

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, April 29, 2012, Easter 3, dedicated to Tiphane Deas and Treva Williams and all the dedicated organizers who have worked with the First Congregational Church BREAD Team and Justice Ministry Network through the years, and always to the glory of God!

“After Thinking it Over”

Acts 4:5-12; John 10:11-18

If we are to understand the Acts of the Apostles 4:5ff , we need context before the content of this sermon. Following the Risen Christ’s ascension in glory (chapter 1), the birth of the church at Pentecost with 3,000 receiving the Holy Spirit and Peter’s proclamation of resurrection faith that day (chapter 2), the explosively joyful movement called Christianity moves boldly out into the public square of Jerusalem.

In chapter 3, Peter and John confront the national religious life and its leaders by first praying and then healing a man born lame from birth *IN THE TEMPLE*. As the crippled man asks for crumbs, Peter offers him legs to walk upon and hope born in the Risen Christ’s power to heal. But Peter and John cross the line in temple protocol. Imagine – healing in the temple! That’s like healing in the church?! Right?

For healing and proclaiming Christ in the portico of the temple, the two are arrested. Here in Chapter 4, they are brought to trial. We pick-up the story at their trial.

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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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It is the nature of established leadership to protect its own self-interests. In the story of the early church found in Luke's Acts of the Apostles, we see this truth demonstrated in the temple of Jerusalem. The Jesus movement has exploded with the conversion of 3,000 people on Pentecost joining the way of Jesus. Now, before the seat of religious establishment, 5,000 people repent of their sins. In the eyes of the religious leaders, called "the high priestly family," this "Jesus disturbance" is in danger of becoming a mass movement.

Luke paints this scene beautifully and with dramatic tones. One on side, "the rulers, elders and scribes are assembled and led by Annas (the high priest - like the pope), Caiaphas, John and Alexander." These are the same rulers from whom Peter hid while Jesus was on trial and headed for execution two months before. They are the brightest theologians and politicians of their generation. On the other side, are Peter and John, who are described as "uneducated common men." They have the power of God in their corner.

The rulers' question is one rulers usually ask to common men whom they perceive to be "disturbers of the peace" ***"Who gave you authority to do all this?"*** Those in power assume that they have all the authority and all the power to run the show! They call the shots. They manage the masses. They move the money. They are large and they are in-charge. That is how they perceive themselves. Those in power look at the likes of Peter and John with disdain and think, *"They are nothing compared to us."*

Peter and John are standing before the religious rulers having been charged with disturbing the establishment. They are treated like common criminals. The issue for the religious leaders is that Peter and John have healed by power and authority beyond the power and authority of the temple leaders. In the eyes of the power brokers - these fools (for Christ) claim Jesus as their power-source. They have brought him back from the dead.

What is the REAL crime? Simply this: Peter and John have administered a "Divine Health Care Plan." In the name of Jesus,

they have healed a man born crippled. He has never walked in his entire life. Now he is out and about! Let us call it “Jesus Care” (but let us say it with disdain so that people think it is a bad thing to heal a man born crippled).

The rulers and leaders have already rejected and crucified the foundation of this movement. Now they have a REAL problem on their hands. They have been upstaged and backed into a corner by two uneducated men. It is the role of the establishment to APPEAR to be in charge and exist for the benefit of the people. That is their job. Now, Peter and John, through the power of God’s Holy Spirit, have clearly demonstrated that Jesus heals, that Jesus is a message of hope. Jesus LIVES!

These rulers do what rulers do in situations like this. They tell the men to be quiet. They tell them to say nothing to anyone about what has happened. They seek to suppress information by denying, deflecting, and delaying the truth. It is a tactic used by those in power when trying to silence common folks like Peter and John. However, trying to silence and hold back spirit-filled people is like trying to stop a breaking wave from hitting the beach. It cannot be done.

After thinking over what the rulers have charged them to do, Peter and John proclaim that they will not be silent. They cannot be silent. To be silent is to deny God’s truth and they cannot and will not deny God. That is what people of faith are famous for - speaking the truth - with love and justice.

