

A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost , October 7, 2012, World Communion Sunday, dedicated to all the congregations joining worldwide to celebrate our unity in Christ, and always to the glory of God!

“To Give Your Life”

Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12; Mark 10:35-45

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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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Twenty-five minutes before the Byzantine mass on a Saturday night in Old City of Jerusalem, I stepped into the sanctuary of the Greek-Melkite Catholic Cathedral. I was with Ben and Hannah - two of my Jewish friends – Ben from the U.S. and Hannah from the Czech Republic. Neither knew many of the stories of Jesus. Both were eager to hear them. I thought the place to begin telling them of Jesus would be one of the most beautiful churches in the Holy Land. With the exception of one man bent low in prayer, the sanctuary was mostly darkened and completely silent.

Every inch of the cathedral is beautifully painted. Each painting depicts the life of Jesus – from the angel’s annunciation to Mary, to the Bethlehem birth, through life to death and resurrection. I started telling his story to my friends in the glorious art and icons surrounding us in this space. Shortly, we were joined by the man in black whom I had seen bent low in prayer 15 minutes before. He greeted us humbly, *“I am Joseph.”* He smiled at me and acknowledged I was doing a good job on the Jesus story. He asked with excellent English, *“May I help?”* I returned, *“Of*

course. I am sure you know much more than I.” He answered, “Well, I have spent some time here.”

Joseph continued sharing the story of Jesus Christ with my friends. At one point he turned to them and apologized for the sins Christians had committed against Jews. He said, “*This is my faith. I do not expect that it would be yours.*” He spoke of Christ as the sacrificial Lamb of God, given for the life of the world. He took us back into the sacristy – the Holy of Holies. He prepared communion as we watched, explaining the meaning of the bread, wine and numerous icons.

Joseph turned to me and apologized for the “fanatics” in the church who keep Christians separated. He said, “*In faith, you are welcome to our table!*” He asked my name. I said it is “Timothy.” He smiled and said, “*Ah, Timothy means ‘one who honors God.’*” Joseph patted me on the shoulder and said, “*Timothy, one day Christ will bring all of us together. No more divisions. Divisions break the heart of God.*” He continued, “*Too often as Christians we are not listening to the voice of the Holy One. We are not listening, but nevertheless, God is still speaking!*”

Finally, I asked of the role of this humble man in black in the church for he had not yet revealed himself to us. He smiled and said quietly, “*I am the archbishop.*”

This humble, articulate man with whom we had been speaking was **Archbishop** Joseph-Jules Zerey, the Patriarchal Vicar of the Holy Lands for the Greek Melkite Catholics. The Greek Melkite Christians make up 70% of all Christians in the Holy Land and they are the oldest Christians in the Holy Land - the only Christians who combine the rites and practices of the Eastern Orthodox Church with the Roman Catholic Church – and are recognized by both Christian communions. Joseph is the head of this church. He is father to the vast majority of Christians in the Land of Holiness. I would come to know him as one of the most honest Christians I have ever met or known.

As we gather around Christ’s table on this World Communion

Sunday, it is now Sunday evening in Jerusalem. Far away to the east, I hope that the man who treated me and my Jewish friends as friends, the man who presides over the majority of Christians in the Holy Lands, is resting. But I imagine he is immersed in prayer or he is compassionately caring for his Palestinian Christian sisters and brothers in some way or another. The needs they face are great and their shepherd is blessed.

Out in the American west in a few hours, Pastor Jim Garlow intends to break federal laws while preaching. He will do this by telling the members of Skyline Wesleyan Church in La Mesa, California, that Christian values are best represented by only one candidate in the upcoming presidential election. Pastor Garlow is the national leader of more than 1,400 churches that today are celebrating **Pulpit Freedom Sunday**. In defiance of the IRS regulations against separation of church and government in preaching, Garlow and others believe that American pulpits need to come alive and declare themselves for one presidential candidate. They have chosen today so that their members can vote early for the right candidate. The pastors are also recording their sermons and sending them to the federal government in defiance of the federal laws.

