

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Third Sunday after Epiphany, January 27, 2013, dedicated to our entire congregation, which now lists 1,005 members, to Gerry Worth our outgoing Moderator for his outstanding leadership of the church in 2012, to John and Francille Firebaugh for their gracious and dedicated leadership of the constitutional revisions this past year, and always to the glory of God!

“What Was Jesus’ Constitution?” Luke 4:14-21

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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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Every Sabbath into the synagogue he goes. It is his custom, his pattern of observance. It is his character, his nature, his constitution. Jesus of Nazareth is designed and created for worship.

Into his hometown shul he strolls. He sees the same people he has seen throughout his lifetime. He hears their conversations, their blessings of one another and the same arguments he has heard for a lifetime. Their patterns of study, singing, prayer, and worship are familiar to him. It is a part of the rhythm of life. They have worshiped in their “gathering place” for 3,700 years and will do the same for another 2,000. Jesus feels at home here.

Jesus appears in the synagogue often in Luke’s Gospel. We will find him in one sanctuary after another praying, teaching, singing, and reading Torah and Haftorah. On this day, he steps up

to read what will become the preamble to his prophetic ministry – a ministry grounded in Sabbath, scripture and synagogue. He reads these words from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah 61:1-3:

*The Spirit of GOD, the Master, is on me
because GOD anointed me.
He sent me to preach good news to the poor,
heal the heartbroken,
Announce freedom to all captives,
and pardon all prisoners.
GOD sent me to announce the year of his grace—
a celebration of God’s destruction of our enemies—
and to comfort all who mourn,
To care for the needs of all who mourn in Zion,
give them bouquets of roses instead of ashes,
Messages of joy instead of news of doom,
a praising heart instead of a languid spirit.*

The poor receive good news. The broken-hearted are healed. Freedom for the prisoners is proclaimed, care, joy, and a praising heart are lifted up. And finally, “the acceptable year of the Lord” – the year of “Jubilee” is declared.

The Jubilee year is the seventh year in the cycle of years – the one in which God sets the world back on its axis of justice and mercy and people get right with God and one another. No more debt. No more hunger. No more jail time. No more pain. It is the year that the poor await and the rich dread.

With his declaration of interdependence rolled out before his hometown family, all is well until Jesus adds – *“The scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”* Translation - Jesus has just declared that he is the fulfillment of God’s plan. He is the deliverer they have been waiting for. He is – the Messiah.

Rumbling begins, which ends with Jesus being run out the front door and up to the edge of the cliffs over Nazareth. Why stone him? They will just throw him off the cliffs for his heresy. But,

Jesus disappears in the crowd and as a prophet, unwelcome in his hometown, Jesus never returns to synagogue or his hometown.

Jesus is clear about his constitutional nature. He has been sent by God to be the bearer of justice and mercy. He is the one who will comfort the mourning as he binds the broken-hearted, bring joy and compassion as he delivers prisoners of crime, injustice and despair, and he will bring God's grace in the resolution of economic disparity between rich and poor. He knows he is the Messiah. He knows all of this about himself. When he reads his constitutional preamble found in Isaiah 61, he finds words supporting what he already knows – he is from God, of God, and for God.

Jesus knows his constitutional nature. Do we know ours?

In the preamble to our constitution we proclaim that we have been created by God and called to First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ to “witness and serve.” For over 160 years, thousands of people have stood before other members and have spoken the same words of covenant promise. We know our faith is Trinitarian and our covenant binds us to with God and one another.

Along with our forebearers of faith, we say: *“In covenant with our Lord Jesus Christ and one another, we have bound ourselves together in the presence of God to live together in all God’s ways as revealed by the Holy Spirit and the Holy Scriptures. We have covenanted with one another to worship, work and serve God together so that we might express through our fellowship and our individual lives the love and faith taught by Jesus Christ. We do this fully acknowledging that each one of us as members as the right of individual interpretation of the principles of the Christian faith and we respect each other in our honest convictions.”*

Adding to this covenant is our Open and Affirming statement of 2002, and these powerful words bind us to God and one another. How we worship, how we work, how we witness and how we serve is in the hands of God and is something we negotiate with God and one another often. If I was really in charge, I wish everyone would

pray each day and worship and pledge each week. I wish we would all go to BREAD meetings each year and to Faith Mission each month.

But I am not really in charge. The very nature of covenant is not that my wishes or yours are fulfilled. The nature of covenant is that we are constantly working out our own salvation with God and Christ. We are relating to God and one another in a way that more and more reflects the love and justice we come to know in Christ Jesus. The nature of covenant is that we are growing in faith and action; we are striving to be more and more the reflection of Christ in a world which needs him more and more each day.

In a little while, we will vote on the revisions of our constitution. A committee led by John and Francille Firebaugh has methodically and thoughtfully gathered our ideas and insights over the past seven months. Word by word, period by period, comma by comma, sentence by sentence, Article by Article they have moved through our constitution. They have approached this as a covenantal work. They have listened, prayed, discerned, discovered and only then written. Step by step, they have engaged us in this process.

When they mailed out the constitutional revisions two months ago, they then opened up an interactive process to listen, respond, pray, discern, and tighten even more. They have been thoughtful, thorough and focused on how to make this document set in place the right balance of guiding principles and detailed directions. Both elements define a constitution. It must be a beautiful map of the entire church and it must – at certain points – show the well defined details that will guide our community at critical moments. A constitution needs to be a document of grace and balance. I believe we have achieved that here. We shall see.

I have been thinking about our constitution a lot this past year.

In November I went home to Philadelphia for Thanksgiving. We visited Independence Hall and saw the place where the

Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were hammered out, voted on and signed. I was reminded of a number of facts about the constitution. Only 39 of 42 present signed the document. Thirteen men left before the convention was over. Only nine of 13 states voted for the constitution. That was just enough to ratify it. Thomas Jefferson refused to be a part of this constitutional convention and John Adams was “encouraged to stay home in Massachusetts.” (So much for Congregationalists input into our rule of law!)

Just before he signed the constitution, Ben Franklin, the oldest delegate at 81, said, *“I am not sure this constitution will work. But it is the best document we have to lead our nation.”* With these words he looked at the sun over the chair where George Washington sat as while presiding over the convention, and said, *“Is that a rising or a setting sun? I believe the sun is rising!”* As he affixed his name to the constitution, it is said that Mr. Franklin wept.

Now the original document is kept in the National Archives in Washington (built by John Russell Pope who built our church!). But, Philadelphia has the actual document our first President George Washington used to lead the first Congress. The National Park guide told a funny story about this well handled copy of the constitution. Apparently one day while paging through the 4,400 word document during a session of Congress, President Washington was overheard muttering to himself, *“Sometimes I don’t understand this thing and I can’t find what I need here. But, I guess that doesn’t matter. It belongs to all of us so I will make due.”*

In a little while, we will vote on our constitution. It belongs to all of us. It will not cover every imaginable detail or circumstance we will face in our life together. We may not understand or like everything that is in our constitution. But, we need to realize that we are a covenantal people – and like a marriage – we are bound to God and one another and are called to walk together in all God’s ways – aware that God, through Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit will guide us through the tough times and lead us to joy.

And as we step into this revised constitution, we need to proceed knowing that the sun is rising, not setting on our life together in Christ at First Church. And thanks be to God for our life together in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

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