

“Start Spreading the News!”

Genesis 18:1-15, Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35-10:8

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June 18, 2023

From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, First Congregational UCC, Columbus, Ohio, June 18, 2023, Pentecost 3, dedicated to all the men in this world who are dedicated fathers, who love and care about their children in whatever ways God has given these children to them, to all people who battle injustice against the LGBTQIA+ community, all who are anti-racists who fight each day to end our continuing war with racism, to the memory of my father, Herman Conrad Ahrens, Jr and my children, Luke, Dani, Thalia and Sarah, to the memory of Robert Monahan who entered eternal life on June 17, and to Jane his grieving wife, who stood by him throughout their years of life together, to Jill J. Kingsley on her 90th birthday, and always to the glory of God!

Last night there was a convergence of five planets of Saturn Neptune, Jupiter, Uranus and Mercury which aligned in night sky. They were clustered together on one side of the sun. Like the planets alignment, I feel like many notable and celebratory events have aligned for us this weekend – Pride, Father’s Day and Juneteenth tomorrow. And for us at First Church, a fourth star entered heaven with the death of Bob Monahan yesterday at Danbury Nursing Home. Our prayers are for his wife, Jane Carter today.... Bob was an amazing man. He was gentle and kind and, on this weekend, you should know that he came among us years ago, because we were Open and Affirming and having lost a son to AIDS, Bob felt the warm embrace of our community of love and acceptance. Thanks

be to God for the light shining in this world which was Robert Monahan. Finally, our fifth star aligning today is Josh Stafford who will head to Chautauqua for the summer starting tomorrow. We celebrate his gifts and send him with love – for the first time – in what we hope and pray will be a ritual of sending for years to come.

Now, start spreading the news...

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock, and our salvation. Amen.

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A true miracle opens our readings today. By the oaks of Mamre, God appeared to Abraham in the threefold image of the Lord's messengers. Abraham sees these men in the middle of Nowhere and runs to them and puts his face on the ground before them. The appearance at this sacred oasis known for the Oak trees now in what we call Hebron, is the place where Abraham learns the news that he and Sarah are going to have a baby. The 100-year-old Abraham and his much younger wife, Sarah at 90-year-old Sarah will have their firstborn child. Sarah is listening from the tent when she hears this news and laughs. She receives good news and the name of her son all at once – for Isaac means “One who laughs.”

While I don't want to focus on the impossibility of this happening, I want us to pause with this thought – it is never too late to give birth to new life and new ideas. You are never too old to welcome new life into this world and participate fully in the raising a child to fulfill God's plans for your life. So, when something happens later in life, you may laugh – but may your laughter always reflect the deeper meaning of Isaac – which is “one who rejoices.”

From the laughter of Genesis, we move to the powerful testimony of Romans 5. From Abraham and Sarah, we learn endurance and patience in the long wait and walk for the arrival of their son, Isaac. From Paul, we learn how to trust God through Jesus Christ. Paul is saying that in Jesus, we receive what God has always wanted for us – someone who will make things right in our lives. He says, *“We throw open our doors to God and discover at the same moment that he has already thrown open his door to us. We find ourselves standing where we always hoped we might stand—out in the wide-open spaces of God’s grace and glory, standing tall and shouting our praise.”*

But there is more to come: We continue to shout our praise even when we’re hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next. In alert expectancy such as this, we’re never left feeling shortchanged. Quite the contrary—we can’t round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit!

Here is what I really love. In the words of Eugene Peterson, in the Message, we read 5:6-8. *“Christ arrives right on time to make this happen. He didn’t, and he doesn’t, wait for us to get ready. He presented himself for this sacrificial death when we were far too weak and rebellious to do anything to get ourselves ready. And even if we hadn’t been so weak, we wouldn’t have known what to do anyway.*

We can understand someone dying for a person worth dying for, and we can understand how someone good and noble could inspire us to selfless sacrifice. But God put his love on the line for us by offering his Son in sacrificial death while we were – truthfully – no help to God whatsoever.”

We have God arriving in surprise and joy in Genesis – through the power of perseverance and disappointment. In Romans, we have hope arriving in Jesus Christ’s promise and self-sacrifice and a deep lesson for each one of us *our afflictions produce endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope never disappoints us (why?) because God’s love has been*

poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. And he arrives right on time!

Matthew tells us what this is all of this is about. In the words of Jesus Christ Superstar, Jesus tells us “what’s the buzz.” He tells us what’s really happening. It is about a teacher, a preacher and a healer who steps into this world – sees every single person in the crowds and has compassion for them. Why – because he sees they have been harassed and have been helpless in the face of the hardships of their lives.

Warren Carter in his masterful Commentary on Matthew, entitled, “Matthew and the Margins, a Sociopolitical and Religious Reading” writes this of Jesus’ words helpless and harassed. “Jesus saw the crowds sufferings from violence. Harassed, in their context meant flaying or skinning, violence and plundering. Helpless meant a throwing down, a laying down, often in violent contexts, including abandonment, imperial violence, war and death or divine and destructive judgment or unfaithfulness.” Carter concludes, “Jesus sees people who are oppressed, downtrodden, beat-up, and crushed” (Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, Orbis Press, New York, NY, 2000, p.230).