I have seen these kinds of proceedings before. You have, too. In fact, John and Peter were not the only ones in the Bible to “think over” what needed to be done. In Nehemiah 5:77ff, the prophet and city planner responded to the sights and sounds of abuse he witnessed against his people and took time to think over what he would do. He called a GREAT ASSEMBLY to address the issues of his day.

When those in power and authority deny, deflect and delay the truth from coming out. In our advertising and marketing rich

culture, we are even more prone to this form of information control. We have our Peters, Johns and Nehemiahs standing up for what is right - and we stand with them. Here at First Congregational Church, we ALL belong to two movements as members of First Church. We all belong to the Jesus Movement that Peter and John (and the Holy Spirit!) started 200 years ago.

We also belong to a movement called BREAD - which stands for Building Responsibility Equality AND Dignity. When First Congregational United Church of Christ of Columbus, Ohio, joined BREAD through a unanimous congregational vote January 24, 2000, we began a journey that would take us through many twists and turns - together.

In just a few days, every one of us as members of BREAD are being called to a great assembly (to use the words of the prophet and city-builder Nehemiah). At our assembly, we will look at some critical issues for our times. We will look at health care; juvenile justice (in terms of restorative justice); our newly-established land bank (which was BREAD's idea in the first place!), which will help people stay in their homes and avoid foreclosures and increased housing vacancies; and our new issue - jobs.

Since Peter and John were all about the "Jesus Health Care Initiative," let us look at health care in Central Ohio. As we see hospitals growing into little cities all around us, we feel good about health care in Central Ohio.

We know that:

- Ohio Health is one of FORTUNE Magazine's "100 Best Companies to work for (six years running).
- Nationwide Children's Hospital ranks in all 10 specialties (US News & World Report).
- The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center was listed in "America's Best Hospitals" (US News & World Report).
- The James Cancer Hospital is one of only 40 "comprehensive cancer centers" in the U.S. as designated by the National Cancer Institute.

- The Mt. Carmel New Albany Surgical Hospital has received the Summit Award six straight years for sustained excellence in patient care (ranking in the 99th percentile).

What we do not know or hear much about on advertisements and billboards is that:

- The Commonwealth Fund ranked Columbus in the bottom half of its most recent local health scorecard.
- Infant mortality is twice the national average (8 deaths per 1,000 births);
- Only 39.9 % of diabetics get recommended preventative care. (Commonwealth Fund) compared with the best communities providing those services to 63.1%.
- Residents of Columbus die at higher rates from chronic conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure and COPD than the national average.
- If Columbus improved its performance to the level of the top 1% of national regions, it would reduce the number of avoidable hospital admissions by 9,154 and save more than \$64 million (Commonwealth Fund, 2012).

As we have studied best practices of health care across the country, we have found some amazing examples of how we could improve health care for the most vulnerable people in our community and save hundreds of millions of dollars wasted ER visits:

* In Camden, New Jersey, Dr. Jeff Brenner developed an outreach plan that ended up enrolling 56 "high frequency users" of hospital services. Through intensive intervention, Dr. Brenner's team was able to help patients make lifestyle changes, improve health outcomes and save an average of \$700,000 **per month** in ER visits and hospitalizations.

* In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the five adult hospital systems and the four local community health centers, along with county and state government, are cooperating to divert Medicaid and uninsured patients, pregnant women and high frequency utilizers from the ER

to community health centers.

In this Milwaukee plan:

- The different hospital systems share information electronically between ERs;
- ER staff meet with targeted patients to counsel them on the need for primary care and to schedule appointments. They schedule **700 appointments per month**;
- Staff make follow-up phone calls to ensure that patients attend appointments;
- Hospitals contribute \$1.5 million to the community health centers to help cover the cost for treating the uninsured.

BREAD's health care campaign will have two steps:

- 1) Get Care Source and three community health centers to create a system to conduct outreach and provide care coordination to Medicaid patients with chronic conditions in 10 Zip codes (2,400 people);
- 2) When this system is in place, we will increase pressure on Columbus area hospitals to adapt and implement the Milwaukee plan.

Essentially, we want hospitals and hospitals systems across this city talking to each other. We want to curtail waste in systems that offer folks no medical homes.

