

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 18, September 30, 2012, dedicated to the men, women, youth and children who have been born, baptized and confirmed at First Church, to all who have been welcomed as new members along the way, to all who have been married here and all who have died, been remembered and from her have risen to eternal life, and always to the glory of God!*

## **“Salted With Fire”**

### **James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50**

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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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In Kachkar Mountains of northeastern Turkey, there is a stretch of land between the Black and Caspian seas where the kingdom of Georgia once flourished during the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. During its brief ascendancy in this part of the world, Georgia was a kind of Camelot, a Christian kingdom in which strong and benevolent rulers carved a culture out of the wilderness and defended it from its enemies. They imported artists from Byzantine Constantinople to adorn their public buildings and build an economy that prospered for all their subjects.

Two hundred years later, it was all gone, torn to pieces by neighboring tribes. Now it is a wilderness again, although a beautiful one – with a kingdom of mountains, high souring pines, streams flowing through a landscape with few people. (Drawn from “Church in the Ruins” by Barbara Brown Taylor, in *The Preaching Life*, Cowley Publications, Boston, MA, 1994, p.3)

Some years ago, pastor and author Barbara Brown Taylor was hiking in Kachkar Mountains when her guide led a group of

trekkers up a dirt road toward a settlement hidden behind some trees. She turned a bend in the road and standing before her was a huge church in the ruins. She could make out the outline of a cathedral with huge grey stones and a central dome that dominated the countryside. As she got closer she could see grass growing between what was left of the roof tiles. The facade was crumbling but even in shambles it spoke to her. The whole group fell silent looking for permission to enter but no permission was necessary. It was a hull. It was a shell. No living thing remained inside, or so they thought.

Arriving at the main portal. Barbara stepped through and was swallowed up by the sheer size of the space inside. Very little of the roof had survived but the massive walls still held plaster frescos of the shadows of biblical scenes on them. There were lambs of God carved on the stone capitals and medieval saints with their faces chipped away. Some of the best stone had been plundered for other purposes, but those that remained testified to the care and expense that had been lavished on this house of God.

As Barbara walked through the church in the ruins, there was evidence of a campfire in one side chapel. Another chapel had been turned into a garbage dump where rats prowled for scraps. From the transept she heard the sounds of children playing and returned to find a soccer game being played on the green lawn that covered the central nave, while a couple of sheep grazed in the chancel. In the dome above it was still possible to see the outstretched arms of Christ presiding at the last supper, but the rest of him had flaked away. Sitting down under what was left of his embrace, Barbara surveyed the ruins of his church. (Ibid, p.3-4).

It is one thing to talk about the post-Christian era, or to reflect on the decline of Christianity, or to speak negatively about our 2.000-year-old faith - it is another thing altogether to walk around inside it. Christianity has all but died in Turkey – the land that gave birth to the Apostle Paul and where once he found fertile ground for spreading the gospel of love and justice that Paul came to know in Christ Jesus our Lord. This land of Ephesus, Galatia, Colossae and Nicaea has become a territory in which no baptisms

have occurred among once flourishing Christian churches since the 1890s. Stripped of altars, baptismal fonts, communion tables and crosses, the jewels of Byzantine Christendom have been turned into mosques, museums, or – like the church in the ruins high in the Kachtar Mountains – they have simply been left to rot. (Drawn in part from “Church in the Ruins,” p.4)

Now it may seem “odd” on our 160<sup>th</sup> anniversary Sunday, as we sit within the most beautiful sanctuary in downtown Columbus (and one of the most beautiful sanctuaries in the world) and listen to brass and our amazing choirs and look high to welcome the sunshine blowing in through our beautiful stained-glass windows on this most perfect day in September, for me to begin the homiletic section of our celebration by talking about a 1,000-year-old church in ruins high in the mountains of a predominantly Muslim country far away. But not really.

I am fully aware of what it takes to keep a church like ours alive and growing. To keep a church like ours with a roof over our head and vibrant people and programs, and joyful children enjoying “dogs” in church and speaking of their pet geckos takes a great commitment and deep desire to love God, to love our neighbors and to love ourselves in the Spirit of Christ. It takes a lot to live the Christian faith. It is hard work to keep any church from ruins – especially in times when the world around us is more content with deconstructing Christian faith and tearing down a faith and an incarnate God who we find filled with life and hope.

Thirteen years ago this month, I sat alone in the stillness of our sanctuary late in the afternoon awaiting the Senior Minister Search Committee’s invitation to join them in the Alma Keeler Library for an interview. They were seeking to discern if I was worthy to be your Senior Minister. I was seeking to discern the call of Christ to serve among you. As sunshine was streaming in the Westside Parable windows (the one where the candle shines God’s light), I never gave one thought to the untrimmed trees outside those windows, or the over abundance of old telephone poles, or the ancient and rusting Beyers Used Car sign sitting on the southeast corner of our neighbors land where over 100 used American

automobiles sat and over which the sun needed to shine to reach this sanctuary windows.

I wasn't wondering why this church had two organs and thinking about whether one of the organs would ever play again. Believe it or not, I wasn't even wondering what the heating and cooling costs were for this sanctuary (although I should have been) and whether or not it bothered some people that you could see the massive unit by the front steps on Broad Street (mostly hidden behind the bushes there). I wasn't even thinking about all the worship services, baptisms, weddings, funerals, memorial services, or concerts that had taken place here and of which I would be apart for however long I would serve – if I were called by this congregation to serve.