What does Jesus do in the face of all of this? He has compassion for them. Out of his guts, his deepest part of his insides, he has compassion. He reaches out and expresses his love and mercy for them. He acts out of merciful love. And then, after loving them, and showing them healing and merciful action, he turns to his disciples and says – *“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Go and spread the good news!”*

Jesus’ response to all this pain and trauma is not despair but prayer as he says, *“Pray that the Lord of the harvest will send out workers into his harvest.”*

He turns to his disciples and sends them out with this – *“Start spreading the news, you’re leaving today, I want you to be a part of it, in all of Galilee.”* Nice tune Jesus! Maybe it will be a hit someday.

That's right. He sends them out to heal, do acts of love and mercy and have compassion for all who are harassed and helpless. This is not some historical, spiritual religious mumbo jumbo. This is the call to discipleship which is as real for you and me as it was for them.

Yesterday, some of us were in a parade with more than 18,000 people. Your fellow church members represented the First Church group in the parade. When our little band of pilgrims walked past the 700,000 on the parade route (some of whom were some of you), we were blown away by the reception and love that came flowing back to all of us. It truly was remarkable. It moved me and each one of us deeply. I made a point of making eye contact with as many people as possible. They cheered mightily for a number of our signs. Rev. Joanna was dancing and lifting hers up high – “Protect our Trans Youth.” I was carrying this sign about trans youth, too. I held the banner with Jen Provenzano which read – “You are Loved.”

As I made eye contact with one young person after another, who smiled and blew kisses and sent love right back to us, I was transfixed by the tears and facial expression of one particular young person – who covered their mouth, started crying, turned to an adult next to them and pointed at me and my sign. They blew me a kiss and put their hand on their heart. I kissed the back of my hand (since both hands were full) and sent the kiss and a smile and “I love you” right back. Then from a distance with a hand on their heart, they mouthed the words, “Thank you. I love you, too.”

Love was spoken with our eyes, with our lips, with our lives entwined for a few seconds in time. I was aware of the deep hungering in those eyes. I felt Jesus present between us – among us – in the intimate dwelling place in the sacred space – with the Holy Spirit holding us together in a crowd of tens of thousands of people.

Everyone who walked felt the love yesterday. There were a few haters trying to suck the oxygen out of the air in the name of Jesus. But they were drowned

out by the Love of the crowd and the true spirit of Jesus on High – where we were all getting high on Love!

Yesterday I felt more love than I have felt anywhere in a very long time. It was palpable. It was promising. It was good. I felt at home on the streets of Columbus with 700,000+ of my closest friends – who are seeking to love and live in compassionate kindness; in merciful and loving ways and as they fight for justice in our city, state and nation.

There are so many Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer/ Questioning, Asexual and many others who use terms like non-binary, pansexual and others who describe their experiences of gender, sexuality and physiological sex characteristics differently than you or I. Everyone needs our love and not our judgment. Everyone needs to know they are embraced for who they are and who they are becoming.

In fact, Everyone needs love. It is as simple as that.

So, start spreading the news. You're leaving today. You are leaving your barn of despair and moving to a house of hope. You are leaving your smaller world which holds you back from fuller love. You are leaving your universe of judgment and entering God's Universe of compassionate love. You are leaving whatever has held you back from really living your life and you are coming out – out of your shell, out of your preconceived notions and so much more.

This is the day which God has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it as we let go of whatever hold us back and let God take us to a whole new world of understanding and love.

On the eve of Juneteenth and from the heart of a father on Father's Day, I leave you with 25 top hits of faith – that I learned from my dad, Jesus and even from Apostle Paul. They are tried and true. I first wrote them 9 years ago today for my dad's 90th birthday. I believe they will support you in your journey of new beginnings. I give them in memory of my father and in honor of my four children.

Maybe some will grab hold of your soul and influence your relationships with others and with God.

1. *Offer your everyday, ordinary life to God.*
2. *Take hold of what God does for you as the best thing you can do for God.*
3. *Don't become so comfortable in this culture that you fit in without even thinking about what you are doing. Instead, fix your focus on God. God will change you from the inside out.*
4. *Ask every single day, what would God have me do in this situation I am in? Then respond to it and do the right thing. Remember, God always brings out the best in people!*
5. *Be thankful every day in every way to God for all the blessings of your life. Stop feeling sorry for yourself – stop complaining about your life.*
6. *Live in the pure grace of God.*
7. *Be generous and Be compassionate.*
8. *Let your love be genuine. Don't fake it.*
9. *Run for dear life from evil, hold on for dear life to what is good.*
10. *Be a good friend who loves deeply.*
11. *Practice playing second fiddle.*
12. *Don't burn out. Keep yourself fueled and aflame.*
13. *Be cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times but pray to God all the harder!*
14. *Help people who are in need.*
15. *Be inventive in hospitality.*
16. *Bless your enemies and remember, no cursing under your breath.*
17. *Laugh with your happy friends when they are happy. Cry with them when they are down.*

18. *Get along with everybody.*
19. *Don't get stuck on yourself – you are never as good or as bad as all that.*
20. *Make friends with those who others treat as nobody. Don't try to be the great somebody.*
21. *Don't hit back when hurt (that includes words – they can hurt others, too).*
22. *Discover beauty within everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody.*
23. *Don't insist on getting even. That's not for you to do. Remember what God says, "I'll do the judging. I'll take care of 'getting even.'"*
24. *Remember also what our scriptures tell us: when you see your enemy hungry, buy him lunch. When you see him thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness.*
25. *Do not let evil get the best of you. Get the best of evil by doing good.*

This sermon opened with a miracle, and I pray that it closes with one, too. May the miracle of God's love alive within you spread to others now and always! Amen.

