

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister of the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 20, September 28, 2008, dedicated to the memory of the pastors, staff and members of the First Congregational Church, UCC, on our 156th anniversary, to Daniel Robert Sitler Ahrens on his 18th birthday, to Dr. Johnny Ray Youngblood and the Rev. David K. Brawley and the people of St. Paul Community Baptist Church, and always to the glory of God!

“More Light”

Exodus 17,1-7; Matthew 21,23-32

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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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There are ten questions rumbling around our two scripture readings today. In Exodus 17 the questions of a lost, hungry, sun-drenched, thirsty nation in the desert are loud and painful: why have freedom if it only leads to death, why do people quarrel with their leaders, why do people of faith test God, what should leaders do with quarrelsome people and finally, *Lord, are you here among us or not?*

In Matthew 21:23, the Pharisees chide Jesus with: “By what authority do you do these things and who gave you this authority?” As Jesus is apt to do with the Pharisees throughout scripture, he responds with his own question: “Did the baptism of John come from heaven or was it of human origin?” This sets off more questions and a parable about the disbelief of believers vs. the belief of unbelievers. In the realm of Jesus, it is the unbelievers who believe that make it to heaven over the believers who spend all their time questioning God’s authority.

Ten questions in 16 verses of scripture. Is it any wonder that we say at communion: “Come to the table, not because you must but because you may; not because you have all the answers to the questions of faith, but because in your questions, you know God will meet you here, receive you here and accept you here. Come just as you are?” That’s right, I just asked yet another question!

I have found there are two major streams in the faith traditions we call Christian, Jewish, Islamic and other. One stream allows few questions. It is built around dogma and doctrine. It has carefully crafted answers to rhetorical questions, rather than faith. In this stream, leaders give the answers to questions mostly formed by themselves. It is a hierarchical system in which the pastor, priest, rabbi and imam are in charge. They are not to be questioned. Their answers are final. Followers are to follow. So, get in line and follow. This is a closed religious system and it exists as a stream of faith within every religion.

There is another stream. In the other stream, questions bubble up from both followers and leaders. In fact, questions about the authority of scripture, faith, belief and understanding are encouraged and sought after. In this stream there is dialogue and community discourse. There is a felt need to explore together questions of faith. Let's call this an open system of the faith tradition.

There are points at which a closed system may appear open. They might have contemporary music or casual dress. But, make no mistake about it, the system of questioning and the correct answers to those questions are final. If you cannot agree with the answers, a closed system will either show you the door or carry you out – or both!

Conversely, there are ways that an open system may appear closed to people. They might have traditional music or set prayers. But, nevertheless, there is a flow of discernment and decision-making that is focused on dialogue, not dictatorship as rule of authority. One of the characteristics of our open system at First Church is that we welcome you into community through membership, but only you can determine whether you leave or not. We have no dismembering apparatus in place.

In seminary, my social ethics professor, mentor, and Roman Catholic sister, Dr. Margaret Farley, was silenced by the pope for voicing her disagreements with the church's views of when life begins. In other words, she was no longer

allowed to speak to Catholic groups or in Catholic institutions – universities or within her order – on the issue of conception and/or abortion.

As she showed me the letter – with a seal of the Roman Curia on it – I asked, “Will this lead to ex-communication?” She answered, “If I defy this order from the pope, I will be excommunicated.” That is a crystal-clear closed system!

We have plenty of excommunicated Catholics among the reformers of our Protestant faith – all of whom pursued openness in the face of closed systems! (In Dr. Farley’s case, she pushed back, challenging the power of Rome, but she was never ex-communicated)

There are blessings and curses related to closed and open systems in the stream of faith we call Christian! Having spent three-and-a-half days with the St. Paul Community Baptist Church in Brooklyn last week, I can see the value of a system in which the pastor sets the vision for the church, hand picks all the leaders and blasts full throttle into the future of God’s creating. I can appreciate the value of this system.

But having grown up in the United Church of Christ, I can see the value of an open system of leadership and faith. Overall, I am proud of our prophetic, spirit-driven tradition that stays open to new insights, new vision, new guidance from God and the Holy Spirit.

We believe that there is always more light to shine forth on God's word and way. We draw this belief from Pastor John Robinson, who, when he was leading the Pilgrims from Leyden in the Netherlands to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1620, said, "There is always more light and truth to break forth from God's Holy Word." In the same sermon he said, "Follow me no further than I follow Christ and if you find a better way, follow Christ there."

