

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 17, September 23, 2012, dedicated to the 42 men and women who founded our congregation September 26, 1852, the men, women, and children who grew the church and for the legacy of love left for us by the pastors and the people of First Church, for the people present who have been members of this church for over 50 years, to our Trustees throughout the generations, to Daniel Ahrens on his 22nd birthday and Ed and Marilyn Koetz on their 65th anniversary, and always to the glory of God!

“What Kind of Legacy Will You Leave?”

James 3:13-4:3; Mark 9:30-37

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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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How do you tell a story about the past and the people of faith who shaped their present moment so many years ago? It is always a God story. And, it is always a people story, too. It is a story of passion for justice and peace. But, in the end it is a love story. Because it is a love story, it is a beautiful and blessed story.

Our story as begins 160 years ago this week when 42 Christian abolitionists in Columbus, Ohio formed a new church start called Third Presbyterian Church. On the northeast corner of Lynn Alley (where the entrance to the Renaissance Hotel parking garage is), the 42 worshiped for the first time on September 26, 1852. By 1856, they were growing and had purchased land at 74 East Broad St., directly across from the Statehouse, changed their name to the First Congregational Church of Columbus and started to build a new Norman-style building. They built it there so that the

legislators across the street would have seen abolitionists on their doorstep every day.

Within 15 years, only half of the original founders were still members – most dying on the battlefields of the great Civil War and others moving from Columbus to start other churches or serve God somewhere else. But in the same 15 years, the church continued to grow. By our 30th anniversary in 1882 and the arrival of our most famous pastor, Washington Gladden, over 1,000 had signed the membership rolls of First Congregational Church. We were a mega-church by 1882 standards.

Who were these people? What did they believe? How did they live out their faith in the heart of a city and a state known to us today as “the heart of it all”? It is true that newspapers, church newsletters and church records can tell something of their spirit and the way they lived out their faith. But, through the years, I have found their legacy can also be traced to the way they invested themselves and their time, talents and treasures in this beautiful and beloved community.

Through almost 13 years of church meetings, I have sat through thousands of hours of meetings. In the Trustees meetings, I watched women and men carefully, thoughtfully, and diligently consider investments and expenditures which build up the body of Christ here at 444 East Broad Street and beyond. This Greek proverb was sent to me by Dr. Christopher Washington a few weeks ago. It speaks to the legacy of love which the Trustees seek to discover, invest and direct for the good of First Church: ***“A society grows great when old men (and women) plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in.”***

It dawned on me that our church has grown great because of men and women who have planted trees, laid stone and built a gothic cathedral whose shade and grandeur they never had a chance to sit in. We are the benefactors of their great vision for a better church and society. For example, when Arthur C. Wright established the Good Samaritan Fund with \$65,249 in 1953 and we began to share the fruits of this fund with Columbus’ poor in 1980,

Arthur had no idea what good his seeds of generosity and love had sown. The fund has become a cornerstone of our ministry here – all because one Good Samaritan left a legacy of love for the generations to come.

Not everyone who has established endowments at First Church is deceased. A number of our great endowment givers are very much alive – many well into their 90s. This past week, I had the chance to call and speak with a good number of people who have given money to First Church through the endowment funds. There are patterns woven together in the stories I heard from people. But the most outstanding pattern when I asked “Why you gave this money to First Church?” is love. The stories I heard this week were love stories. Please let me share a few.

When she was a young woman graduating from Bradford Junior College in Haverhill, Massachusetts, Ann McElroy Wright remembers something said at her graduation by then senior minister of First Congregational Church in Columbus, Ohio. Dr. Merrill said, **“Think spaciously, live graciously, and love hard Work.”** She always kept that with her as her guide for living. Although her grandfather was pastor of Broad Street United Methodist Church, Ann “snuck across the street” to attend the young adult forum at First Church, where she got to know Dr. Merrill. (Plus, all the really good looking guys were here! ☺)

Soon after this, Ann joined the church. In 1991, in a ceremony attended only by the presiding senior minister, the Rev. Dale Rosenberger, Ann was wed to Frank. That very year, she and Frank gave \$42,000 to establish the McElroy/Wright Fund to honor her mother and father. She said, “I gave the money because I loved my parents and I wanted to honor them.” At the end of our conversation, Ann asked, “Is it alright if I give more money to the church in their memory?” I replied, “Yes, that would be beautiful! Thank you!”

