

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215
Phone: 614.228.1741 • Fax: 614.461.1741
Email: home@first-church.org
Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

“Itching Ears and Just Hearts”

***Jeremiah 31:27-34;
II Timothy 3:14-4:5;
Luke 18:1-8***

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By the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens
Senior Minister

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 21, October 17, 2010, dedicated to Tom Stewart, chairperson and the entire Capital Campaign Committee, and always to the glory of God!

“Itching Ears and Just Hearts”

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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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Our scripture lessons today call us to live and act with deeper faith.

Jeremiah brings us to see that God writes God’s covenant on our hearts and for each of us to remember - now and always - *“I will be your God and you will be my people.”* A new and deeper life of faith is granted in this new covenant.

In Paul’s second letter to Timothy, the apostle equips us to keep God’s message of the risen Christ alive and proclaim it with intensity. As he brings his letter to a close, Paul tells Timothy that unscrupulous people will attempt to win others over to their side. In the face of this, Paul charges Timothy to: *“Not let it faze you and to stick with what you have learned and believe since childhood.”* In addition, Paul tells Timothy *“to challenge, warn and urge your people . . . to never quit and to*

keep it simple" (*The Message*, p.2173, II Timothy 4:1-2).

In Luke, Jesus gives us a parable - an amazing story of a widow and an unjust judge. The widow persists in demanding justice from the judge who eventually grants her justice simply to "save face." As the parable ends and Jesus brings home his point, he asks, "*When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?*"

Three texts. Three lessons for life. First, God writes God's covenant of love on our heart (in our souls). Second, we are to be persistent and strong in our faith and in our actions. Third, we are to work for justice and if, perchance we are the ones on the other side of justice, we are to grant justice!

And as for the "faith on earth" question - Jesus answers it in Mark 13:13 when he tells his disciples, "*The one who endures to the end will be saved.*" It is "this one" who embodies faith on earth.

This week, the whole world witnessed faith rising up from deep under the earth! Out of the depths, the Phoenix II brought every one of the 33 miners to safety from 2,300 feet below the earth. The copper miners in Copiago, Chile, trapped for 69 days rose from seemingly hopeless conditions following a mining disaster on August 10. The whole world watched and grew in their love and admiration for the miners as they kept finding ways to survive in the deep darkness of the earth.

Then on Wednesday, October 13, their escape capsule, Phoenix II rose 33 times from the heart of the San José Mine with every man saved. As their stories emerged with them, we saw new life rising from the deep below the earth. Each man survived and the often criticized Chilean government did everything right to save their miners.

Something very significant happened in this story. All of us witnessed the powerful presence of resurrection faith in the

recovery of 33 miners at San Jose Mine. When they were discovered alive – 17 days into this story - and the shaft was completed to provide relief items for the men, after food, they immediately asked for religious items - Bibles, crucifixes, rosaries, statues of the Virgin Mary and other saints.

Pope Benedict XVI sent each man a rosary that was brought personally to the mine by the archbishop of Santiago, Cardinal Francisco Javier Errázuriz Ossa. They set up a makeshift chapel in the mine, and Mario Gómez, the eldest miner, spiritually counseled his cohorts and led daily prayers. One man said, “God, working through Mario, saved my life every day.” When they were rescued, the miners were all wearing t-shirts given by one miner’s brother, which read "Thank you Lord" on the front and "To Him be the glory and honor" on the back - taken from Psalm 95:4 - “in his hands are the depths of the earth."

Among the miners, a number attributed religious significance to the events, “Super” Mario Sepúlveda, for example, said, *"I was with God, and with the Devil – and God took me."* One writer said, *"A deep religious faith powered this rescue; miners and families and rescuers alike believe their prayers were answered."*

Both government representatives and the Chilean public have repeatedly attributed divine providence with keeping the miners alive and the Chilean public has viewed rescue as a miracle. Chile's president Sebastián Piñera stated, *"When the first miner emerges safe and sound, I hope all the bells of all the churches of Chile ring out forcefully, with joy and hope. Faith has moved mountains."* When Esteban Rojas stepped out of the rescue device, he immediately knelt on the ground with his hands together in prayer then raised his arms above him in adoration. His wife then wrapped around him a religious tapestry with Mary on it as they hugged and cried.

With Jeremiah writing God’s loving covenant on our hearts, with Paul empowering the Apostle Timothy to never

quit and always proclaim the risen Christ with intensity, with Jesus asking, “Will God find faith on earth?,” and with the clarion response ringing out across Chile and the globe - “There is faith on Earth” - how will we respond on the corner of Broad and Cleveland today?

I believe today is our time to live into our faith on this corner of the earth.

