

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Epiphany 4, January 31, 2010, dedicated to the Rev. Barb Cunningham in thanksgiving for her ministry, and always to the glory of God!

“Forward in Faith” *

I Chronicles 4:9-10; I Corinthians 13; Luke 4:21-30

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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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Someone once said, “There is really very little difference between people – but that little difference makes a great deal of difference.” Buried in two short biblical scripture verses in one of the least-read sections of one of the least-read books is a prayer of a mostly unknown man named Jabez. If he stood beside Moses or Kings David and Solomon, this man would appear little indeed. Those early Christians who turned the world upside down in the Acts of the Apostles cast large shadows across his tiny presence in the scriptures. But in the end, Jabez made a great deal of difference with his little difference.

The first nine chapters of Chronicles are taken up with family trees of the twelve tribes of the Hebrew people. Long lists appear with mostly unfamiliar and difficult names – more than 500 all together. Even the bravest Bible student soon finds herself turning to Ezra and Nehemiah to escape the chronology of people beginning

with Adam. Forty-four names into the fourth chapter, a story suddenly appears.

“Now Jabez was more honorable than his brothers, and his mother called his name Jabez saying, ‘Because I bore him in pain.’ And Jabez called upon the God of Israel saying, ‘Oh, you that would bless me indeed and enlarge my territory, that Your hand would be with me and that you would keep me from evil that I would not cause pain!’ So God granted him what he requested.” (I Chronicles 4:9-10)

There is something about Jabez and his prayer that makes the chroniclers interrupt their litany of names and offer us his prayer. He is never spoken of before or after these verses of scripture. We only know he caused his mother much pain in birth. We wonder, was it a difficult pregnancy? Long Labor? A Breech birth? What was it that caused the pain? From his birth he bears a name which many would prefer to change. Only God knows the pain his mother bore.

At First Church baptisms, we always hear the names of the ones about to be baptized from the language of original. Often the names translate, “Pure,” “Strong deliverer,” “One who honors God” “Beautiful.” To begin life with a name that means “I caused my mother pain in birth,” is a lot to bear. Such a name was not one left alone on the playgrounds of ancient Israel. I guarantee it.

So, we know things started badly for a person no one had ever heard of (and no one hears from him again). We know he prayed an unusual, one sentence prayer. We know things ended extraordinarily well for him. So, something about Jabez’s simple, four-line request to God left a permanent mark on the history books of Israel.

Let’s look again:

1. *Oh, that you would bless me indeed,*

- 2. And enlarge my territory,**
- 3. That your hand would be with me,**
- 4. And that you would keep me from evil.**

At first glance, these four requests might strike you as sincere, sensible, even noble, but not very remarkable. But, briefly, let's look closer.

1. Oh, that you would bless me indeed. This is a great opening to the prayer. In this prayer, Jabez calls upon God for a blessing. INDEED! He leaves it up to God to determine what his blessing will be. When and where and how God will bless him is God's business. That is great, because God is in the blessing business! We learn from Jabez to open our prayers, asking God to bless us. When we are blessed, we will be a blessing to others. Proverbs 10:22 says, "The Lord's blessing is our greatest wealth; all our work adds nothing to it." There is in this opening line of Jabez' prayer a radical trust in God's good intentions. In other words, I believe my God will bless me!

You and I need to remember that our God is in the blessing business! It is God's nature to bless. God loves us so much that God wants goodness and joy to overflow in our lives. In fact, I believe God's blessings are only limited by our unwillingness to pray and ask for them! In addition, Jabez puts his prayerful exclamation point on this prayer. He says, "INDEED!" God will "INDEED" bless us if we but trust God. Know who you want to be and ask God to bless this! So, let us take our heads out of our hands and lift our hands, eyes and hearts to God – asking for God's blessing INDEED!

2. And enlarge my territory. Having asked God for a blessing, now Jabez asks God to enlarge his territory. In other words, he asks God to enlarge his field of vision, his reach, his touch, his responsibility, his influence and most important, his opportunity to make a difference in this world. Jabez wants to make a mark for the God of Israel.

Depending on the translation of the word “territory,” it can also mean “coast” or “borders.” Where we are and what we do is the “territory” God has blessed us with. As teachers, doctors, pastors, social workers, those who serve others, this territory is the influence we hold over those we serve and minister among. In the business world, our territory is our office, our reach into the economics of our time, our field of vision, our opportunities to influence the economic climate of the times in our world and within our reach.

