

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, January 24, 2010, Epiphany 3, dedicated to Drs. W. Gladden, M. Lichliter, B. Merrill and C. Coe and all my predecessors who have served as Senior Minister of First Church since September 1852, and always to the glory of God!*

## **“The Spirit of the Lord is Upon YOU!”**

### ***I Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-20***

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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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For the past three weeks I have been reminiscing over the past 10 years. Thank you for the memories of sharing the joys and sorrows of life and ministry as we serve Christ in downtown Columbus. There are so many ways to look upon our time together. But I am not sure how best to measure this time. I know statistics cannot completely tell this story, but the numbers are humbling. Here are a just few from January 23, 2000-January 23, 2010:

Ninety-six babies have been born, while 109 men and women have been memorialized in death. I have performed the sacrament of baptism 174 times – 130 infants and 44 adults. I have presided at the altar for 197 (out of 289 total) weddings for men and women and couples of the same gender. Five-hundred and ninety new members (including 67 Confirmands), along with 175 new children, have joined our fellowship. This makes the new blood and vision of

765 people! Worship has grown from 154 each week to 390 on average. Church school has grown from 71 to 194 on the rolls. There were 672 men, women and children 10 years ago and 1,133 today. I have preached more than 1,200 times between two services each Sunday, funerals, weddings, special services and at least 50 sermons delivered in churches, synagogues, national conferences and seminaries across the country and Chautauqua institutions in Ohio, Michigan and New York.

God has given all our growth! To God belongs all glory and praise!

Numbers can't measure the hours of prayer (and meetings), the time of tears, the smiles and laughter, the teaching and learning that has happened here as your 15<sup>th</sup> senior minister. Statistics can't tell you how much joy I feel when I watch your children grow and become fine young men and women – highlighted by serving on seven youth mission trips. In some cases I have presided over your children's baptisms and confirmations or their confirmations and weddings! I have yet to experience the trifecta – infant baptism, confirmation and wedding! Just two out of three makes me feel older! Through it all, my heart has been with you as your pastor, teacher and friend.

Today begins year 11 (as I approach my 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ordination). We will see where the journey takes us. In October, I proposed an agreement to church leaders which would have had me recommit to stay for five or more years. While we have made no real progress on this proposal, and while I would genuinely love to serve as your pastor for years to come, I love and trust God and know in my heart God will guide our feet forward in the pathways of justice and peace. Wherever we are meant to serve, God will show us how to love and live for Christ. I am absolutely sure of this because our God is loving and just.

As our congregation has grown through these ten years, I remain one just one person – who is a pastor AND a husband and

father. In eight days, the Rev. Janine Wilson will join our staff and once again we will have two full-time pastors, along with six other full-time staff-persons in a church that has virtually doubled in size. More than ever, we need each other to do the caring, teaching and leading in lots of ministry and mission areas. As our future unfolds, we must organize for care of the congregation in which all of us are fully engaged. Your hands, your hearts, your care will help us minister much more effectively. So, how will you reach out, touch and care for other members and potential members of First Church? As we step forward, I pray that each one of you will answer this one question.

Together, I believe our future will be bright and beautiful! Again, thank you very much for the opportunity to serve as your 15<sup>th</sup> Senior Minister.

Now, how will I deliver sermon 1201 if we don't pause to pray and I to preach?

Sometimes whole communities of faith lose track of God's touch on their lives. They forget whom God is calling them to be and get caught up in their own egos and power struggles.

In the first letter to the Corinthians, our first church planter and church consultant, the Apostle Paul, is confronted with one of his congregations which has turned in on itself.

Church members in Corinth had forgotten who they are as a community of faith. They had lost track of what really matters and what spiritual gifts they bring to the community. In the course of getting lost, they had established a pecking order or a caste system in their church. At the bottom were the slaves, then the recently freed slaves are in the middle and the slave owners at the top. There were the rich, who have placed themselves in leadership and the poor, who the rich have placed in membership.

Paul appealed to them to see how their church is "out of

order.” He points out this is not the order God has made. God puts things together by spiritual gifts. He names a few of his total list of 26 spiritual gifts here in I Corinthians 12. He says there are those with gifts for apostolic leadership (read missionary zeal and spiritual community leaders). There are others who are gifted preachers. Others still are gifted for teaching. There are the wonder workers who are able to create order out of chaos. Still, others are gifted in the healing arts. Others still are gifted for helping the poor, the widow, the orphans, and the newcomers. Still others have spiritual gifts for administration (in the Greek the word literally means “piloting” or “steering the ship through rocks and shoals to harbor”). So he names apostolic leadership, preaching, teaching, wonder working, healing, helping and administration as gifts in the church.

