

“Born to Run at 66”

Genesis 21:8-21; Psalm 86 1-10, 16-17; Romans 6:1b-11;
Matthew 10:24-39

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens
Senior Minister

June 25, 2023

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>

“Born to Run at 66”

Genesis 21:8-21; Psalm 86 1-10, 16-17; Romans 6:1b-11;
Matthew 10:24-39

Baptismal meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio. Pentecost 4, June 25, 2023, dedicated to my grandson Benton Myles who is 8 today, to the United Church of Christ and all our members, lay leaders and pastors through our 66 years of life together and to the generation of new leaders being born and rising up including Malcolm and Madeline Bohnert who are being baptized into Christian faith today, to Mark Dahnke as he retires after 6 ¾ years with us, and always to the glory of God!

+++++

*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.*

+++++

Years ago, I was listening to a family therapist during a radio interview with Terry Gross on “Fresh Air” on WHYY in Philadelphia. Terry said, “the family is such a neurotic institution.” The family therapist responded, “That is true. But it is the best neurotic institution we have.” Yes, it is! Family is neurotic, complex and complicated. If you don’t believe me, read Genesis 21 and Matthew 10 again. They are tough texts because families are neurotic, complicated, and complex.

In Genesis, God told Abraham to have a child with Hagar, the servant to his wife Sarah. So, he does. Hagar births Ishmael, whose arrival is celebrated by Abraham and all present – except Sarah – who is barren and bitter. When God eventually blesses Sarah and Abraham with a son named “Isaac,” Sarah tells Abraham to drive “that woman” out of the camp and into the wilderness. This cruel action is supported by God who, in essence, tells Abraham, “I will take care of them in the wilderness.”

The contrast between Ishmael and Isaac, and Hagar and Sarah is stunning. Isaac is honored and lifted up as the child of promise. Ishmael is dismissed from the camp – but not from the narrative. Although the wilderness is a place where he barely survives, he does survive and becomes the father of the Ishmaelites – eventually known to us as the Muslims.

Sadly, through time, we have drunk the Kool-Aid of our forebearers in faith who have waved the flag of celebration for Isaac and turned our backs and our listening ears from Ishmael. They are siblings and most importantly – both are children of Abraham. Each is important. Each becomes a leader of “great nations.” The child who leads the Hebrew people (Isaac) and the child who leads the People of Islam (Ishmael) are central to our family tree. Neither should be ignored. Both should be celebrated and blessed.

Our Neurotic family’s Gospel medicine may be even more difficult to swallow today. In Matthew 10:24-39, Jesus turns family values on its head. Jesus is not a “Focus on the Family” kind-of-guy in this text (thank God!). He is not talking about the ordinary cruelties and struggles of family life, as devastating as they can be. Jesus is talking about divisions that occur in families when HE walks into our lives. What happens to family loyalty when you put Jesus first in your life? I have seen struggles in families caused by the presence of Jesus in their households of faith.

What do you do when one of your family members makes a radical decision to choose another church or another faith? What do you say to parents when one adult child refuses to go to church while the other leaves the church of

her childhood for a place where they speak in tongues? What do you say to Christian fathers and mothers who are delighted to see their children become doctors, teachers, lawyers, and business leaders, and yet, when one follows God's call to ministry and seeks to be a priest or pastor, these committed "disciples of Jesus" become distraught?

Years ago, one parent asked me, *"How did we fail our daughter that she would choose the ministry over being a doctor?"* Kind of tough to answer – as a pastor. You might not believe this, but that was one moment in my life when I was speechless. After pausing (for what seemed like an eternity) I responded, *"I know how you feel. I was pre-law before I felt the call to the ministry. I know that let down all the lawyers in my family and in my life."*

Jesus tells us that the Gospel is inherently divisive. **"What on earth" is Jesus saying?** I know we don't like this message. He says we should not be surprised when people fight about it. In Jeremiah 23:29, that contentious prophet says, *"God's word is like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces."* