

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 12, 2012, Pentecost 12, dedicated to the six Sikhs killed while praying last Sunday morning, to the police, who came to the community's rescue, and for God's mercy on their killer, who died as well, to G. Dene Barnard for his 39 faith-filled years in our church, to the faith that is in my children – Daniel, Luke, Sarah, Thalia – and my wife, Susan Sitler, and always to the glory of God!

“The Chalice of Faith”

Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

Part III of VI in the sermon series

“Shining God's Light

on Hidden Christian Virtues”

“Now faith is the turning of dreams into deeds; it is betting your life on the unseen realities. It was for such faith that men and women of old were martyred. And so by relating our lives, we become aware that history is woven to God's design, so that the Seen Event is a projection of the Unseen Intent.”

-- Hebrews 11:1-3, The Cotton Patch Version, Clarence Jordan

+++++

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

+++++

When we speak of faith, Hebrews 11 chronicles the reality of faith best of all! The version of Clarence Jordan in his book *The Cotton Patch Version of Hebrews* begins this way:

“Now faith is the turning of dreams into deeds; it is betting your life on the unseen realities. It was for such faith that men and women of old were martyred. And so by relating our lives, we

become aware that history is woven to God's design, so that the Seen Event is a projection of the Unseen Intent."

Listen carefully – Faith **is** turning dreams into deeds. It is betting your life on unseen realities. Faith is relating our lives in the full awareness that history is woven in God's design, not ours. This means that the things we see are a projection of God's unseen intent. Faith is living into this truth.

How many times in your life did the circumstances of the day you were facing say one thing to you about that day? Perhaps it was day that you would rather forget. Looking back, you may call it the worst day of your life. The circumstances of our lives often weave us into one look at our reality. We see whatever is before us and are led to believe the "evidence doesn't lie." We feel something is (most certainly) a certain way. We believe one situation is what it is – often we see it as bleak or depressing. But faith calls us to reframe our situations. Faith calls us to look on the circumstances of our lives and do something completely different with them. Faith most assuredly turns dreams into deeds.

Throughout the past 15 days, we have witnessed men and women on the Olympic stage with all the bright lights shining on all their gifts and strengths and on all their egos and weaknesses. Like many of you, I have spent many nights glued to the TV watching these amazing young teens and young adults. Truthfully, no one stands out more than South African Oscar Leonard Carl Pretorius – the "Blade Runner" – the fastest man in the world with no legs.

Oscar is the double amputee whose stumps above the knee are attached to blades made from carbon fiber called "Cheetahs." He was born with no bones in his lower legs. At 11 months old his legs were surgically removed. Oscar is a deeply faithful Christian. He makes faith real! He spent the last two weeks in England opening the eyes of the world by running on his Cheetahs. And he is the only Olympian who will stay on to compete in the Paralympics beginning next week. Watching Pretorius on the track in London sent chills of joy, ecstasy and awe through any person with a soul! He is one whose dreams have turned into deeds.

Not only does faith turn dreams into deeds, faith changes the world. By this, I mean faith takes the possibilities that hope provides and despite all the physical evidence pointing to impossible results, changes the world. This is not the work of any one person's hands. It is not even the work of all our hands put together. It is the work of God in us and through us. Make no mistake about it – faith **MUST** be put into action. James was right when he wrote, **“Faith without works is dead,”** or as Clarence Jordan writes, **“Belief without deeds is dead.”** Faith must be put into action.

Faith in action is something to which Jim Wallis has dedicated his life. Jim opens his book *Faith Works* with these words: *“Hope is believing in spite of the evidence, then watching the evidence change.”* Jim goes on to share 15 lessons he has learned from his life of faith. Each one of the lessons points us deeper into faith and to greater action. Here are the 15 lessons – all applicable to all of us in some way as we walk by faith:

1. Trust your questions. (if you are struggling with something big in your life, trust that your questions will lead out of familiar territory and the same predictable answers into a new reality).

2. Get out the house more often. Once we are out of the house, we begin to see things in a different light.

3. Use your gifts. Do what you do best and apply it where it will do some good.

4. Do the work and you'll find the Spirit. By doing the work of faith, we will see the faces of poverty and need which leads us to five . . .

