

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister of the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Congregational Meeting Sunday, January 25, 2009, dedicated to Tom Stewart, the leaders of the Church Council, my staff and all the members of First Congregational Church, UCC, and always to the glory of God!*

## **“Hope – All of Us Together!”**

### ***I Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20***

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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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With a tap on my shoulder, a look in my eye and a word delivered to my chin as I sat in the classroom, the little third-grader spoke. “I need your help,” he said. I had been drifting off to some far away thought when these words were spoken. They startled me and swung me back into reality. I looked him in the eye and responded, “What did you say?” Again the child spoke. This time he tried speaking slower, as though I were hard of hearing or spoke another language. “I need your help.”

My mind began to race with thoughts and questions. How long had it been since I had heard those words? With my children growing up and growing more independent in so many ways, these were words that seemed disconnected to me. How could anyone need my help? Why me? Why did this child need MY help?

I asked, “What is your name and how may I help you?” With a smile and finally with my attention, he responded, “I’m Christian and you can help me in so many ways! You can help me read. You can help me with my math. You can help me figure out what ‘Social Studies’ is. You can help me learn. You can help me grow up!”

I smiled as my mind began racing again. I thought, “I’m just a volunteer. I am only here one day a week for a few hours. I certainly can’t help him grow up. That’s too much to ask for.” Thankfully, my words reflected nothing of my thinking as I answered, “Christian, I am happy to help you in any way I can. Let’s get started.”

Christian’s simple four word statement opened a school year of Friday mornings dedicated to helping him and his classmates. What a year it was. We covered lots of subjects. But most important for 45 minutes each week, we were together helping each other. I helped with math, reading and social studies. Christian helped me forget about my work and the complexities of life. He broke it down. He kept it simple. He welcomed me into his world with four words: **“I need your help.”**

In today’s Gospel, Mark tells of the beginning of Jesus’ Galilean ministry. Jesus opens by saying, *“The Kingdom of God has come near.”* These opening words place all the power, presence and purpose in God’s kingdom and God’s reign. He then sets out to invite the first four of the 12 men who would join him on the adventure of exploring the Kingdom of God which was so near to them – embodied in Jesus who stood before them.

Jesus called the disciples to leave their homes, their families, their boats, their vocations on the Galilean Sea. He asked them to leave everything behind and follow him. He needed their help to bring about God’s reign on earth.

How did he do it? In some way or another, Jesus must have said, **“I NEED YOUR HELP!”** to the fishermen of Galilee. Whatever the words, he must have been compelling! Without hesitating, they

arose and followed him. The call to discipleship and service often begins with moments and words this simple and this compelling.

This past Tuesday, standing before more than 1.8 million people on the Mall in Washington and a whole world watching on television, our 44<sup>th</sup> president, Barack H. Obama, called our nation and world to enter a new era of responsibility. He called us to draw upon values that are old and deeply ingrained in the American spirit – hard work and honesty; courage and fair play; tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism. He called us to face this winter of despair with hope.

He drew his final inspiration from our first president, the father of our nation, George Washington. As the patriots under his leadership camped on the frozen shore of the Delaware River outside Trenton, New Jersey, in the winter of 1778, their future was bleak, their cause was seemingly dying. As President Obama said:

*The capital was abandoned. The enemy was advancing. The snow was stained with blood. At that moment when the outcome of our revolution was most in doubt, the father of our nation ordered these words to be read to the people: "Let it be told to the future world . . . that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive . . . that the city and the country alarmed at our common danger, came forth to meet (it)." (The inaugural address, of Barack Obama, January 20, 2009, Washington, DC).*

I can identify with these words on this cold January day in Columbus, Ohio. We, too, are faced with tough decisions and a difficult path ahead. The leaders of this congregation you elected only 52 weeks ago have had to make hard decisions throughout this church year now ending. Working as volunteers, they have served you with excellence in this effort. Several of them now stepping out of leadership have served you for two and three years continuously, and they have done it with a spirit of love and grace. Thank you to each and every leader, committee member, commission member, teacher and volunteer who has served us so faithfully and so well. We could not do what we need to do here if it were not for you!

