

A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister of the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 5, July 5, 2009, dedicated to the memory of Fran Gurley, to James E. Bobb as he begins his ministry of music among us, and always to the glory of God!

“The Meaning of the City”

II Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10; Mark 6:1-13

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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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With our eyes the heavens, with our hearts touched by music and color and sound and drama of bursting red glare, close to one million Central Ohioans witnessed “Red, White and Boom” on Friday night. Our eyes could not be cast down. Our spirits were pulled beyond the troubles of our days. With people of many nations and yet all of our one nation, we were unified on the streets by this outstanding display of fire and power.

Last night in communities scattered throughout the greater Columbus area, we were drawn heavenward all over again as we enjoyed fireworks on the 233rd birthday of the United States of America. Lee Greenwood’s lyrics, “*I’m proud to be an American ‘cause at least I know I’m free,*” blasted from radios as we sang along with his classic patriotic song, *God Bless the U.S.A.*

There is always something unifying about fireworks. All eyes are riveted on the heavens above. As the fire shoots skyward and the blasts blow light everywhere, we are in awe of that which is created

from human ingenuity and given gloriously to expound our pleasure and joy. We are all drawn to fireworks. Unity beckons us. People of all ages, races, national origins pull together when bursting light calls us to the streets and we look up.

The day after the fireworks, it is nearly impossible to duplicate this feeling of unity that we felt on city streets less than 36 hours ago. When daylight breaks, our eyes are drawn in vastly different directions as we look down. When our eyes move from heaven to earth, from darkness to light, and gaze around at what is right in front of us, we rarely share the same vision. It is hard to maintain a vision for the city when our vision is clouded by the struggles we see before us on the same city streets. No matter how we interpret what we see, we all recognize the needs of the city around us.

From today's passage in II Samuel, we learn that the city must become a central place of worship, care and even holiness in the life of the community. In II Samuel 5 ff, we read that King David ruled over Jerusalem for 33 years. He was to Jerusalem what LaGuardia was to New York. He took what had been a heathen military stronghold and turned Jerusalem into the religious capital of the world – "the city of God." David did this by placing the ark of God's covenant, the remnant of the Ten Commandments, in the heart of the city.

David knew that the meaning of the city was tied to the Ark of the Covenant. Before David, the "holy of holies" had been kept on farms and home – but always in the country. David wanted Jerusalem to be a city set on the hill - a holy place where God's ark was placed in God's Temple - a place chosen by God for the living out of God's plan of salvation. This moment and this city becomes unique in religious history.

Before "the city of David," no city had held a place of unmistakable "chosenness" in the eyes of God. In fact, the city had been seen as a place not to trust, a place where evil flourished. Although Jerusalem changes that as a holy city, she is still a city. She still has all the big city problems. She still suffers from pride and

prejudice like other cities. Nevertheless, God named her as a place where God would work out God's salvation – ultimately in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – which happens on the edge of the city.

What about our city? What about Columbus? How is God working out God's salvation in our city? Like Jerusalem, our city has a mixed record of good and bad. We have great resources of people, industry and creativity, and an incredible willingness and ability to work on the problems that beset us. I have lived and worked in five cities in my lifetime (including "The City of Brotherly Love" – my hometown metropolis) and have never found access to people and problem-solving so readily available and possible as it is here in Columbus, Ohio. I always feel like people in Columbus want to solve problems when they arise.

Nevertheless, we are far from perfect. We can point to projects in the heart of the city – like the doubled cost on the Main Street Bridge reconstruction and the City Center demolition – which many don't feel have the whole city at their heart. We can point to neighborhoods where more support is needed by folks to increase safety and security. We are not a perfect city, but God is not finished with us yet.

In a few weeks, Tuesday, August 4, we as citizens of Columbus and those who earn their living within her borders or benefit from her presence in our lives (all of us in this room), are being called to decide if we should increase revenues for the city through a proposed tax increase. The tax rate would increase from 2 % to 2.5%. In a time when state leaders are grid-locked and unable to deal with revenue increases through taxes to provide basic support to those in greatest need, our city is coming together – Republican, Democrat and independents – to stand behind this initiative.

We are faced with voting and deciding on our first tax increase since 1982. We are trying to manage a 21st century city with a 27-year old revenue model. The civilian workforce has been trimmed down

32% in the last eight years. With recreation centers closed and other basic services slashed, we have already cut the needs of the city to the bare bones. Everyone knows once you cut past the bone, you make the body much more vulnerable to illness and disease. In other words, we cannot cut police, fire and EMS support services and expect to support a growing city and keep her healthy.

We know we need to do something. We know we need to maintain our city services and keep our quality of life alive and thriving in Columbus. To do that, we need to be honest about the revenues needed for our great city. Even this moderate increase will keep us in the median range of Ohio city tax rates. Great cities have the support of great people. To be a great city in the 21st century, we have to make that difference now. We need to understand the meaning of our city and respond to her needs.

I have been thinking a lot about the meaning of our city this week. One-hundred years ago, at the turn of the 20th century, our pastor, the Rev. Dr. Washington Gladden, served one term on City Council. Ninety-one years ago, on July 1, Dr. Gladden entered eternal rest. This summer, the Episcopal Church will vote on Dr. Gladden and grant him a “saint’s day,” – July 1 in their book of prayers.

Dr. Gladden was a great advocate for this city. When he served on City Council, he voted to increase city services – especially to support the weak with our borders. One summer, he did a study that asked the question, “What makes a great city?” He believed Columbus could be a great city and wanted to discover what other cities did to set themselves apart. He concluded that we in Columbus will be great when we enact the laws that are on our books already. Make the city water healthy for all to drink. Care for the poor within our city.

The meaning of a great city is defined by how it cares for the “least of these” within the city. It is that simple.

Past the time of David, we read on about the complexities of

relationships which Jesus faced in his hometown as well. In Mark 6, we read that Jesus met with mixed reviews in his hometown of Nazareth (now a major city in Israel). Unlike our Columbus Clippers, he really wasn't a hometown hero. Although those who heard him preach in the synagogues were impressed with his teaching and preaching abilities, others scorned him as "Joe the carpenter's son." They didn't like his pedigree. They mocked him, picking on his mother, brothers and sisters as well. They disbelieved what they saw when he worked wonders for their friends and relatives. They didn't honor his prophetic voice. They didn't care for his presence in town.

Jesus and the disciples took to the villages and countryside where they did a lot of good – casting out demons and doing a lot of good through the love and grace of God. Jesus learned that to be a prophet and healer in your hometown isn't always possible. He met with mixed reviews.

We all meet with mixed reviews in life. The challenge is what we do with the reviews we receive. David built a great city – not perfect – but centered on God's holiness. Jesus built a kingdom not made of human hands. As we come to the table today, let us bring the best of the blessings God has given us. Let us bring the best of who we are. On these days following fireworks, when our eyes are cast to the earth once again, let us find unity in looking around to serve the needs of those so close at hand. By doing this, we will discover God's meaning for the city. Amen.