

*A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 1, 2009, dedicated to the nine men and women who died unto the Lord this past year, and always to the glory of God!*

# **“Together in Life and Death”**

**Revelation 21:1-6a; Isaiah 25:6-9;  
John 11:32-44**

**(Part III of IV in the Stewardship series “Together”)**

I was blown away this week when I considered the nine men and women who have died unto the Lord this past year. Their average age was 84 and their average church membership was 51 years. I chose today to reflect on their memory as we stand together in life and death. I invite you to join in celebrating their lives.

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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 theme for Stewardship this year is “Together.” The nine stewards who have lived and died unto the Lord this past year shared their lives with First Church for more than 455 years. Faithfully, they supported the life of this church through genuine stewardship of giving consistently throughout their life with us. They willing and generously shared their financial gifts as well as their time and talents. We were blessed by them and today I would like to lift them up in our celebration. Five of them were less visible to us in their later

years. But, all of them were resourceful in their lives of faith. As you listen to the good news of these saints of God, I want you to think about your life of faith and the ways in which you contribute to church and society. How might their examples of being stewards of the gifts God gave them touch you to do the same?

Paul Swinger was 92 years young at the time of his death and a member for 55 years. Through the years, Paul was always peaceful and calm. Even when he lay dying on our last visit and could not speak, his eyes spoke of love. When I asked Georgia about her husband, she said, "We were married for 66 years. Paul Swinger was a decent man. He treated everyone fairly. His life's work was educating children. As the principal of Fairmont School, he was always fair to everyone there. Often when they needed a substitute teacher, Paul would simply step in because he knew all the kids, all the subjects and he loved teaching! Paul was the kindness man I ever knew." **For Paul Swinger, thanks be to God.**

Jean Byerly was one for the ages. She was always curious, inquisitive and bright. Jean sought throughout her lifetime to learn, to absorb truth and to grow in faith and wisdom. She was a friend of truth and spoke truth freely and clearly, trusting God to deal with the fallout. Jean sang in our choir, loved everything about our music ministry, and served in a variety of ways on any number of committees. She worked for years on the staff of St. Joseph Cathedral. She was our ecumenical insider. She was, in the words of one friend, "the most honest person I have ever known." She was beautiful and she was ours for 54 years. **For Jean Byerly, thanks be to God.**

Samuel Cobb, was 90 years old and a member for 76 years at the time of his death. He and Betty were married for more than 65 years. Sam prayed for our church more than anyone I have known. Sam worked two blocks from here in the Borden Dairy factory for 45 years. Each day he would grab his lunch, eat it on the way and come to our sanctuary to pray and mediate. When I asked him once "Why?" he said, "I had been through combat in WWII and the noise of war and

noise of machines at work was everywhere. Here, I heard the music of angels and during the days, I felt the peace of God. For me, First Congregational Church was the most beautiful place on earth.” Now, it is our honor to sing you into heaven my friend within this holy place. **For Samuel Cobb, thanks be to God.**

Henry Hunker, was 84 years young and 55 years a member when he died. Henry was married to Beth for almost 60 years. Henry Hunker loved life. He loved Columbus, Ohio, he loved his family, and he loved this church. He loved the world of ideas, theory, and designs. And yet, he was able to translate complex systemic analysis into everyday language. He was an urban geographer. He wrote the best book on Columbus I have read looking at our city through the lenses of history, industry and geography. He was a popular professor at OSU because he cared about students. After I had lived here 11 years, he introduced me to Columbus all over again. Through the spirit and eyes of Henry Hunker, I fell in love with our metropolis in a new way. **For Henry Hunker, thanks be to God.**

Melvin Koch loved life and he loved First Church. He was 95 years young when he died and maintained his membership for over 62 years, even while living in Colorado and Florida. He was married to Freda for 55 years. Working at Battelle, Mel was an enthusiastic writer and communicator, working on the journal and in publications his whole working career. Mel invented “White Out.” He did it to help the secretaries in his workplace be less frustrated and more effective and efficient. It worked! Mel loved this nation and best of our values and was a fierce and loyal patriot. He loved this church and the best of our values and lived into our belief of the “individual interpretation of the principles of the Christian faith. (While always) respecting others in their honest convictions.” Some of my most engaging theological conversations happened with Mel Koch by phone over the past nine years. I miss those conversations and I miss Mel. **For Melvin Koch, thanks be to God.**