Beyond the power play of rich and poor, Paul discovered another serious problem in the church. He discovered that those gifted in one area are trying to do the work of those gifted in other areas. The helpers were trying to tell the preachers what to do. The apostles (cut out for visionary leadership) were trying to be administrators. The healers were trying to teach.

Do you get the picture? It is, as Paul says, like the human body with the foot decrying his role and deciding instead to be a hand; or the ear getting undone about not being an eye. Essentially, Paul says, “Face it. It doesn't work. When we try to be something we are not gifted to be, it only adds to spiritual decline, frustration, and chaos.”

As always, Paul points out a better way. He draws a picture of the unity of the body of Christ set in proper proportion and function. The body parts aren't jealous of one another. They do not covet each other's functions. Nor do they desire to do each other's work. In fact, they become so invested and involved in their function that they don't even have time to criticize or judge unkindly the work of the other. With better spiritual job descriptions, they don't interfere in other member's areas of

giftedness. They flourish, like leaves on a tree. As the old Spiritual proclaims, "I feel good, good, good. I feel good, Oh yes, my Lord! For there is something about working for my Jesus that makes me feel good! Good!"

We would do well to follow Paul's teachings as the body of Christ on Broad Street. Let's realize and actualize and internalize a few of these major teachings.

First, we need each other and we need to communicate well. One of the things the Corinthians did was set up and serve communion when they knew others were not able to be there – a sacramental pecking order. We certainly can't do that, but our translation might be no unannounced meetings or planning meetings when we purposely know some people cannot be there. Similarly, we cannot be isolated and out of touch. We cannot neglect our own work in the church and we may not criticize or judge the work of others. A healthy church, Paul points out, is one in which we find and follow our calling within the body (and if you haven't yet done so, see me! I can assist you!).

Second, we have to respect each other and acknowledge and utilize the spiritual gifts people have. In the body there is no question of relative importance. Any limb or organ which fails to work throws the entire body of our sync. We need to honor and work with each dimension of our life together in Christ. In other words, how do we honor and support all the ministries of the church - from cradle to grave. The work of one commission and committee should be acknowledged for its importance right alongside the work of others.

Third, we ought to sympathize with each other. If anyone part of the body is affected, all the others suffer in sympathy because they cannot help it. Our prayer lists should become our "to call" lists. How do we call on one another when times are tough and physical and spiritual strife is present? This goes beyond the walls and the membership rolls of this place. We need to reach out

to our neighbors in other churches, synagogues, and mosques when they suffer - as we have done at various times in our history.

In essence, Paul asks, "Why are we here?" Our answer must be: We are here to glorify God and serve God all the days of our lives. We are here to figure out what our spiritual gifts are. We are here to share our gifts with others. We are here, not to do the work of other body parts, but to glory in the work God has given us and to celebrate others in our body!

Through it all, we must remember that we need each other. We must to respect each other and communicate well while utilizing our spiritual gifts to build up the body of Christ and while sympathizing and serving each other.

The church is not the only place where someone asks, "why am I here?" today. One Sabbath day in his hometown synagogue of Nazareth, Jesus has a "Why Am I Here?" moment, too. At the moment when the scroll is unraveled, Jesus rises to read. He turns to Isaiah 61:1-2 and reads, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor who I have been sent, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to free the captives, and proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord."

As he finishes, Jesus sits down. When he sits, our greatest teaching on "Why we are here?" comes to light. As disciples of Christ, you and I are here for no less than living into our baptismal anointing. We are here to be prophetic witnesses to those who are left out of the wealth, locked into the prisons, blind to world around them - physically and spiritually - and oppressed in every manner of ways. We are here to be witnesses of no less than the resurrection of life!

Jesus offers us a roadmap for serving him. Now, we're not handed out street maps today, but, given a few intersections with his prophetic GPS unit. Take a trip to neighborhoods within your

reach, schools where children yearn to learn, prisons where the captive are lost and sinking, street corners where drugs (not God) rule, homes where abuse and neglect reign, homes where windows have been replaced by plywood and homeowners replaced by squatters - the places to be his prophetic witnesses are all around us.

Ask yourself, "How is the Spirit of the Lord upon me?" Through prayer and supplication, I ask you to put together your own personal map quest! You need to figure out, through the power of God and the anointing of the Holy Spirit and in the name of Christ, what the street map of your life will look like. That is your assignment as one called Christian. And I will be here for you every step of the way!

The Spirit of the Lord is upon YOU. What spiritual gifts do have to offer the Lord of Life as he calls you to ministry? As Christ's anointed ones, holy and beautiful, how will you serve him?

Earlier, I said we need to care for each other and serve one another. In essence, we need to look around and see who is missing, who needs a call, a hand reaching out in friendship. We need to be the beloved community we are called to be. As our light shines so brightly, God will smile upon us.

May God guide your feet to be a prophetic witness for Christ. For God knows, Christ needs you more than ever before. Amen.