

“Love and Blessings”

I Corinthians 13; Matthew 5:1-12

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 5, May 22, 2022, dedicated to the Confirmation Class of 2022, to my co-teachers, Jackie Dean and Jonathan Miller, to Rev. Dr Matt Wooster, the Sr. Minister of Plymouth United Church of Christ, Shaker Heights, Ohio, to Rev. Dale Rosenberger, to the memory of Tammy Anderson and Richard Mason, and always to the glory of God!

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I Corinthians 13; Matthew 5:1-12

Letters have been at the center of our life together as Christians since the first century. 21 of our 27 New Testament books are letters. In recent weeks, two letters have rocked our world as a faith community – the letter of resignation from Kevin Jones and the letter ending her called ministry at First Church from Rev. Emily Krause Corzine. Four additional letters have been written to me calling for my resignation and at least 12 letters have come to me and others supporting my ministry.

Letters carry us into our deepest convictions of faith and clarify who we are and what we believe about ourselves and others. They speak from the heart of one to the heart of another. In my 22 ½ years with you, I have written many letters to you and for you. For many years you received a weekly Pastoral Epistle from me. In addition, all 22 of my Senior Minister annual reports have been written as letters to the congregation. I have even preached a few sermons which have been written as a letter to you. Today, I offer you a letter.

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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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May 22, 2022

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Risen Savior Jesus Christ!

I write with a heart full of love and yet a heart broken in two. The news of our Music Minister and our Associate Minister leaving us – news that came only five days apart – has left me and all of us – reeling. I have described it as two torpedoes blasted into the hull of our First Church ship. I did not ask for them to leave. I do not wish for them to leave. We will all be lessened as a community of faith without Kevin and Emily here. I am quite sad as I work to respond and stabilize our remaining staff and our faith community and plan for the future in the light of two significant departures.

As I write to you, I can't help but look back over the past 26 months. We survived the worst of the pandemic but it appears that the cost of our survival has been greater than we ever imagined. We are not alone in this cost. As you know, March 2022 marked the worst month in American history for people resigning from jobs. Over the course of the Pandemic, this exodus from the workforce has been labeled "The Great Resignation." We thought we were immune but we have discovered we are susceptible to such loss in our own community of faith. In addition to Emily and Kevin, our Building and Grounds

Assistant Superintendent, Darrell Cross left for higher pay at the end of March and we continue preparing for our Building and Grounds Superintendent, Mark Dahnke's retirement in the Autumn of 2023.

While the pandemic surely exacerbated our difficulties, the seeds of some of our challenges were planted before COVID hit us.

So, here we are. We have come through a lot – and we have done it together. As we said for 16 months when you were out of this room and we were here, we are “Separate but together.” Those of us who have survived COVID (so far) must continue to find a way forward – together. As Jesus says in Matthew 19:6, “What God has joined together, let no one tear asunder.”

COVID has brought suffering and struggle to all our lives over the past 26 months. It has been tough for all of us – no matter how we frame it.

In March 2020, we all began to confront a culture of death. We felt this pain immediately at First Church. Within weeks of the pandemic's arrival, Dayna McCrary lost her sister Gina Harris. Dr. Karl Danneberger became the first person at OSU Medical Center with COVID – and came close to death as he battled for his life on a ventilator for three weeks and, also became the first person to survive COVID at OSU. Over the past two years, at least eight members have died with COVID- related cause – including my friend, mentor, and colleague Rev. Herb Goetz. Most of us have lost friends, neighbors, and family in the devastation of this pandemic. More than 60% of us have tested positive for COVID. Some of us have lasting effects that still linger and hurt.

Remember that by Memorial Day 2020, two months into the pandemic, our nation had lost 100,000 people. This week we passed 1,000,000 deaths from COVID in the United States and worldwide the number is more than 6.27 million. Public health experts are saying that the true number of deaths could easily be triple what we have counted.

Going back to March 2020, something else died for me – just like something died for each of you. For me, my old way of being a pastor died. The scriptures and stories of resilience guided my prayer and shifted my ministerial leadership path. Together, with a phenomenal staff and with Peter Murray as our lead Livestream Minister, we moved into being a virtual church. We worked together through the steps of becoming a seeming studio in worship, and teaching, in visitation and every other way.