Your church staff has had to labor throughout this past two years with diminished resources and the still high expectation of presenting excellent programs and worship. Stan Parron, Denny Mahoney, Sharon Leidheiser, Marty Worth, Marti Rideout, Lori Tisher, Barbara Cunningham, Mark Williams, and the custodians, security and nursery workers have anchored this staff day in and day out to keep us shining as a beacon of light on Broad Street. While doing their work to the best of their ability, men, women and children arrive daily at our doors in growing and desperate need. The volume and the needs are increasing. Truthfully, it takes a toll on people to look your neighbor eye and say that we are not able to help the way we would like to help. While we do all that we can as often as we can for the people who come our way, too often you feel in your heart of hearts, it is never enough.

If you have ever wondered why Marty Worth cries whenever she presents an appeal for the Good Samaritan Fund, it's because she sees in her mind's eye the faces of the men, women and children she has helped and those she has had to turn away. Their spirits are connected to her. They should be connected to all of us.

At least two nights each week, I leave this church about 10 p.m. I head home with my head still spinning with what must be done because the work never ends. My poor staff gets calls way too often as my tired and drifting thoughts try to tie together what has been unfinished in the long day of labor. I realize that the longer I serve you, the more my head and my heart is filled with thoughts and feelings for each of you.

This past Friday marked the conclusion of my ninth year of serving as your pastor. Today, begins year 10. I sometimes wonder when I think that I have preached more than 1,000 times in this church. Except for Drs. Gladden, Coe, Lychlyter and Merrill, this year I will become the fifth longest-tenured senior minister of the fifteen men who have served you during more than 157 years.

Forgive me for reminiscing a bit. But, I realize today that nine

years have flown by. It seems like yesterday my family was walking through the doors for the first time. Following 11 years at North Congregational UCC – with its modern sanctuary and design – I remember Daniel saying about First Church, “Dad, this doesn’t even look a church.” With Luke 12 years old, Daniel 9, Thalia 5, Sarah 4, and Susan and I years younger, we arrived on the annual meeting Sunday.

As your pastor, I know I have been far from perfect. My flaws are easy to spot. I will even assist you if you have trouble finding them. I can help you find someone in the church who can fill you in on all the details of these flaws. As I stand before you today, I ask for your forgiveness and your grace for the times and ways I have failed to meet your needs as your pastor.

But I also ask for you to communicate with me. It gets lonely in the tower which is my office. Too often, people play “whisper down the lane” thinking the church and the staff – and especially the Senior Minister – know what is happening in their lives and why they have been absent or out of sorts. Take a look at the prayer list and you will see that when we receive requests, we lift people up in prayer and presence. We attempt to serve a church that lives in seven counties and more than 40 Zip codes as well as we can.

As we move forward together in *“the depth of this winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive,”* I need to remind you that we need each other.

Let me be as clear as Christian was for me a few years back. ***I NEED YOUR HELP!*** I need your help to minister to the needs of our members and neighbors. I need your help to better care for our children and youth. I need your help to create the vision and plan for the next nine years of ministry here. I need your help to pay for the ministry and mission we have and the dreams we need to fund for the future. I need your help to look out for one another. We are trying hard to set up systems of care through our “Care and Prayer” ministries. I need your help to make sure this happens. Now is the

time for all of us to come together to help one another. As another revolutionary from Virginia, Patrick Henry, said, “We must all hang together, or most certainly we will hang separately.”

We are blessed with a community of hope – a rainbow of hope – in these uncertain times. I pray that we will hold one another as we hold together. By the Sea of Galilee so long ago, a carpenter of Nazareth called fishermen from Capernaum to follow him. He must have said, “I need your help.” In his name and his spirit, I say the same: “I need your help.” Amen.

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