This is not an issue about Democrats and Republicans. The greatest advocate to get this off the ground has been Gov. John Kasich's Ohio Department of Health Director Dr. Theodore E. Wymyslo. He sees the need for the poor to have medical homes. It is not a political issue. It is a people issue. It is not a profit issues. It is a care issue.

At our Nehemiah Action on May 7, we have John McCarthy, Ohio Medicaid Director, coming to support our plan to get community health workers from Care Source to be assigned to each of the community health center sites.

On jobs, our BREAD research team has been hard at work. We have unearthed a number of facts during the course of five months of research.

1) Franklin County reports its unemployment rate to be 6.7%; however, if we count individuals who are not actively looking for work, the employment rate climbs to 12.5% as of December 2011. African-Americans are disproportionately affected with an unemployment rate that is estimated to be twice that of their white counterparts (19.4% vs. 8.8%).

2) Per capita income in Columbus has declined by \$2,500 relative to the national average over last 10 years (source: Columbus 2020). This is because the city has developed too many low-wage (back office) jobs;

3) Small businesses are the best vehicle for developing wealth and living wage jobs (nationally 66% of net new jobs are created by small businesses but in Columbus only 50%. Source: US Small Business Association);

4) Much of the problem comes from disparities in two areas: small business and workforce development. One study ranks Columbus dead last among 16 similar cities for small business development. Professionals in the field attribute this to a lack of funding and training for small business owners.

5) Two things inhibit entrepreneurs: lack of know-how and lack of capital;

6) Small business incubators are a proven strategy for providing entrepreneurs with necessary know-how;

7) Micro-lending is a proven strategy for helping working class, immigrants and others get access to capital.

BREAD will propose a process to establish at least four small business incubators to target underserved communities and a

dramatic expansion of the capital available for micro lending. These small business incubators would provide entrepreneurs with administrative services, mentoring, low-rent offices, market research and business advocacy. BREAD also plans to ask the city of Columbus to invest capital to fund the development of new businesses in under-served neighborhoods.

As a Big HOLY Audacious Goal, BREAD is proposing \$42 million to demonstrate that Columbus is as committed to developing entrepreneurs as we are to supporting the millionaires in the Arena District.

On the issue of restorative justice, BREAD is seeking to support youth who commit non-violent offenses. In a program called Restorative Justice, national experts gathered last month to demonstrate proven diversion programs that focus on the needs of victims, offenders, and the involved community. Victims take an active role and offenders are encouraged to take responsibility for their actions. The community also is afforded the opportunity to tell how they have been affected by the offense. With all parties involved, the concept of healing is central to the restorative justice process. Programs in place are reporting significant decreases in re-offending rates. Restorative Justice, rather than retributive justice, is the way our God works. I would rather have our youth being productive, contributing members of society than locked behind bars.

Think it over . . . To make a difference, we need to turn out many people on Monday night, May 7, at the Celeste Center at the state fairgrounds, 717 East 17th Ave., Columbus. I would like to see everyone in this room present - plus your friends, family and neighbors. The Nehemiah Action is an amazing gathering of over 3,500 people from all sections of our county, all races, Spanish and English speaking, all parts of Christianity, Jews and Muslims. If you have never been to a Nehemiah Action, you want to go. It will blow your mind! It will open your heart and spirit. It will educate and activate you. BREAD is us and we are BREAD.

When I think about all the meetings I have sat through over

12½ years, how many hundreds of hours I have spent listening, learning, praying, leading, growing here at First Church, I believe the meetings of BREAD (without a doubt) overall have been the most inspirational and educational. They have been action packed and action-oriented. They have been spirit-led and spirit-fed. In two hours, you will be blown away by hope. I dream of seeing each and every one of us there working for justice.

In our Gospel today, the source of our strength and inspiration, Jesus the Good Shepherd, calls us to listen to his voice and follow him. As Peter and John heard and followed Jesus by healing a man who had been disabled all his life, let us hear and follow. As they faced the powers and authority of their time in their places, and did so unafraid, let us also face and interact with the power and authority of our time - unafraid. Our Good Shepherd, Jesus the Christ, calls us to think it over and then act with holy boldness.

After thinking it over, I hope and pray we all come to the Nehemiah Assembly on May 7. Amen.

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