

*A baptismal meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 5, April 28, 2013, dedicated to Anna Kay Sugar on her baptismal day, and always to the glory of God!*

## **“Love . . . Others”**

**Rev. 21:1-6; Acts 11:1-18;  
John 13:31-35**

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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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On November 12, 2012, at Christ the King Church in Columbus, I experienced a conversion of heart. I was your pastoral delegate to the BREAD Annual Assembly. As you know, BREAD means, “Building Responsibility Equality And Dignity.” We often chant – “BREAD” and the response comes back – “Rises!” **On that night, I saw BREAD really rise!**

Here is what happened: We were all gathered for the annual assembly trying to figure out what issue to tackle in 2013. Each problem and an accompanying testimonial was presented. The issues were for crime and violence, education and discrimination against immigrants. For 17 years, I have listened to these issues presentations. There have been presentations on the issues we have cut: public education issues, street violence, crime and drugs, fair housing, public transportation, jobs, health care, youth and the criminal justice system. All of the issues are worthy of our time and efforts. Sometimes I have found these presentations touching and sometimes tedious. But I have always tried to listen.

On this night, as the issue on discrimination against immigrants was presented, I listened to our speaker in Spanish and English. It was powerful as the witness told a story about their encounter with injustice as an immigrant coming into Columbus, Ohio. My mind drifted back to my ancestors, your ancestors, and some of us facing hardship and peril upon arrival in this new land – a land full of hope and dreams for immigrants and slavery and pain for our early arriving African- American brothers and sisters.

When the vote was taken, a block of 75 mostly Hispanic members of Christ the King Church (our host congregation) voted for the discrimination issue. Never had that happened before in 17 years of doing justice in this city. The room was stunned. The issue won the night. As the meeting concluded and people dispersed to their cars and homes, I made my way to the Christ the King delegation. Through a translator, I thanked the group for hosting us and for their courage to come out, speak out and vote out this issue.

That is when the conversion happened.

This mostly poor, and mostly brown-skinned group of Christians clapped and danced; cried and smiled. They embraced me and thanked me for my kindness. Quite frankly, they welcomed me and loved me for my words of thanks. Then one man, with clear and loving eyes, asked me to pray for them. We all held hands and through a translator, I led the prayers, ending with the Lord's Prayer, which as I offered it I felt my arms rising as the words of our Savior enveloped the room in Spanish and hands were raised as one!

As my eyes opened, I glanced upon an image of Christ by the altar with his hands raised. I saw his face. Then, I looked around the circle and found myself falling in love. I saw eyes of love all around me. My heart had been warmed by the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. I was converted to my own faith by people who spoke God name in another language in my own city. BREAD had risen.

I imagine Peter may have felt some of the same feelings in Caesarea many close to 2,000 years ago. There in the beautiful port city along the clear blue waters of the Mediterranean Sea, Peter met Cornelius and his family. Called to the city through a series of dreams and visions, Peter (the Jew become Christian) was a stranger in a strange place. Stepping out on faith, he baptized the Gentile Cornelius and his household, after which he returned to Jerusalem to explain his actions to the other Jewish-Christians.

How do you explain a cross-cultural religious conversion experience to those who take pride in homogeneity? It's hard. In Peter's case, his explanation leaves the Jerusalem homeboys silent. During their silent reflection, they finally come around to see the goodness and love of Peter's actions. They praise God and recognize that God has given **even the Gentiles** repentance that leads to life.

What is actually happening is that Peter falls in love. He enters Cornelius' world, and stands in awe. He sees Cornelius, not as a Gentile, nor as a stranger, but as a brother. Peter sees this Roman soldier (the enemy by most accounts) as one who is gifted in different ways, but truly a brother - and then following his baptism into Christ, he sees him as one in Christ. Peter is converted to Christ all over again!

Essentially, Peter lives what Jesus commands all of us to do in John 13:31-35. In what is known as the "farewell" section of John's Gospel, Jesus commands his disciples to: *"Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this, (Jesus continues) everyone will know that you are my disciples. If you have love for one another"* (John 13:34-35).

I believe the whole problem of our time is a problem contained in the partial sentence concluding with this passage, **"If you have love for one another."** Love is the verb and noun in this incomplete - yet perfect - sentence. Love is all in all. Yet, when we encounter love we find love problematic. We do not know how to love.