Today is our church's 156th anniversary. On September 26, 1852, a band of 42 men and women and their children left Second Presbyterian Church in Columbus to form Third Presbyterian Church. They found a better way to follow Christ. They were abolitionists and could no longer abide in the union of slavery and Christian faith. They formed this congregation around the belief that slavery is wrong in any form and that God creates us equally.

Four years later, the faithful people of Third Presbyterian Church changed their name to The First Congregational Church of Columbus. In 1961, one last change brought our name to the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio.

We are called in our time to seek more light and truth as well. We are called to be witnesses of the light of God. In his five William Belden Noble lectures delivered at Harvard in 1903, Dr. Washington Gladden spoke of five great artists and poets who were witnesses of the light. He lectured on Dante, the poet; Michelangelo, the artist; Fichte, the philosopher;

Victor Hugo, the man of letters; Richard Wagner, the musician; and Ruskin, the preacher.

In his introduction, Gladden wrote:

“I have called them witnesses of the light. This may seem a superfluous function; is not the light its own best witness? It would be doubtless, if there were no so many caverns and cellars in which men (and women) can hide themselves from it; if there were not so many who walk abroad wrapped in the darkness of tradition or superstition or fear. So, it is a great part of the business of God’s messengers in this world to point to the light.

“No new truth needs to be created or invented; there is enough to spare, and that which is most needful for us to know lies beyond the threshold of our lives; we do not have to climb to heaven after it or to descend into the depths to unearth it; it is near to us - so near, oftentimes, that we do not see it; and the mission of the prophet and seer and teacher is to bring home to us realities of the homeliest sort, whose meaning we too often miss; to open our eyes to the environing beauty which appeals to us in vain, and to speak the word which shall arouse in us the slumbering sense of things unseen and things eternal.” (Washington Gladden, *Witnesses of Light*, Houghton, Mifflin and Co., New York, 1903, pp. 4-5)

As witnesses of the light, I have some questions for all of

us on this anniversary Sunday. How often do we miss God's light and truth because we our minds and eyes have closed to what is right in front of us? How often do we miss the beauty of this place, because we are arguing about the things that don't work or the people who don't deliver on promises made? How often do we say "No" when a "Yes" would help further the church's mission and ministry and our work in this city and world? How often do we complain about our pastors or other members when we all know they and we need love and support to get us through the trials and tribulations of this day and this life? How often do we focus on matters of insignificance when matters of life and death, faith and beauty, sharing and caring who we are with one another are calling us to stand in a better place with a better purpose?

I know that I function better with encouragement than judgment. I know I lead better with support than condemnation. I know I face the troubles of this life better when I walk arm in arm with you and others whom I care about and love than when I stand at arms length and scowl at others. How about you?

As I mentioned earlier, I was blessed to spend several days in Brooklyn this past week, preaching and worshiping in the 8,000-member congregation of the Rev. Dr. Johnny Ray Youngblood who is "being promoted" (not retiring) in the next eight months. Wrapped in prayer and praise, we spent days listening to and learning from the experience of the MAAFA, the Kiswahili word for the great suffering of slavery in Africa and the Americas.

What impressed me most of all was the rich spirit of the people in this poor community. I hope the light of Christ I received as a blessing from all of them shines forth in me for all of you!

In the sweet, sweet spirit of St. Paul's and Dr. Youngblood, on our anniversary Sunday, in which we celebrate our liberation from the shackles of an enslaved Christian communion of the 19th century, I share this in closing. It is the last will and testament of Mary McLeod Bethune, founder of Bethune-Cookman University in Daytona Beach, Florida, and a great woman of faith and change from the African-American experience of the late 19th and early 20th centuries:

My Last Will and Testament

If I have a legacy to leave my people, it is my philosophy of living and serving.

Here, then, is My Legacy . . .

I leave you love. Love builds. It is positive and helpful.

I leave you hope. Yesterday, our ancestors endured the degradation of slavery, yet they retained their dignity.

I leave you the challenge of developing confidence in one another. This kind of confidence will aid the economic rise of the race by bringing together the pennies and dollars of our people and ploughing them into useful channels.

I leave you thirst for education. Knowledge is the prime need of the hour.

I leave you a respect for the uses of power. Power intelligently directed, can lead to more freedom.

I leave you faith. Faith in God is the greatest power, but great, too, is faith in oneself.

I leave you racial dignity. I want Negroes to maintain their human dignity at all costs.

I leave you a desire to live harmoniously with your fellow man.

I leave you, finally, a responsibility to our young people. The world around us really belongs to youth, for youth will take its future management.

As we enter our 157th year of serving Christ in the city, may we carry more light, ever more light, always Christ's light, forward in faith. Amen.