Jerome Dailey was only 58 years old when he died after two years of membership. He and Scott were partners for 15 years. Jerome

entered our doors to worship. He stayed to serve. He departed for eternity much too soon. Jerome lived his life like a candle in the wind. He was the Holy Spirit incarnate. He gave himself completely to our life together and his impact and now his loss is felt everywhere in our fellowship. When we celebrated his life in May, close to 400 people came to remember Jerome. His was one of the largest memorial services we have had in my years here. He lived our Open and Affirming statement (found on the back of the bulletin). He loved our neighbors as Jesus loved us. He welcomed everyone. To us, he was life, light and love embodied in human form. Jerome's absence has left a huge whole in our life together. **For Jerome Dailey, thanks be to God.**

To lose two beams of God's light in three days doesn't seem fair. But, it happened. Lillian Brownfield died three days after Jerome.

Lillian was 92 years old and a member of this congregation for more than 61 years. She was a fabulous and amazing woman. Lillian was an activist for justice and a feminist before the word had entered our vocabulary. She defended the poor and especially looked out for women and children. A widow at a young age, Lillian raised four sons and a daughter as a business woman and civic leader. Later she was a cancer survivor and one of the true guiding lights of social justice in this church. Two weeks before her death, Lillian was at the BREAD assembly at Vet's Memorial. Along with Tom, Kathy, Van and Laura, she came rolling in on her walker and said, "Here we are." On Sunday, May 17, she was in church in worship celebrating our Confirmands in love and delight commenting how beautiful they all looked. On Wednesday, after spending much of the day in the garden with Tom, she announced as she went to bed, "This was a good day." Later that night, she died in the arms of her son and Kathy, her beloved daughter-in-law. **For Lillian Brownfield, thanks be to God.**

Frances Gurley would have been 80 years old this past Tuesday. She was an active member of First Church for 41 years. For most of those years, she was very active in so many ways in the life of our church. Her niece Janet recalled that "Aunt Francie" had a keen

(really almost childlike) inquisitiveness about all life around her. She was curious about plants, sports, technology, bird watching, the weather ( she loved her annual Farmer's Almanac), health issues and reading. She also loved cutting out, saving and trying new recipes. Although she never had children, she loved her nieces and nephews and all their families and kept up through the phone and birthday and Christmas cards. She was also the adopted aunt of many neighbors at Buckeye Lake, particularly Evan. If someone was sick, Fran would always check in to see if there was anything she could do. She showed up early at family functions, always eager to help, and after the meal you would always find her in the kitchen cleaning up the dishes. She always put others ahead of herself. **For Frances Gurley, thanks be to God.**

On October 17, Ruth Rieppel entered eternal life. She was 92 years old and a 53-year member of First Church. She and Perry were married more than 60 years when he died eight years ago. She was a music teacher and lover of early music. Ruth was part of the early interval music community here in Columbus. She loved the holidays and parties. She also loved her family. She once told me that First Church and our music combined to make the most beautiful setting for worship and music she had ever celebrated. Then she thanked me. She always said how much she loved Dene Barnard. Ruth was gracious and good. She will be remembered in a memorial service on Friday, November 27. **For Ruth Rieppel, thanks be to God.**

John 11 is a story of compassion and power in which Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. Jesus' love for his friends – Mary, Martha, and Lazarus – bring him to Bethany and because he is able, he raises the dead. Before the spectacular comes the sublime. Friendship and love guide Jesus to become the one who brings resurrected life. While Lazarus' resurrection foreshadows Jesus' own, the real point of this miracle is the revelation of a death-destroying, life-giving God.

In Isaiah 25 and Revelation 21, we are caught up in the universality of God's promise of life beyond death. In an amazing

break from traditional Hebraic reflection on eternal life, the prophet Isaiah offers God's promise of life eternal not only to the people of Israel but to ALL people. Revelation, as well, speaks of a new heaven and earth in which the rivers and trees are for the healing of all nations and all people. Christ is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end – but he is for everyone, not just for people whom we deem righteous enough to make the cut.

This is good news on this All Saints Day. If we make the mistake of declaring a resurrection only for ourselves and those whom we love in Christ, we miss the point of God's universal declarations of compassion and life everlasting for ALL God's children. Today, I pray that the nine whom we lift up in sung prayer will be joined by those you lift up in spoken prayer as we remember and celebrate the men, women, and children – all the saints – who have touched and transformed our lives!

**For all the saints, thanks be to God! Amen.**