

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 19, September 29, 2013, dedicated to my wife Susan Sitler, Dr. Washington and Jennie Gladden and Joseph A. and Celia Jeffrey, to their familial heirs, and to all pastors and lay people who shined God's light on, in and through First Congregational Church down through our 161 years of life together in Christ, and always to the glory of God!

“Shine Forth, O Light!”
Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15;
John 1:1-18

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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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The story of our Jewish-Christian faith surrounds us this morning. In stained glass and carved stone; in intricate wood carvings and woven tapestries; in masterful metalwork; in the suspended red ceramic cross; in 8,100 organ pipes and the wind of the spirit blowing through them; in timpani and brass; in scripture, prayer and song; and most important – **in God's people** – the story of faith is everywhere around us and within us. And God is smiling and says, **“This is good”** - for the faith surrounding us and within us is truly a vision to behold.

And this day, of all days, our eyes are drawn with wonder, delight, awe and heartfelt appreciation to one window with 94 panels and enough stories of Jesus to guide our hearts and our feet for a lifetime of living in his love. In the highest glass of this sanctuary, high above every other image in the Jeffrey Window is the ascending Christ. His arms are outstretched and he is seated on a rainbow – the rainbow covenant given by God to Noah. His hands and feet bear no scars of crucifying agony. His face is at

peace, his countenance a blessing. It is as if he were saying, ***“All is well. All will be well.”***

The Word of God, who was in the beginning with God, is **THE light** shining in the darkness and cannot and will not be extinguished. His glory is present and filled with grace and truth. That is the promise of John’s Gospel to us. More important, that is God’s promise to us. The windows before us remind us of this. But the transparency of the windows can only remind us of God’s glory and beauty and light, they cannot make us glorious and beautiful and light-filled. For glory, beauty, love and light to blast out at us, we must be transparent. We must be the light shine of God.

Our task is to become more and more each day the living light of God. Stained Glass is great. But you are the story God is seeking to tell in our times. You are the ones God is seeking to shine through in our times. You are the ones God needs for our times. And the glass simply calls us, reminds, rekindles us, inspires us and shapes us to be transparent and to be light for this world.

So how shall we “Shine Forth,” O People of God!?

Today’s scripture from Jeremiah points us to the pathway of shining forth. The story begins in a prison cell. The poetic and powerful Prophet Jeremiah has just told the king that his days are numbered. He has told the king that his economic devastation of God’s people has weakened his nation so completely that all that is left is an inevitable siege by alien invaders, which will result in the kingdom’s destruction. For the speaking the truth in love, the prophet has been chained and jailed in a dungeon.

We ask, was Jeremiah issuing a prophetic prediction or simply projecting the truth about a national economy built on the backs of the poor and the greed of rich leaders who have no vision? Actually, both are at play – and the king is outraged - as powerful people are apt to be when prophetic truth is present and the evidence cannot lie.

In what would seem to be the lowest point in the prophet's life, in the heart of an economic depression, in the midst of an enemy siege of faith, values and nationhood, Jeremiah does something that turns this story upside down and inside out. Jeremiah buys the farm. He purchases land. In an act of solidarity, fidelity and faith, Jeremiah acts as God would act. He lays down his roots. Jeremiah's simple act speaks louder than all his words. His act says, *"I believe in my people! God believes in you as well! On this land, in our capital city we will rise from the ashes of corruption in the king's court and we will be born again!"*

Every member of First Church across 161 years of life together can identify with faith in God and hope in an unseen future. Like Jeremiah, we have been led by generations of people who see what is not there and invest in the future – even in dark and depressing times. **It is in our DNA!** Speaking of DNA – we have 18 members of Washington Gladden's family here today – who are also Keltons. As you may know, the Keltons were two of the 42 Christian abolitionists who walked out of one church 161 years ago this week and formed a congregation of liberation and hope - a community of faith in which slavery had no future. Thanks be to God for your DNA and for ours as well!

When our forbearers called Washington Gladden – a 46-year-old pastor with no formal theological training and an English Literature degree from Williams College – to serve as senior minister, could they have seen that he would change the face of American Christianity **forever**? When Joseph A. Jeffrey, a 42-year-old banker took a walk at lunch one day and saw a primitive coal mining machine in a Columbus storefront window, could he have imagined he would found and lead the first and greatest coal mining machine company in the world? And when his wife, Celia Jeffrey, saw starvation and poverty on the streets of Columbus, could anyone have imagined that she would lead a social revolution of compassion and care for children that would change the face of this city forever – founding not only Gladden Community House but Children's Hospital? (By the way – the Jeffrey DNA is here today as well! Thanks be to God!)

And when our forbearers – with the vision of Dr. Lichlyter, the inspiration of Dr. Washington Gladden and the lead gifts of Joseph A. and Celia C. Jeffrey – stepped out in faith in the heart of the Great Depression to build this cathedral of grace, this house of justice, they did it on faith!

And when all of you who believed in this church and our future in the heart of this great capital city, stepped out on faith and purchased 1.61 acres of land to west, did you ever imagine that more people would come and believe in the Gospel of Love and Justice in our times?

It has been said that **“All scripture is God-breathed...”** When the breath of our God breathed upon us, we were filled with the Holy Spirit just enough to have courage, faith and hope in our place and in these times to step out to do the right thing for our sisters and brothers – who in our times are still enslaved – by poverty, prejudice and lack of understanding.

Dr. Gladden penned words that should be inscribed on every human heart: *“Shine forth O Light that we may see, with hearts ALL unafraid, the meaning and mystery of things that thou hast made. Shine forth and let the darkling past, beneath thy beam grow bright, shine forth and touch the future vast, with Thine untroubled light!”*

May God’s light shine forth on you, and in you and through you to others. And may the story of faith being written in your life, leave a legacy of love for this church in this city, in this world for these times. Amen.

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