The weekly worship team was sensational, and we gave you our best Sunday by Sunday from March 15, 2020, through the current moment – via cameras and technology. I became more adept at doing adult study, Confirmation, and meetings via Zoom (though I still forget to “unmute”) and seeing you as our Zoomland students and leaders as if you were all contestants on Hollywood Squares or in the opening credits to the Brady Bunch. Like many of my colleagues, I consistently broke the Tenth Commandment and coveted the remarkable online abilities of other congregations, pastors and rabbis. I called it COVID coveting.

Beyond the gains of this new normal, something was terribly lost for me. I am a pastor. I am relational. I lead with my heart and my head. Through it all, I could not visit hospitals, nursing homes, retirement communities and your homes. I couldn't see you for meals at

restaurants. Weddings stopped (almost completely). When your loved ones died, I was on the phone, zoom or facetime with you – not with your family holding hands and praying. Funerals were done on Zoom or Livestream. As your pastor, I felt completely cutoff and had to figure out how to keep connected to 1500+ men, women, teens and children. Praying to God each and every day for each and every one of you was my only salvation. Through prayer, I lived into hope.

As your chief of staff, I felt cut-off as well. We moved to zoom meetings and virtual communication. There were weeks and months which moved into years in some cases – when we literally didn't see each other face to face, eye to eye. For heaven sakes, we were out of this room for 16 months. I didn't see any of you then – although you saw us. As one who doesn't use social media – I texted a lot to reach out to you. It was my main way to stay connected other than emails and calls.

For me, this time was even more intense because of my wife Susan's immune compromised condition and her vulnerability and susceptibility to illness unto death. There were times during the pandemic when I moved into the church for four or five days at a time and lived in my office because I had been exposed to COVID in the role of an essential worker and couldn't and wouldn't risk its devastating effects for Susan. Some people questioned this. Others criticized me for it – accusing me of crossing boundaries. Most of you who heard this were understanding and kind because you also had family members facing similar difficult choices in the workforce who were caring for their loved ones, too.

And like some of you who brought new life into this world – I had two grandchildren, Emryn and Axel – born in Ohio during the

pandemic. I saw Emryn through the sliding glass window off her back porch late at night when she was first born. I didn't hold her in my arms for months. It would be weeks before I saw Axel. We hardly saw and rarely held them during the height of the pandemic which hurt me deeply.

Cut-off from you, often from loved ones, and isolated in ways that none of us ever experienced before, I worked hard to keep you and the staff safe, to keep Susan safe and alive and to find new ways to minister and persevere through the pandemic. There were many days and weeks in this desert of isolation that I felt like I was failing you and falling short in giving you my all. But nothing matched my lowest point in ministry – December 12, 2021. On that day, following worship, I heard that the three ministerial staff with whom I had ventured through the pandemic in leadership of worship and so much more over so many years, had shared serious verbal “concerns” about me with key lay leaders.

Never in my 37 years of ordained ministry has any staff person registered such “concerns” about me or shared such complains to lay leaders about my leadership or managerial style. It cut me to the core. In January, an independent attorney was brought in and investigated what was happening. When she finally met with me, having talked with the others, she said – three times – that she found nothing of substance in her investigation. But she recommended that that the four of us work on and improve communications and our relationships. Although I have never seen her report, I agreed to move forward wholeheartedly. For the past four months, I have asked for that to happen. Although our lay leaders worked to bring this about, the two letters of resignation came the week before we were

supposed to sit down and in the words of the Psalm 51:7, “reason together with one another.”

My heart is broken by this.

Something I have heard a lot recently concerns my “patterns of behavior.” In my 37 years of ordained ministry, I have only served as a pastor. I have served three congregations of the United Church of Christ (my birthright denomination) all in Ohio – Bethany UCC in Cleveland from 1985-1989 and North Congregational in Columbus from March 1989-early January 2000 and First Church since January 23, 2000. As a pastor and teacher, I have demonstrated one consistent pattern of behavior. I have loved and served each congregation and all our members and friends with everything I have. Right or wrong, I have always done what I believed was in the best interest of each congregation.