Keith White established the Dorinda White Fund with \$15,331 in 2007 – shortly after Dorinda’s death. As our Christian education director, Dorinda had done a great job for a long time growing our

program and lifting up children and families. She died at 51 years old – way too soon. When Keith gave money for the fund in her name, he did this for three reasons. He wanted to establish an endowment that would mean something to HER. The ins and outs of the fund were established to reflect what she saw needed to be done and funded for our children and youth. How the fund works reflects conversations Keith had with Dorinda through the years. He said, “People who knew her immediately will always remember her. But, those who come along later and never knew her will always be reminded by this fund that she was and she will be remembered in years to come by those who never met her.” Thank you, Keith.

Twink Starr – has three plaques in the church that tell a small part of the story of why he gives. There is one plaque in the narthex to honor the gift of our sign on the front lawn, two in the parlor – one on the grandfather’s clock and one on the wall honoring the gift of funds which redecorated the parlor in memory of his business and life partner of 53 years, Allan Wingfield, with a gift of over \$11,000. I love the fact that we have a plaque in our church honoring and remembering the relationship of two men – probably one of the only churches in the world with such a plaque. Thank you Twink!

Twink gave out of love for Allan. He gave out of love for all the members of First Church and to the honor the heritage of this great church. Every Sunday morning, Twink shines light on this heritage. He goes in the church parlor and turns the lights on the portraits of Drs. Gladden and Lichlyter and gives thanks to God for them. He wants to make sure we remember those who have guided us and that we too are likewise remembered in our afterlife. Twink told me, “The church is the love of people following the teachings of Jesus Christ. The church is love. It is as simple and as beautiful as that.”

Bob and Clara Harsh were long time members of First Church. They loved First Church and they loved our organist and choir master, G. Dene Barnard. In 1994, they were concerned about their friend. Clara, now 94, told me last week, “We were motivated

to give because we loved Dene and we wanted to encourage him to stay at First Church. We wanted to invest in the music ministry that Dene had built up over the years. With monetary cuts always afflicting the church budget, we wanted to make sure there was money for him to get his job done. There weren't "trumpets blowing" telling us to do something. We just felt it was the right thing to do. So we took maturing municipal bonds (totaling \$25,000) and gave them to the church as the Barnard Fund." Clara ended, "You have to go where your heart takes you. You have to go where God leads you."

When asked "why?" he helped Elizabeth Bohannen establish the Jackie Owen Fund in memory of his wife, Colonel Bill Owen was caught off guard by my question. "Why?" he responded." "Jackie was the loved of my life." Jackie and Bill fell in love before World War II in which Bill was a fighter pilot. She was in high school at St. Mary of the Springs and he was a sophomore at OSU. He carried her picture with him to war. She promised to wait for his return. He thought of her every day throughout the war and when he returned home, she honored him by accepting his offer for marriage. He said, "I was the lucky one." They were married by Dr. Merrill at First Church on June 26, 1946. Jackie sang in the church choir. She loved it!

Bill left Columbus to serve more time in the Navy flying as a fighter pilot in Korea in 1951 where he served 21 months. He went on to serve another 20 years as a pilot. They returned to Columbus in 1971 and became very involved in the life of the church. He served on House and Grounds where he did everything from pouring cement on sidewalks to lifting and spreading 27 bales of hay above the senior minister's office to make it warmer when Pamela and Chalmers Coe moved into the church. "I didn't want Pam and Chal to get cold on winter nights," Colonel Owen said.

Jackie continued to sing. She made the Christmas dinner each year. In 1983, when she was becoming weaker with cancer, she gave her special recipe to KFC and they cooked the chicken with her specifications. She died in May 1984. Mrs. Elizabeth Bohannen put the first funds into the church to establish the

Jackie Owen Fund with \$1,000. Bill has added to it for the last 28 years. It now has \$145,000 in large part because Bill keeps sending money each year. As a result of his generosity and the growth of the fund overall, it has grown! He was blown away when he heard how much is currently in the fund. He said, "You have done well with my gifts." I said, "You are the one who multiplied your love! You have done well." Bill thanked me. What a gracious man!

Jean MacNevin loved her husband of many years William Marshall MacNevin. Together they had a wonderful life, one very connected to the worship and music of First Church. Jean also loved the Walter Martin Memorial Organ – we affectionately call it the Kimball Organ named after the Kimball Organ Company in Chicago, Illinois. (And she wasn't crazy about "that organ," pointing to the von Beckerath Organ).