How are we going to recover the ability to love ourselves and to love one another? Thomas Merton, writing in *The Living Bread*, puts it this way:

*The reason why we hate one another or fear one another is that we secretly, or openly, hate and fear our own selves. And we hate ourselves because the depths of our being are a chaos of frustration and spiritual misery. Lonely and helpless, we cannot be at peace with others because we are not at peace with ourselves, and we cannot be at peace with ourselves because we are not at peace with God. (Quoted in *Through the Year With Thomas Merton*, page 67)*

Back in November, I found myself falling in love. I can't fully explain it, but my eyes met the eyes of my fellow members of BREAD, these newcomers to our land in the light of God, the light of love. I saw each one with fresh eyes. I saw each one as beloved, as blessed, as beautiful. For a suspended moment in time, I saw the light, life and love of God in each one of them. It was a powerful feeling. Instead of focusing on "immigration issues" or wondering why they had come to "my country" and hadn't dressed a certain way, or spoke a certain way, I simply saw in them the light and love of God. I saw them as good. I saw them as my brother and my sister. And in that act of love, I felt the power of God's unconditional love for myself.

My lack of love was suspended in time, and I found myself sharing love. I dared to love. Too often I find myself desiring the other to be a certain way before I extend love to him or her. Is this true for you? Do you want a person to be a certain way or look a certain way before you love him or her? You are essentially looking in a mirror and reflecting yourself onto that person. For example, if you demand that a person look a certain way before they are acceptable to you, you really are looking at your own unacceptable self and projecting this onto them. To love like this is to be a stranger to yourself.

Rather, the act of God's love is unconditional! This week, I implore you to fall in love all over again. Offer someone a smile, a little visit, a short note, read them a story, bring them a pair of shoes, give them a hug. In the spirit of the Saint Teresa known in

the Catholic Church as The Little Flower, **do ordinary things with extraordinary love**. Remember, in so doing, that we can do no great things - only small things with great love.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta lived this kind of love every day. She tells the story in *Life in the Spirit* of a young man her sisters found on the streets of London laying in the street. They said to him, "You should not be here. You should be home with your parents." He said, "When I go home, my mother does not want me because I have long hair. Every time I go to her door she pushes me out." By the time they came back to him, he had taken an overdose and they rushed him to the hospital.

It is easy to love people far away. It is much harder to love those close to us. It is easier to give a cup of rice and relieve hunger than it is to relieve the loneliness and pain of someone unloved in our own home. But today I ask you begin your week of loving in your own home, for this is where our love for each other must start. I also ask each one of you to extend yourself in love and come to the Celeste Center at the Ohio State Fair Grounds on Monday night, May 6. You, too, will experience a conversation of heart if you come and open yourself to the love of God that is shared between brothers and sisters from all over the city, from all over the world, and from many different faith traditions. It is powerful to be with such a broad mix of people in our own city. Don't sit at home Monday night a week from now. Come with me to the meeting. For free – you get to witness God's love and justice in action.

Leviticus 19: 33, 34 and 37 implores us (in God's words, not mine):

**33** "When a foreigner lives with you in your land, don't take advantage of him. **34** Treat the foreigner the same as a native. Love him like one of your own. Remember that you were once foreigners in Egypt. I am God, your God. **37** "Keep all my decrees and all my laws. Yes, do them. I am God."

Blending Acts, John and Leviticus, we come away from God's converting call, God's decree and God's law to love one another.

I close with a story I heard from my friend and colleague and BREAD Vice-President, The Apostle Lafayette Scales, founder and pastor of Rhema Christian Center. He retold the famous story of William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army trying to get a telegraph out for a Christmas message to his soldiers in Christ. He had very little money. He kept offering words to the telegraph office worker. The man kept saying, to him, you do not have enough money to send this. Finally, after three attempts, Booth wrote one word and handed it to the young man. The word was "others." Others.

Love . . . others!

That is what we are called to do. Please join me next Monday and we seek to love others through BREAD. This week, I invite you to open eyes, as Peter did, and love "the other" who is right in front of you. From me this is a request. But according to our Savior, this is not a request, it is a commandment, the only commandment that he ever makes - "You must love one another." So be it.

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