In each congregation, our members have set forth our vision. Together we have worked, through a series of long-range plans for our flourishing of faith. Each church’s membership has grown in each year of my 37 years. Here at First Church, you expect your pastor to lead in the work of social justice. It is in my job description. I have done my best to do this. I have been a founding pastor of BREAD – Building Responsibility Equality and Dignity; the founder of We Believe Ohio – which combatted the rise of the Religious Right in Ohio; the co-founder of the Area Religious Coalition – working for justice in the police department and the community and I helped establish Faith in Public Life in Ohio – with Rev. Dan Clark doing all the heavy lifting! And – thanks to the generosity of Nancy Jeffery and the Jeffrey Family and the investments from our community by people who trust that we are people of justice, WE

built The Washington Gladden Social Justice Park – the only social justice park in the United States.

20 years ago, we worked together to become an Open and Affirming Congregation – the second such congregation in central Ohio – the first of which was my previous congregation – North Church. I have been the only white contributing editor for the Columbus/Dayton African American News Journal for the past eleven years (although others have begun writing recently). According to Dr. Amy Jill-Levine, I co-led (with Rabbi Misha Zinkow) the largest interfaith Bible study class in the country with over 250 Christians and Jews. Then we followed that with over 350 people who participated in Speaking of Faith – the largest such group ever to assemble for learning about other faiths in Ohio. Thanks to 53 geniuses of justice, I have now completed the book, “The Genius of Justice.”

We have grown our congregation from 755 adults and children in 2000 to 1500+ adults and children in 2022 – while five of 11 downtown churches closed during these same years. We did all of this at the same time our denomination lost 30% of its membership nationwide. Thanks to your generosity and vision, our pledge base has grown from a little over \$200,000 to close to million dollars. Our endowments have grown while other churches have eaten theirs up just to keep their doors open.

Best of all, along with great co-teachers across the years, over 315 Confirmands have studied scripture, learned about our Christian faith and made a choice for their life of faith – moving forward in holy boldness – no matter what their choice was!

This has been my pattern of behavior – to be a pastor, to grow churches in the UCC, to teach, to preach, to prophecy deliverance

and to live the Gospel of Jesus Christ while witnessing for justice and peace as an Ohio interfaith leader. This church and our community and our world need us to work together in the fight for justice and peace. Our divisions send a signal to the world that even the church will kill each other off in difficult times. We can do better than that. We can love one another.

What shall we say to all this? As I write, I am aware that our faith in Jesus Christ always calls us deeper and calls us forward. We are actually called by God “to be in the right place.” I draw this from Fr. Greg Boyle of Creighton University, writing on the Beatitudes. Fr. Boyle says, *“Scripture scholars say that the more exact translation (of the word beatitude) if you were to be really precise (if a little awkward) — wouldn’t be ‘blessed’ or ‘happy,’ it would be, ‘You’re in the right place.’”*

In other words, you are in the right place if you are poor in spirit. You are in the right place if you mourn. You are in the right place, if you are meek (like Jesus or Moses were meek). You are in the right place if you hunger and thirst for justice and righteousness. You are in the right place if you are merciful. You are in the right place if you are pure in heart. You are in the right place if you are a peacemaker. When people persecute you, or insult you; or utter all kinds of lies about you because of your faith in Jesus, you’re in the right place.

The Beatitudes are about social location. They are about where we choose to stand and with whom we choose to stand. They show us how to stand – in the right place – which really matters. I believe The Beatitudes are not simply a guide for spirituality, they are a geography of faith.

In closing, I circle back to Paul’s letter to the church at Corinth. This church was a doozy. Paul really struggles with this church. They

are difficult people who specialize in division. On any number of occasions, he intervenes to teach them how to be Christians to work together, remembering as Christ's church, they are serving God and their neighbors in need – not their cliques and special interests. They are the body of Christ, not a party of partisans. By the time we reach I Corinthians 13, Paul is exasperated and exhausted in his struggle to hold this divided cluster of Christians together. It is at this point, that he delivers the most beautiful and powerful words he ever writes. He calls them to live into love. He wants them to move into and through their conflict to get to a better place. He calls them to be a healed community. In the end, it about the whole community and making the community whole. Listen to some of his letter:

If I speak in the tongues of humans and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all my possessions and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; or resentful, it keeps no record of wrongs; 6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. 7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends... And now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love.

In spite of any of our differences and no matter what we hang onto, I pray – with my whole heart – that Love – known to us in God – will deliver us through this current moment. Everything else will come to an end. Only one thing survives. It is Love. God's love will never end.

May you be blessed – or rather – may you be in the right place. My brothers and sisters in Christ, may God bless you and keep you and love you always.

With all my Love and Blessings,

Timothy