When she died in 1999, Jean left \$572,636 to restore the Kimball organ or to enhance the worship of First Church. This amounted to most of the estate. She left the money in memory of her husband, William. Because of Jean's gift, we were able to restore the organ to its original glory. In addition, we currently have \$140,000 for its maintenance. With Kimball restoration complete and both organs playing beautifully, I have been told we have the two most magnificent organs in any sanctuary – outside of Duke University's chapel – east of the Mississippi River. I believe we have the best organs anywhere in America!

Mae Johannes loved First Church. She left a bequest in her estate for our church. It turned out to be worth \$10,311. She was concerned about 444 East Broad St. She wanted to make sure we maintain a roof over our heads. Her gift was given for the high quality care of this magnificent building. Mae thought that it really didn't matter what you did with new windows, building additions and so much more if you didn't care for the roof over your head. She was practical. Her blessed practicality reflects in her gift and still shines forth in the practicality of her son, Bill! ☺

When I spoke with Nancy Jeffery this week, she had some wonderful thoughts as well. She has always felt blessed. She has always felt that she needs to share what she has. We who have been blessed with so much, need to share our blessings. “That should be a universal truth for all of us,” Nancy said.

As one trained in social work, she has found that she has a special place in her heart to care for those who battle mental illness. Quoting a great philanthropist of our time, Nancy told me (and she tells her 13 grandchildren, too), “It’s not rocket science. You simply put \$50 or some designated amount from your paycheck toward endowed giving and watch that fund grow. In a year’s time you have put forth \$2,600. You simply pay forward.”

Christopher and Shannon Washington are among those who make regular contributions to the endowments of First Church. He has given to the Pastor’s Fund. When I asked why he gives he said, “You work with people at all the ages and stages of people’s life cycles. You deal with people holistically. I want to support that work. I give to the endowment because giving a little over time, you see the fund grow. Mixing with the dollars there helps grow it faster and make an impact over time. Makes a difference in the short term and long-term.”

In addition to Jean MacNevin’s fund of \$572,636 (which arrived just after my election as pastor in November 1999), people have given over \$279,000 in endowed to First Church. Paul Leidheiser, Sr., established a fund in memory of his beloved Elsie with \$5,080 in 1998; Marguerite Buel left the church \$20,000 upon her death in 2005; Amy Allen left \$21,000 (\$14,000 for the Owen Fund and \$7,000 for the Alma Keeler Fund for children); Bill and Barbara Heer left \$34,898 split evenly between Music, Building, Education, Mission and Church Support. And Chloe D. McGlinchay (who I did not know) left \$87,000 and Julia Hadley over \$88,000 for the unrestricted use of church support. Because our Trustees have managed our funds so well, all of these funds have grown even in tough economic times! Thanks be to God!

In addition, you should know that we regularly receive support from the Cook Family Fund established in Elizabeth and Herb Cook, Sr.'s memory and an anonymous fund simply called Major Projects Fund, both administered through the Columbus Foundation.

Lifting up the legacies of our church and the tremendous investments people have made across the years, I must add my thanks to all of you who have been so amazingly generous with your gifts to our 2010 Capital Campaign! Today, and "Far down the future's broadening way," you will be remembered for the love shared here in these years! Thanks be to you! Thanks be to God!

So, I ask once again, who do you love? How do you wish for your love to be remembered? What kind of legacy will you leave?

I have a dream for First Church and all of us! My dream is that each one of us invests in the endowments of this church. I would love to see an Endowment Society at First Church with hundreds of people. Today, we will be given an opportunity to remember the past and invest in the future. Our offering today will go the Legacy Fund. As you write your name on an envelope going to the loose plate offering, no matter how big or small your gift, you have made an investment in the future of our church.

Dr. Boynton Merrill once said, "The church of the past is dead and buried. The church of the future is not yet born. So, let us be the church of the present age and live in the beauty and love of Christ." Thanks be to God for the love that gave birth to First Congregational Church Columbus, Ohio. Thanks be to God for the love that has sustained our Gothic beauty and our congregational way for 160 years!

Thanks be to God for each and every one of you! I hope and pray that we may grow in love of God and one another for years to come. You are beautiful! I love you all. Amen.

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