5. Recognize the three faces of poverty. Pay attention to the needs of your sisters and brothers as they struggle in their lives.

6. Listen to those closest to the problems.

7. Get to the heart of the matter. (We will realize that the old language, old labels and old solutions don't work).

8. So we . . . throw away old labels – (remember) values are what counts.

9. Find new allies and search for common ground

10. Tap into the power of faith communities.

11. Be a peacemaker (learn the things that make for peace).

12. Be a contemplative (Be prayerful in all things at all times. As a person of prayer you will listen to God and people).

13. Keep it human. Be real with all things, with all people at all times.

14. Have a dream. What is your dream? Trust in it. Pray for it. Work in faith toward it.

15. Change the wind. Don't put your finger in the air to see which way the wind is blowing. Change the wind! Be part of the faithful ones who make a difference in this world! (Jim Wallis, *Faith Works*, Random House, N.Y., N.Y., 2000, pp.xxxvi-xxxviii).

Faith works! I have witnessed faith working throughout my lifetime. I see it here every day. In large and small ways, people encounter life and hardship; with deeds done in faith, pain, walls of separation and seeming hopelessness, doors are opened, lives are changed and what was difficult and despairing becomes lighter, possible and hopeful.

Faith is universal, too. Yesterday, several hundred people of all faith and some who see themselves as compassionate humanitarians with no particular faith, gathered with our Sikh brothers and sisters at the Sikh Temple here in Columbus. Their temple is a large warehouse off Wilson Road near 270 on the West Side. We had come because six Sikh worshippers were gunned down last Sunday morning while in prayer at their temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. We had come in solidarity and love to support our local friends and neighbors.

Along with Tom Brownfield of our congregation and two dozen Christians (a good number of whom were UCC), I was in a room packed with head-covered men and women of every race, creed, color, faith tradition and a vast number of different national origins sitting cross-legged on the floor for 90 minutes listening to Sikh music chanted in prayer form, coupled with the Sikh community

leader waving a huge feather over an elegant woven orange tapestry laid upon an altar under a huge white canopy. Following 30 minutes of meditative prayer and music, we heard from many speakers of all religious traditions and public officials as well. As each spoke, the Sikh community responded with a litany of thanks spoken in their native tongue. I was touched – as were all of us – by their gentleness, trust, grace, love and extravagant welcome. I was genuinely moved by their faith.

One week before, none of us outside the Sikh faith had imagined we would be together in that converted warehouse on Columbus' West Side. We had been brought together by tragedy which had not directly touched us, but torn at the fabric of our human community and cut against all that we believed to be good and right. There we were seeking to find a way forward out of the cycle of violence and hate.

Faith is the primary driver of all that we do and say in Christian community. Guided by Jesus Christ who calls us to be in faithful relationship with God and one another, we have no choice but to respond in faith to Christ's appeal to us.

In Ephesians 4:25-5:2 (our epistle lesson for this day), Paul appeals to us to be imitators of Christ. We are to put away all falsehood and to speak the truth to our neighbors – for we are “members” of one another. In other words, we are knit together with one another. As those knit together, we need to be honest with one another. Paul challenges us to never let the sun go down on our anger. He calls us to never let evil come from our mouths – but rather to allow the Holy Spirit touch our tongues. Paul loves giving lists to people. In the list he offers in 4:31ff, he calls each of us to put away bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, slander and all malice. He calls us to be kind to one another, forgiving of one another and tenderhearted. As we have been forgiven, we must forgive. Then he says this, “Be imitators of God.”

Paul has this right. If we are imitators of God, we reflect all the elements of love that bring us closer each hour and each day to the source of our blessing.

Our symbol today is the Chalice of Faith. The Chalice reminds us that we are bound together by a cup of blessing. That cup bears in it the blood of Christ, the love of God incarnate. Also, the chalice is a symbol of unity. When we drink of the common cup, we find our unity in Christ. In him, faith is possible. In fact, in him, all things are possible.

As you go into this week remember this: *“Hope is believing in spite of the evidence, then watching the evidence change.”* And faith is the game changer! Faith is that which allows us to turn dreams into deeds. This week, many people around us will put their fingers into the wind and see which way it is blowing. This week, change the air around you. Change the wind through the power of the faith that is within you.

Copyright 2012, First Congregational Church, UCC