It is estimated that at least 95% of Mr. Garlow's pastors will declare themselves for Governor Mitt Romney as president, although (ironically) at least 95% of them were against Romney in the Republican primaries because he is Mormon and not conservative enough for their liking. On this day we call World Communion Sunday, the pastors of Pulpit Freedom Sunday say the IRS prohibition has caused religious leaders to shy away from speaking about what they see as theological truth, such as the belief that homosexuality is biblically unacceptable. Garlow says, *"The line is being slid so fast, so far, that people no longer recognize authentic biblical preaching and they're calling it political. . . . Today's parishioners,"* he said, *"are starving for religious leaders to act as the moral compass of society."* The important measure of success, Garlow points out, is when the pastors who boldly speak on political issues receive standing ovations. *"Then you know you are really reaching believers with the truth,"* he says.

While the freedom to choose who we vote for is the key to our democracy, it is not okay to do what pastors of the Freedom Pulpit Sunday are choosing to do. Telling any of you who to vote for is not my job. Having said that, I believe it is the job of all of us to encourage everyone to vote. To participate in our democratic process is key to our life together in this nation.

On this World Communion Sunday, Archbishop Joseph Jules-Zereyand Pastor Jim Garlow present vastly different understandings and visions of the body of Christ. Joseph believes that Christ is calling us to be in unity. He seeks to knit the body of Christ back together. Jim believes today is Pulpit Freedom Sunday and Christ is calling Christian pastors to preach separation from the law and to name and declare which political candidates are worthy of a “Christian” vote – so defined by Jim Garlow and band of brothers. As we sing, *“In Christ there is no east or west in him no south or north”* we might want to add a question mark where a period stands. Or maybe, we should add a comma, remembering that God places commas where we place periods.

Why don’t we let Jesus cast the deciding vote on which understanding and vision of our faith actually reflects his understanding and vision.

In today’s epistle lesson, the author of Hebrews declares that Jesus calls us brothers and sisters. He lays down his life for us as our friend. His suffering unto death is a gift through which we might come to know the love of God and the grace of God **for everyone – for the whole world – for all humanity**. In other words, as sisters and brothers in Christ, we are to give up our life for others as he gave up his life for us. We are called to “imitate Christ” as we practice the love, grace and hospitality of our Lord.

More directly, Jesus speaks to his disciples in Mark’s Gospel. The setting of our text comes in a section of Mark in which the suffering of God’s servants and the meaning of that suffering for the people are the focus of the gospel. Against such a backdrop, the request of brothers John and James (the sons of Zebedee), to have a special place in God’s kingdom come as discordant and strange notes.

Zebedee's boys want the best seats in the house of God's realm. They want to be the top two disciples. I can see the sign on their Galilean Seaside Fisherman's Hut – "The Sons of Zebedee – Top in their class of twelve!" Jesus says, "You can be the top two if you live into a baptism like mine and drink the cup that been prepared for me." In other words, Jesus says, "*I can guarantee suffering. I just can't guarantee glory. I will leave that to God.*" The sign-makers put their paint brushes away.

Given the chance to cast his vote, Jesus votes for us to serve God, to lay down our lives and to be set free by following him. In other words, when all the polls are closed, when the lights are out in the sanctuary, when the fishermen have gone back to their seaside homes, Jesus stands with those who are hurting. He suffers with those who suffer. To the poor and the poor in spirit, he lays down his life. He calls us to do the same.

In the final service in of worship at the Greek-Melkite Catholic Cathedral, Archbishop Joseph-Jules Zerey, the leader of Christianity in the Holy Land, said to the faithful gathered there, "*We need to open our eyes to see God. We need to open our hearts to receive God. We need to open our ears to hear our 'still speaking God!'*"

God is still speaking is not simply an ad campaign for the UCC. Joseph Zerey believes with his entire heart and whole being that God is still speaking. Let us come to the table of our Lord trusting that our still-speaking God will meet us here. On this World Communion Sunday, let us seek more fully to imitate Christ and lay down our lives for our friends.

Let us join together and cast our votes for our Christ and his way of love, grace and hospitality as I come to his table. Amen.