

A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 6, May 5, 2013, dedicated to all 16 of our new members who have joined in the past month, to my son Daniel Robert Sitler Ahrens upon his graduation from Ohio University, and to my mother Lorene, my sister Deb, my wife Susan on their birthdays, and always to the glory of God!

“Give Them a Chance”

Acts 16:9-15; John 14:23-29

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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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The first person in Europe to convert to Christianity was a woman named Lydia. Lydia was from the city of Thyatira. Although we know very little about her, we do know that Lydia was an industrious woman and successful businesswoman who had her own shop in Philippi and traded in purple cloth – a royal, beautiful and often expensive color and cloth with which to deal.

We also know Lydia was a woman of prayer. When the Apostle Paul comes upon her she has closed her shop for a time of worship and prayer and is worshipping God with a circle of women. As Paul begins to encounter this woman of faith, he senses an openness in her to hear what he has to say. God opens her heart and mind to Paul and his message of a certain “Jesus.” She listens eagerly to his words. Heeding the words of Paul about Jesus, Lydia asks to be baptized. She and her whole household of faith (which could have included the women’s circle of prayer) are baptized that day. Following her baptism into Christ, Lydia invites Paul and Luke and their entourage to come to her home to stay.

From the beginning to the end of this simple and straightforward story, Lydia demonstrates her openness to God in Christ, her ability to listen with her open heart, her willingness to accept God in Christ into her heart, her gratefulness and her faithfulness. She also demonstrates amazing hospitality. We know from later passages that the Church at Philippi was established and met in Lydia's house. Let's be very clear. The first CHURCH in Europe was set-up by a woman, led by a woman, and organized by a woman. Close to 2,000 years ago, Christianity was established in Europe by women! How in God's good creation, does anyone in the Roman Catholic Church or conservative Christians of any stripe go off on a Biblical high-horse saying women should not lead in the church? DO I get an "Amen" from at least half of the faithful gathered today?

Lydia gives Paul a chance. She gives God a chance. She gives Christ a chance! In Lydia, we see what faith looks like when you give it a chance.

So much of our world today is captivated by skepticism and fear. When someone steps forward and presents themselves as open, faithful, grateful and kind, we tend too often to question that. We tend to wonder if they are "real" or sincere. We wonder what is wrong with them. Why are they so gracious and delightful? What are they up to? What is their real motive and agenda? Unlike Lydia, we are so ready not to give people a chance. I find this heart-rending. I find this sad.

I believe our faith is best expressed and lived out when we become more like the first European to say "Yes!" to Jesus – like Lydia - this fine, businesswoman of godly heart and mind. When we receive the genuine gift and presentation of love that someone brings to us and open ourselves to believe they are being honest with us, we are well on our way to growth in our faith.

I find this Lydia-like faith to be the faith of our confirmands. They are seeking, wondering, asking, inquiring, laughing and expressing themselves in untraditional ways. They are not weighed down by cynicism. They are delighted to discover what the truth of

our faith is all about. I love this about them. Quite simply, they are willing to give you as church and Jesus as Savior a chance to be their church and Jesus their savior.

Tomorrow night, we will gather as faithful people across this region as people of faith in the Nehemiah Action. We are the Children of Abraham – Jews, Christians of every creed, color and practice, and Muslims. We are English and Spanish speaking; black, white and brown; rich, middle class and poor. All of us worship God. All of us believe that our God is a just and righteous God. We believe that our God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin (as our UCC Statement of Faith says) and to give us all a chance – a chance to change; a chance to do the right thing; a chance to make our neighborhoods, our city and our region a better place - a chance to live into a faith that does justice.

Our theme is “Welcome Columbus.” We believe that Columbus is a great city, we can be even better.

We believe that more than 132,000 foreign-born Columbus citizens love their new home but have not always experienced their new home as a welcoming home. We want to give them a chance to feel safer, hopeful, fearless and integrated into our community.

Our small businessmen and women need a chance to help their businesses thrive in our community. They need a “leg-up,” which they will have through the small business incubators in sections all across central Ohio in the inner core of our cities.

Young people who have made poor choices and have been caught and incarcerated for stupid crimes need a chance to experience restorative not retributive justice. Through our community restorative justice centers, young people with face those they have wronged and be given a chance to set things right. Rather than incarcerate and harden these young men and women into lifetime criminals and prisoners, we as judges and community members will help them turn their lives around and to restore them to justice.

Through continued work with Columbus City Schools, we will continue to keep pressure on the school district to fund and support the KEY program, which deals with truancy and sets young men and women on the track to graduation and success, not jammed in the pipeline to prison. We want to give them a chance.

And by saying “yes” to the federal program for Medicaid expansion supported by Governor Kasich in next year’s budget, we will be giving a chance to 275,000 uninsured Ohioans to have health care coverage in the next two years. Cutting their health care costs will be good for Columbus and for Ohio.

I want to say something else about “giving a chance” to BREAD. The work of justice is the hardest work we do as Christians. It is not easy. It is not always sweet and kind. It is like tough love. It makes us better in the long run, but is tough to deliver in the short run. Some won’t give BREAD a chance for a variety of reasons. But when you do, you will be blown away by the amazing and exciting ways in which justice is being lived out in our community.

Do you remember a time when someone gave you a chance? A chance to work? A chance to get ahead? A chance get an education, go to college, teach another? Perhaps a chance to come to this country and begin life anew?

This is the way of our Savior. He beckons us to his table of grace to give us a chance – a chance to remember, to be redeemed, and to begin again. Come to the table of remembrance and hope, the table of new beginnings and the table of second chances. Like Lydia, open your hearts, your minds and your spirit to God. Welcome God and one final time, I ask you to welcome Columbus tomorrow night at the Nehemiah Action. Amen.