

A baptismal meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 6, May 9, 2010, dedicated to the memories of my aunt, Janice Kellermeyer Higgins, and Robert Christopher Roberts, to Fisher Blaine Ferguson on his baptismal day, to the 2010 Schumacher Award recipients, Danielle Hamlin, DeMeeshia Marshall and Kara Snyder, to all our mothers, to Mark Williams as he heads to surgery, and always to the glory of God!

“Returning to God”

Revelation 21:10, 22-22-5; John 14:23-29

Today, we gather in worship to celebrate God’s love among us. This love takes form and action in the love of our mothers for us and love in return. We see this love take human form and become real in the persons of Fisher, Danielle, DeMeeshia and Kara. I am deeply grateful today for my mother, the mother of my children, your mothers and the women in our lives who have “adopted” us as their beloved ones – stepping in and embracing us with the fullness of God’s love – made real in human form. Thanks be to God for the love given to us by all the mothers in our lives.

++++
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.

++++
Before dawn, May 26, 1987, I was awakened by two eyes wide open staring at me, two hands with nails grasping my left arm and the words spoken inches away from my newly opening eyes, “IT’S TIME! THE BABY IS COMING!”

Our suitcase was packed. Our clothes were ready. The baby was on the way. Six hours later, at Booth Memorial Hospital on the Eastside of Cleveland, the baby arrived – all 8 lbs. 12 oz. – a baby boy, Luke Timothy Sitler Ahrens. Now “this baby boy” is in graduate school and engaged to be married next June. It seems like yesterday when those eyes of love, pain and joy awakened me to announce the coming of a new generation into our family. It seems like yesterday we were holding a newborn in our arms.

But we know it wasn't yesterday because yesterday my aunt, Janice Higgins' husband, Clip, her six children, thirteen grandchildren, my mother (her sister) and extended family memorialized her in Lincoln, Neb., at Vine Street Congregational Church, UCC. This celebration of life came in a week when we lost two dear friends in Bob Roberts and Rev. Bhaskar Onawale at Deep Griha in India, this all on top of my pastor and mentor of 26 years, who died 13 days ago.

Furthermore, my aunt's service was ending while we were beginning the celebration of marriage for Laura Browne and Lance Collins here at First Church. Laura, a daughter of our church, and the daughter of Kathy Brownfield, granddaughter of Laura Barndt and Margaret Browne, was walking down our aisle and into marital covenant while my family was walking down the aisle carrying my aunt to her final rest.

I share this because it's true – life really does come at you fast. It's not just an ad campaign. “IT'S TIME!” could easily be the mantra for a lifetime of daily comings and goings. Through the circle of life, our babies are born, brought to the waters of baptism, come to the celebration of confirmation, head out into the world, return for marriage, have children of their own, live life fully, and in time return to be remembered in love. We come. We go. We return. We depart. Through all the circles of life in our lives, there is one constant – the encircling love of God.

When we pause to reflect on God's love, we find ourselves wrapped in a story of homecoming, tied with a bow of forgiveness

and grace. God's heart goes out to all of us. Like a mother's love for all her children, God's heart cannot depart from one and extend to another. God's heart is open to all. In the story of the prodigal son, the father loves both his sons. He mourns their split and from his heart-of-hearts hopes to see them together again as brothers. As different as they are, he yearns to see them together.

Let this image of God's love embrace you today. Like a father, like a mother seeking unity and oneness for his children, for her children, I encourage you to breathe deeply a mystery of our faith.

We do not first choose God, but God chooses us.

The claims of atheism and agnosticism cause me to (respectfully) laugh at times because God's will and way is for every one of God's children. We can deny God. We can proclaim God "isn't" or "doesn't exist." We can make anti-faith statements that we do not choose God. It really doesn't matter. As Paul Tillich says in *The Courage to Be*, we all are children of God, whether we admit or not. As such, God is choosing us in every imaginable way every day. Grasping this is our constant challenge.

One of the truest mysteries of faith is that we do not choose God. God chooses us. From all eternity, we are "hidden in the palm of God's hand," and we are "engraved on God's palm." Before you or I or my son Luke was touched by human hands, God formed us "in secret" and created us from the depth of the earth. Before any human thought about us, "God knit us together in our mother's womb." God loves us before any human person can show love to us. God loves us with a first love, an unconditional love, an unlimited love. And, here is the clincher, God tells us to become as loving as Godself. (Drawn from Henri Nouwen in *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, pp.105-106)

How often do you find yourself wrestling with God? All too often, I find myself struggling to know God's will for my life, to see God's hand in the actions and reactions around me, to seek and follow God's way. I try hard to pray, to read scripture, to listen to God, to figure out what God and Jesus would do in any given

situation. Questions fly about : “How am I to find God?” “How am I to know God?” “How am I to love God?” When I screw up, “How can I return to God?”

In the spinning of questions that our hearts and minds create, we can easily lose track of who our God really is. Our God is not a detached, removed, distant and difficult “heavenly Father or Mother.” As in the story of the Prodigal Son, our God comes out of the house, into the fields, ignoring his dignity running toward the fallen son, ignoring apologies and promises of change. Our God sets the table and serves the feast when we return. Our God is looking for us when we run away, hide and avoid our God. Our God is constantly seeking us, smiling upon us and loving us unconditionally. Our God, who created us, knew us and knit us together in our mother’s womb will never tear us apart in the world which our God created for us!

So, our God, who is not the one hiding, running away or dividing us from one another, but rather is the one seeking us, running toward us and knitting us together, our God is waiting for our return.

The world in which we live would love for us to stay stuck in our spiritual loathing, our self-contempt, our self-rejection! You can sell a lot of products based on a people’s sense of worthlessness and self-loathing. Low self-esteem drives the marketplace, not the kingdom of God. Our God is waiting for us to return.

As Jesus says in John’s Gospel lesson today, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Do not let them be afraid.” He goes on to say, “Believe in God, believe also in me.” My friends, return to God with all your heart. Do not be troubled. Do not be afraid any longer.

The circle of life continues and we need to get aboard. Our God who has chosen us is calling us home. It’s time. Return to God.