As the warmth of early fall sunshine touched my left cheek that afternoon, all I could think about was Jesus. I wondered what Jesus thought of this church and your community of faith. I wondered how you experienced his love in your daily lives. I wondered if the parables displayed around me in artistic glass shed light on the lives of faithful folk at First. I wondered if the beautiful blue windows high above the chancel (which I later came to know were called the Jeffery Window) displaying the story of Jesus teaching and healing; working, laughing, loving, being baptized, driving out demons, breaking bread, being beaten and then –in the uppermost reaches - ascending to the right hand of God – I was wondering if all of this – all of Him - had gotten into your hearts, minds, souls and bloodstream.

I was thinking of Jesus. Were you his people? Was he your savior? Were his friendship, his love, his justice, compassion and kindness in you?

I was thinking of Jesus. I was wondering if his spirit was in you. What he stood for, what he lived for, what he died for, what he rose for – was it in you? Did you know Jesus? Were you with him as he is with you?

All these years later – with all these gray and white hairs, too many extra pounds, more clearly defined smile lines, and all the water weight lost from tears of joy and sadness shed for you – I still come to place thinking about Jesus and praying for you. But, now when I am here, I ALSO think about AND pray about ALL those infinite items that hadn't entered my brainwaves in 1999.

Now when I am here, my mind's eye is flooded with you – your family, your friends, you partners, your spouses, your children, your grandchildren . . . and at this time of year – your pets and what a blessing they are in your lives.

After all these years, I feel like I have an answer to all my questions.

**The answer is: “Yes.”**

I feel like you are a people of faith who know Jesus. He lives in you and you live in him. You seek him. You seek to understand him. He shines through you to others as well.

It is not always easy. In fact, most days I feel like there isn't a person in this room who finds walking with Jesus the easy way to go. I think in our day and age to follow Jesus and his way of love, grace, forgiveness and justice – is a radical and courageous act. It is often hard work to face your daily choices and choose generosity over judgment; to choose love and kindness over bitterness and chaos. It is hard to choose joy over sadness and faithfulness to God over the easy walk away from faith into cynicism and sarcasm. It is hard to look at a world falling to pieces at times and believe in hope in the hardship of life. But as I look at you, I believe in you. I believe you juggle all the balls of faith and life and I see you seeking to find a rhythm and a balance in your lives. I admire you for that. I love you for that.

Last year this time, we voted for our long range plan answering one question: **“Where is God calling us next?”** It was a bold and wonderful question which called us to trust and follow

God in Christ. In 26 pages you mapped out how we were going to do our best to answer this question.

In my reflections at that time I shared these words from our 1902 Golden Jubilee, delivered by our Senior Minister at the time, the Rev. Dr. Washington Gladden. More than 100 years ago this week, Dr. Gladden penned these poignant words charging our congregation for our mission ahead:

*The work of the church is not yet done. The character of the work has greatly changed . . . and the difficulties are somewhat increased . . . But there are people enough all about us who need the Gospel and no better place can be found for a church of Jesus Christ, a church ministering in His name to those who need Him most . . . To maintain it here will require of the members a little more time, a little more resolution, a little more sacrifice, and a little more love, than some churches require of their members, but no more than it will be good for us to give.*

To follow Jesus into the crowded ways of life in our city, in our nation and in our world requires a lot of each one of us! I would like tell you it is easy. But I have found that nothing worth anything in life is easy. Take a look at our covenant on the front cover of the bulletin. It says, **“We have the right of individual interpretation of the principles of the Christian faith we respect each other in our honest convictions.”**

When our forebearers in faith stepped out of Second Presbyterian Church to ultimately become First Congregational Church 160 years this week, they carried these words out the door and into the streets. This is a radical Christian concept. It was really radical then. It is even more so now. For 160 years we have lived into this covenant.

This means that each one of us has to interpret the principles of the Christian faith while every other one of us respects each of us in our honest convictions. This is a radical concept! It calls us to be thinking Christians. It calls us to be expressive Christians. It calls us to be living our faith out of conviction not out of a creed

that we may speak but not fully believe. It calls us to listen to one another. It calls us to interact with the other. It calls us to follow Jesus and own what we do and say. We have to be responsible for what we believe and how we express it.

In essence, we are, in the words of the Gospel of Mark, called to be “Salted with Fire.” We are to be flavor-full Christians. We are to be fiery Christians. We are to be people full of the Holy Spirit and undaunted by the challenges before us!

I believe the men and women who stepped out on faith 160 years ago to say “no” to the evil of slavery; “yes” to the fullness of freedom; “no” to oppression and “yes” to justice for all God’s children, were Christians who were salted with fire!

We come from a long line of salty Christians! Let OUR arteries of free flowing faith never harden. Rather let us express ourselves and our undying faith in Jesus Christ!

May God bless you my sisters and brothers – you who are salted with fire! May God guide our hearts, our feet, our souls and our minds to be unafraid as we live into the covenant of First Church as a principled, expressive, respectful, loving, just and ever growing people of an ever-evolving Christian faith.

In the words of Jesus, “Be salted with fire!...(Yes!)...have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another.” (Mark 9:49-50) Amen.