“The Color of Water”
Genesis 1:1-5; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

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January 11, 2015

From the Pulpit
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A Baptismal meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, January 11, 2015, dedicated to Charles Christopher Hire Hayler and all the generations of Hires and Haylers who have been baptized into faith and lived in love and service to Christ and others, to my daughter Sarah Ruth Sitler Ahrens whose life and baptism inspired “Hymn of Water and Spirit” and always to the glory of God!

“The Color of Water”
*Genesis 1:1-5; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11*

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.

“In the beginning, God…” we are told in the first words of the Bible today. In the Beginning God creates. And God’s creative, powerful energy is given to light and dark, **Water and Spirit**. This is what the opening words of our Holy Bible proclaim. We can all relate to this. Mark tells us of Jesus going down into the water for baptism and all heaven breaking loose – with God’s voice proclaiming Him
blessed, doves descending and Spirit arriving full force. While Paul seems tied up in knots about whose baptism is right or wrong, Genesis and Jesus clear the way for a baptism of Water and Spirit, a baptism of grace, power, and truth.

It is inevitable that we are all drawn into this baptismal grace today – the Baptism of our Lord. Earlier - in the power of God’s new beginning Spirit - we rose, washed in water, had a cup of water and coffee or tea, walked and drove across frozen water only to be sprinkled or drenched in water by said Pastor. We have listened and sung water music and prayed water prayers. Then, all washed and cleaned in water and spirit we will soon go home - back out over frozen water –in anticipation that more freezing and frozen water will come falling down on this entire region later tonight. Water has already played an important part of our day. Water matters!

We have come to baptize Charles Christopher whose name means “Free Man,” and “Christ Bearer.” He has brought his beaming light and loving presence into this family of faith. Here we have received him and welcomed him. Here he has become one with us. What joy we feel in the presence of Charlie, Elizabeth, Chris and family to
welcome one more into Christian faith. It is so refreshing…. Just like the water which has soaked our brows and reminded us once again who we are and whose we are.

We are living in times when the refreshing Spirit and water we have received in this room is not everywhere to be found. Our offering today is for Safe Water Projects where the central question for whole communities, regions and nations is this: how and where will we find enough water to survive today?

This all happens on a “water planet” – where 75% of the planet is water.

Beyond water access and rights, we look out on a world today in which troubles surround, divisions swirl and people are divided by economic and racial injustice. But, here in Columbus hope is rising!

I wish you all could have been with me last night to walk with the 12 First Church family members- especially blessed by Alex and Alyssia Palmer – our Prayer March’s two youngest leaders. It was beautiful – in weather that was 12 degrees and felt like 5 degrees, 300 people marched and prayed over 2 ½ miles… at First Church, at City Hall, at
the Supreme Court, at the Police Headquarters, and at the Statehouse. Led by a Seventh Day Adventist Drum Line, we prayed, marched and sang – slipping and sliding for justice. We were gathered because Black Lives Matter, because injustice too long delayed is justice denied (as Dr. King said). We were Jewish, Christian, Unitarian-Universalist and more. We were mostly Black and some white. We were mostly millennials – young adults who had caught wind of this in church and Facebook. We were people with hearts of prayer on a mission of hope. The tips of our noses were frozen, but our hearts were full of God’s love!

I was mindful as we passed St. Joseph’s Cathedral, the sign board out front – in French and in English – lifted up the Jews and journalists killed and held hostage in Paris this week. Having been in the synagogue the night before with this year’s confirmation class, this was particularly poignant. There Rabbi Woodward spoke of the anger he felt that extremists – in the name of God – had destroyed many lives while tactically striking, killing, and terrorizing a few.

Meanwhile on the streets, we marched on in peace and the embrace of God’s love and justice! Next time, I hope you are all with me. We were and we will be a rainbow of hope in an uncertain world.
We will be people of God united – we will be the color of water! What do I mean by “the color of water?”

In *The Color of Water*, James McBride tells the story of his mother Ruth. Ruth is raised in the home of an Orthodox rabbi in the South. She marries an African-American man (James’ father) who takes her to Brooklyn, where she raises 12 children. Upon leaving her father’s home, her Orthodox family prays the *Shiva* (the Jewish ritual of mourning), because she is dead to them. Ruth embraces Christianity and the black parishes of her husband, a pastor in Brooklyn.

Ruth places great emphasis on religion as she raises her children. The source of this book's title appears when James remembers asking his mother a question about her race. He often asks her about her light skin and she dances around the answer throughout his childhood.

One day, James asks, *What color is God's Spirit?*” Ruth replies, "*God’s Spirit doesn’t have a color. God is the color of water.*" James continues, “my mother’s statement that "God is the color of water" succinctly captures her attitudes toward race and religion. She believes that race occupies a secondary
role to goodness and achievement. She believes that no matter one's race, hard work determines worth. She believes that God loves all races equally, and that goodness and devotion, not a certain race or class, make people worthy of God's grace.

When Ruth says she thinks of God as "the color of water," for her God is not black or white. God is not of one race or another, God is all races and none. While Ruth embraces both black and white people, she knows that prejudice is widespread and intense. God's spirit, on the other hand, welcomes people of all races, sexual orientations and backgrounds.

I share this story on "God as the color of water" as I close because I believe we should come to baptism and faith in Christ bearing in mind the unity of God’s spirit and the oneness of God’s love. Let us remember that to become a Christian requires a number of things. It requires renouncing. It requires dying. It requires proclaiming faith in Jesus Christ. It requires accepting the Holy Spirit in your life. It requires receiving water and that same Holy Spirit you just proclaimed you accepted. In the end – as in the beginning - being made a Christian is about water and the Spirit.
Truly, to become a Christian, we need to embrace and be embraced by our God, who is the color of water. Today, we have carried and celebrated Charles Christopher as he joins out amazingly graced fellowship that walk and live in Christ. Today, we renewed our baptismal vows. Today, as people who are made into Christians, let us remember our baptism and keep it holy. Amen.

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