Today, as a community of faith, we will be talking about moving the boundary lines of First Congregational Church to the west of our current structure and property. In just a little while, we will decide about the purchase of the property immediately adjacent to our current 444 East Broad Street location, a process that has been four years in the making! In essence, all the land between Cleveland Avenue and Ninth Street on Broad Street in downtown Columbus will be 444 East Broad. I believe we will all be a part of one of the most exciting, astounding, extraordinary, and exhilarating moments in the already exceptional 158-year history of First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio!

It is so exciting, astounding, extraordinary and exhilarating because God has placed us in the heart of the city to do ministry and mission for Christ. By expanding our territory, we commit even more fully to our great capital city that we are ready to be even more fully engaged for God in the heart of it all. We expand our territory for the service of God.

Late in the afternoon on Wednesday, I came into the sanctuary to pray. The sun was sinking lower on the horizon and the light cast through the western windows was magnificent as I lifted my prayers to God, asking for God’s blessing (INDEED) on a number of pressing needs. As I sat in the front pew, my eyes were drawn to the western most reach of our sanctuary, the Gladden window, here

in the west transept. Please take note that the place where our most sanctuary reaches out to the west is the place where the images of Christ as Justice and Christ as Charity stand shoulder to shoulder.

I have always believed that Washington Gladden's window was set to the west because it was a way to reach back to the place where we grew up as witnesses to justice and charity in Columbus, on the north side Broad Street on Capital Square. In my mind, the decision we will make about the purchase of 414 East Broad Street is ultimately not about real estate, but about mission. Today, we have the opportunity to expand our territory west as a way to more fully serve God in this city. Our friendship with neighbors all around us will allow us to have fruitful and exciting years as a congregation well into the 21st century! As the great hymn of the church says, *If we but trust in God to guide us*, all will work together for good.

I believe God is looking to us to expand our territory of mission and ministry. Some of us say that is not possible. Our mathematics are used to figure out what can be done in our limited time and space.

We add up our abilities + experience + training + our personality and appearance + our past + the expectations of others and find that = our assigned territory. However, if we use "God's mathematics," and imagine God's power working through us, the equation changes. Now we find that: our willingness and weakness + God's will and power to change circumstances beyond our control = our expanding territory. When we pray for God to bless us and guide us into expanding territory of mission and ministry, we are blessed in our request! Like the first Christians praying for the presence of the Holy Spirit to come and bless them, we will be blessed! God's miracles fill our moments of trust in God.

There is a sense in which expanding our territory goes against common sense, contradicts our experience in the present moment,

disregards our feelings and needs for security and sets us up in ways that make us uncomfortable. But I believe we will reach our dream and destiny through the power of God working in this community of faith.

Three-and-a-half years ago, my daughter Sarah heard about the Beyer's Lot and our opportunity to purchase it. At 11 years old, she was excited about the prospect of a large playground to the west of our building. She began to make and sell Buckeye necklaces. The first one she made and gave to Bill Willis. But from that point on she made and sold \$400 worth of necklaces. She gave \$150 to Heifer Project and bought a lama for South America. She gave the other \$250 to the church. She told me at the time, "Dad, please use this to buy the lot next to the church." Since then, that seed money has earned a little bit of interest. Others have stepped forward with their investments, too! Now more than \$200,250 is in this fund. But the first investment was made by an 11-year-old who believed in us and our ability to expand our territory.

This is God's mathematics at work! As we decide to step forward in faith today, I pray that we will have courage in deciding which way to turn. Let's take our lead from the west transept windows of Charity and Justice and a Buckeye-laden lass who believed in us from the beginning to have courage in stepping out in faith.

The final two parts of Jabez's prayer are also critical to our trusting God's guidance at a time such as this.

3. That Your hand would be with me; (4) that you would keep me from evil. Let us call upon God to grant us a supernatural blessing on this day. By this I mean, we need the "Holy Boldness" of our fore-bearers in faith to step forward in faith. When the early church was filled with the spirit of God, great things happened. I pray that our God will fill us with God's spirit and through God's power and presence, great things will happen again.

Finally, as we step forward in faith, let us pray that God will protect us from chaos and discord and any spirit of division. In today's Gospel, Jesus encounters such a spirit of hatred and discord as he is driven to the edge of Nazareth's hillside not far from his hometown synagogue. God delivers him at that point, but not before he sees the eyes of scorn and hatred which would have him vanquished. At a time such as this (to paraphrase Patrick Henry), "We must all hang together, or we will certainly hang separately."

Someone once said, "There is really very little difference between people – but that little difference makes a great deal of difference."

May someone say of this community of faith that on this day, we chose to make a great deal of difference. And may God bless us and keep us together as we step forward in faith. Amen.

* A number of insights in this sermon on the nature of the prayer of Jabez are drawn from Bruce Wilkinson's book, *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life*. Multnomah Publishers, Sisters, Oregon, 2000.