

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister of the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 12, 2008, Pentecost 22, dedicated to the memory of Marian Guynn, to the honor of Bill and Alice Boden and Amos and Janice White, and always to the glory of God!*

## **“Stay on Track, Be Steady in God”**

### **Phillipians 4:1-9**

Periodically, I write letters and deliver them as sermons. I find my inspiration for doing this in the writings of the Apostle Paul, whose letter to the Philippians is our Epistle text today. I invite you to listen to this letter, which I have written to Bill Boden as he and Alice leave this week for Idaho.

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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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October 12, 2008

Dear Bill,

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord Jesus

Christ!

Earlier this week, I was surprised to hear that you announced in choir last Sunday that you and Alice would be moving to Idaho. Although I know this has been in the works for many years, as long as we have known each other, my selfish prayers of delay were ultimately ended. So, God answered your prayers and not mine.

As faithful as you are and poorly motivated as my prayers have been, deep down inside, I am glad you have come to this difficult and challenging point of decision. You and Alice will be happy near the rest of your family. And although I know you will miss the prairies and long sunsets of your Ohio homeland, I am sure you will, in time, adjust to Idaho's looming mountains and wide-open spaces.

You have always been my teacher. When you served as chair of the Personnel Committee, you asked engaging and enveloping questions of meaning and purpose. You were less concerned about policies than people. Your heart has always been for people. You have always given yourself – all that is within you – to lift up, celebrate, engage and love the people around you.

As a lifelong learner and educator, you have always asked questions that open a person to more light and truth. I am sure you did the same for your children and the young people to whom you dedicated your life's work in public education. Your curiosity and discerning spirit have led many to look at themselves and their motivations through the lens of love and not judgment. How I wish my children and all the children of this church had been able to know Mr. Boden

when he was teaching and guiding young hearts and minds to greater knowledge and understanding.

Bill, you are a child of this church. I would like to believe the shaping of your mind and your spirit was not only a homeward experience but grounded as well in the faith and practice of First Church. When you tell me stories of Dr. Boynton Merrill and the lessons of life he instilled, I delight in knowing him through your eyes and memory. What a joy it must have been for you as a young artist to be nurtured in faith and art by Dr. Merrill. Two of his paintings adorn my office walls – gifts from Herb Cook and Paul and Georgia Swinger. When I take time to be still in the hustle and bustle of the day, I feel his spirit alive in my office, an office in which he worked and drew for 17 years.

Dr. Merrill encouraged you to draw in church. He encouraged you to be an artist. He also encouraged you to become an ordained minister. I know you found your calling in teaching, which was, after all, the primary focus of the Rabbi of Nazareth. Encouragement. Hope. Curiosity. Love. That is what you learned here as a child of this church. It is my hope and prayer that every child who comes through our doors today is nurtured in the same way.

Throughout your years in the choir (treble and adult), you have sung to the glory of God. In addition, you have sketched what you have seen while sitting and listening to the rabbis of First Church. I thank you for translating God's word, which was written with pencil and paper, into beautiful images in this, our Cathedral of Grace. By so doing, you have graced our lives with more beauty.

This sanctuary will miss your attentive and gentle spirit. Perhaps no one has paid more attention to her than you, because you have seen her for all that she is, not all the blemishes or water stains, not all the cobwebs and spiders (although God has placed them here to catch the flies). But you have seen her majestic pillars, her translucent wonder in color and stained glass.

You have caught God's light and shadows cast across 60 years of sketching. You have seen her beautiful instruments of sound and power and grace. From the gallery, you have prayed over the people of God for so many generations. I feel as though your prayers have been a blanket that has wrapped this congregation with love and grace.

As a father of a young and gifted artist, I thank you for encouraging Daniel to draw in this special space as well. Your gentle encouragement has not been lost on him. God bless the men and women, youth and children, who, like you, have brought their artistic spirits into this blessed and holy place and here found nurture and love.

You would have been so proud and joy-filled if you had been here yesterday when Cori Benner and Ben Rowley were married in our sanctuary. Both CCAD graduates (Ben '07, Cori '08), baptized by me 16 months ago, they and their friends and family of artists and art lovers, filled this space with delight and joy. If you could have seen them, you would have been happy to know that the significance of this majestic house that justice built is not lost on those who follow you into this place.

What you have learned and experienced here, what you

have given back and shared here is all part of the legacy of love that is First Church. You, and so many around you in worship this day, a day in which we celebrate two of them – a Janice and Amos White – are part of the living legacy of First Church.

You have changed the world around you by being an instrument of God's peace and God's love in the place where you have been. You have touched thousands by following one God. You have opened possibilities to others by your gentle words and way. You are such an important part of our legacy. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

In today's letter to the church that he founded in Philippi, the Apostle Paul is trying to say farewell as we enter the last chapter of this epistle. For all of us who have negative images of Paul in relation to women, we need to remember the church at Philippi started when Paul met with a women's prayer group and encouraged them to hear the stories of Jesus. This, his most joyful letter, was written primarily to women, encouraging the church to grow in faith and persevere in all things. If you question Paul in other places, remember him in this place.

Eugene Peterson shares his translation of Philippians 4:1-9 with these words (and I paraphrase some of the passages):

*My dear, dear friends, I love you so much. I do want the very best for you. You make me feel such joy and fill me with such pride. Don't waver. Stay on track, steady in God.*

*Celebrate God all day, every day, I mean **revel** in God! Make it as clear as you can, to all that you meet that you are on their side, working with them and not against them . . . don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life.*

*Summing it all up, my friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on these things – true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious – the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not to curse. Put into practice what you learned from me, what you heard and saw and realized. Do that, and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into God's most excellent harmonies.*

I will miss you my friend. I will miss your notes and letters of encouragement and love. I will miss your presence that smiles delight and laughter, and depth of faith and conviction. I will miss your voice raised in praise. I will miss your being here week in and week out.

I pray that you will find a place for your soul to flourish and grow and be nurtured and cared for in your new homeland. I pray that our “God, who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies.”

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

I love you. I give all my love as you venture forth in Christ.

Your brother and friend in faith,  
Timothy

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