. The Truth of the Gospel is this - You are loved by God. You are loved by Jesus. You are loved by the Holy Spirit. And there is a place for you in church – at least in my church. The church I serve is an Open and Affirming church. **We believe that Jesus is open and affirming.** Just read the Bible and you see the evidence of Jesus' love for ALL people.*

You are always welcome at First Church. Give us a try. We are not perfect. Maybe there is a perfect church. I just haven't met one yet. But, we honestly do our best to welcome all people."

This marked the beginning of this young woman's return to church. She found home again in the embrace of God's amazing Grace, in the comfort that Jesus is open and affirming and in the arms of a loving and accepting congregation.

This Story of one woman's leaving and returning to church is just one story. Each of us has our own stories of leaving and returning to church – and other parts of our lives. Each story matters. Each story is sacred.

But there is one truth with traverses all our stories. It is this: **Jesus IS Open and Affirming.** So, I ask you, what feeling of exclusion and distance do you struggle with in relation to God and Jesus, the Holy Spirit and the Church? How – in any way - do you feel separated from the love of God in Christ Jesus? Your story matters to me and it matters in our community of faith.

Our Open and Affirming statement, which was adopted by a Congregational vote on September 8, 2002, clearly states that

we believe that all of us are loved by God and called to love our neighbors as Jesus loves us.

I invite you to turn to the statement and let's read it together.

Open and Affirming Statement

We, the members of The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, believe the following statement represents our commitment and desire to reach out and welcome those in need of and searching for God's love:

We believe we are all created in God's image, female and male, and we are called to love our neighbors as Jesus loves us. We believe we are many members, but one body in Christ, and called to unite all people in God's love. We welcome and affirm all people. We invite those who are seeking God's presence in their lives to join us in our common journey. Our faith community seeks to unite persons of all ages, races, nationalities, ethnicities, sexual orientations, mental and physical abilities, socioeconomic levels, and political and theological backgrounds. Together in our diversity, and being empowered and directed by the Holy Spirit, we will **"do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God"** (Micah 6:8).

What I have always loved about our ONA Statement is this: “Our faith community seeks to unite persons of all ages, races, nationalities, ethnicities, sexual orientations, mental and physical abilities, socioeconomic levels, and political and theological backgrounds.” I treasure this more than anything in the ministry and mission of this church. Here we grapple with seeking as a community of faith to unite persons. Although the list is not expansive beyond belief, it is inclusive of our best efforts to bring people together. This is not easy work. Look around. We have lots of differences. We have plenty of beliefs and practices in our faith community and our daily walk of life which could keep us apart. But, by (no less than) the power of the Holy Spirit, we seek to be one in Christ. We seek to find the ways that we can be united in our diversity. We seek to be a living, breathing organism of faith in the heart of Columbus.

It is our calling to figure out how and where Jesus is alive and well in our downtown setting – in what we say and what we do. How is Jesus Open and Affirming?

In our text from Mark today, Jesus seems initially harsh in his interaction with the Syrophoenician woman who seeks healing for her daughter (not seeming to be the ONA Savior I just proclaimed!). The woman is a pagan. She is not like the vast majority of Jesus people. She has no faith. She doesn't claim to

have a faith. But, she is a Momma Bear. She is scared to death that her daughter will die. So, she invades Jesus' quiet place, his place of prayer and peace. She really demands that he heal her daughter. At first, he balks and talks tough. But, she is unrelenting. He likes that. He heals her daughter. He keeps an open mind and as a result, he listens to the woman's cry for help and responds with compassion.

This is break out moment for Jesus. He crosses the line of Jew and Gentile – a line clearly drawn in the sand of his desert reality. He not only talks to a woman of another culture and belief system. He heals her child.

But, Jesus isn't done. He is just beginning. He goes on to heal the man who is deaf – another outsider for whom Jesus grants the miracle of hearing. What I love about Jesus' healing of the man without hearing is that Jesus clearly tells the crowd of people (who are also outsiders) to be silent about this miracle. They won't be silent. The more Jesus tells them to be quiet, the more they talk. They are really pumped up about Jesus. They love this guy. How are you supposed to be quiet about someone you love, respect and admire? It is how I am feeling about the pinpoint passing of OSU quarterback Dwayne Haskins, Jr. I have to talk about it. Now, don't get me wrong – hitting a receiver at full stride right in the hands at 40+ yards is not the same as bringing a girl back from death and granting

a deaf man hearing – but I have to talk about it! And what about Tate Martell – the backup Quarterback? Anyway...

When something great happens, you have to talk about it – even if Jesus says to be quiet... It's hard to stop!

We all exist within systems and ways of thinking which are opened and closed. It is as if these are two contrasting conditions exist within each of our hearts and minds. Our open way is more relaxed, receptive, fun-loving, exploratory and democratic. Our closed way is tighter, more rigid, more tunnel visioned, and more authoritarian. Most of us tend toward the closed way. We spend more time in our work lives and personal lives in the closed way. The challenge is to become more open and more available to the open way. This is really hard to do. I speak from experience. But, our text in Mark told us Jesus Struggled with this too.

Nevertheless, when we become more receptive to the movement of the spirit which opens us up to others, we also become more receptive to the power of the Holy Spirit and the Spirit and way of Jesus. When we become more open to other people, other faiths, other cultures, other nations, other languages, we suspend our assumptions of being right and our assumptions of superiority and approach new worlds and new people with respect – not domination.

It all begins with listening. Our hearts open when we listen. Ask Jesus – when he listened to a mother’s cry for her daughter, he changed all his preconceptions. He changed. May each of us be more attentive to God speaking to us and let us “hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.” Thanks to be God! Amen.

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