Today, we will be given the opportunity to invest boldly in the mission and ministry of First Church. “The Future’s Broadening Way” campaign comes many of our homes today. Now, some of us have joyfully presented gifts to this campaign during the leadership part. I know a number of you have responded by investing your assets and your faith in this congregation. One single woman told me that she “over ruled” her financial advisor and said to him, “This is what I want to and need to give. Make it happen!” Another family gave a lead gift drawing from retirement funds – then added another significant chunk on top of it because they saw an item that needed specific funding and they knew they just had to invest in that mission! Another family, which has always been opposed to the purchase of the lot on Broad and Cleveland, gave their largest ever single gift to the church in over 30 years to pay for the sound system, the lighting system in the sanctuary. The choir is coming together to support the music ministry with a joint gift for the organs. But that’s only the beginning for many choir members who are investing tens of thousands more in the total campaign.

In the case of Susan and our family – in the midst of facing a 25% drop in family income with one son in college and another in graduate school, and planning a destination wedding at Myrtle Beach and a daughter chomping at the bit to continue her education in college in four years – we have given the single largest gift to any institution in our letter of intent. How we wish it was even more. We shed sweat and tears to reach the decision we reached. But we are proud that it will be counted as a major gift to this church we love. Like

the Jeremiah in 32:1ff, we are setting down our roots in this place to see to completion what God has set in motion.

Now, this is where I feel directly empowered by the Apostle Paul's words to speak boldly to you as members and friends (for those who are visiting and hope to join our church and step out with us on the Future's Broadening Way). Remember that Paul said to Timothy that folks would find fault with his teachings and his faith, but that he needed not to be fazed and stick with what he had learned from the earliest moments of life. *He also said, "Never give up and keep it simple."* I feel like he is speaking directly and personally to me.

Here we go. I have heard it said that we don't have economic resources to meet the goals of this capital campaign.

Let me address two elements of our faithful response to this campaign as (in keeping it simple) I bring home my message for this morning.

First, from those most challenged in these economic hard times. I have had tearful conversations with members who are unemployed. A number of these men and women are turning in letters of intent - some with hopeful and promising LEADERSHIP gifts - because they believe in this church's future and they want more than anything else to invest in this land, this building, and our missions in this city, this nation, and this world. Summary, those who are struggling with the economy are not struggling with their faith on this corner of the earth. Like the widow in today's gospel, they will find their way to justice and invest in their dreams for First Church.

Second, there are those who have said we don't have the resources in our church to make this happen. I have never believed this from the opening day of this campaign. I believe it is a question of our will to reach the goal, not one of resources.

One of my friends and colleagues, retired Navy Chaplain and Ohio UCC pastor, Rev. Jim Chapman told his church:

“We have the resources in this sanctuary to pay for this campaign. If we passed the offering plates, we could pay for this today. The money is in the cars in our parking lot. It is in cars we have at home which didn’t even drive here today. It is in the cars which we really don’t need to buy in the next three years. It is in our homes and for a number of us - our second homes in warmer places. It is stocks, bonds, securities, and other investments. It is annuities which we either have or have not established for the church - but we about to! If we have just finished paying for college for our children, give the money as an investment in the children of this church! It is even in the dinner’s out which we won’t take for the next few years or cruises or vacations which we could defer or even simplify for this important moment in our lives and our churches life.”

Jim’s church went out on their DECISION SUNDAY and blew right through the top of their goal! I want our church to do the same thing! We have the capacity right here in this room to make this happen.

For those in our congregation today who hear these words and would like to increase their “Letter of Intent” to reflect their increased investment – I know Russ Kelm and Sheldon Taft as our lead gift co-chairs would love to see you after church! For those who have a lead gift request but have not responded to the calls from your fellow members to come to a decision, please respond to them. Theirs are not “robo” calls. They are members seeking to receive your great gift to this great campaign.

For those who will receive Caring Callers into your homes later today, I ask you to prayerfully consider Rev. Chapman’s words as encouraging words as you step forward in giving to “Our Future’s Broadening Way.” The Caring Callers will ask

you to fill out this letter today while they are with you. So, this is the time to consider this gift.

Like Jim Chapman, I believe First Church has all the money we need right here to multiply the blessings of mission by \$261,000+, to do a makeover on our 80-year-old Gothic beauty, to double the size of our property as we pay for, beautify and build on the corner of Cleveland and Broad as our legacy for generations “far down the future’s broadening way.”

Finally, I just need to say – I am blown away by the positive energy of this church at this time! Under the leadership of Tom Stewart, the Capital Campaign Committee has worked tirelessly day-in-and-day-out since March 2010, only six weeks after we voted overwhelmingly as a congregation to take on this major, massive campaign. They meet every week! They keep their chins up no matter what they encounter. They are my personal models of faithful stewards and faithful witnesses of the way of Christ. (Could committee members please stand!). Thank you!

Paul says to Timothy that people will have itching ears. They might drift in faith and faithful witness. In the midst of this drift, Paul encourages us to never give up and to stand strong in our faith. Like the widow who demands justice, let us be persistent and let us achieve the legacy of love which God has set before us and written on our hearts. Like the miners who rose in Phoenix II from darkness to light, from death to new life, may you and I demonstrate to our Savior today that WE have Faith on earth. We have it and will build on this rock of faith right here on the corner of Broad and Cleveland in Columbus, Ohio. Remember - now and always God’s words to all of us in Jeremiah: *“I will be your God and you will be my people.” Amen.*

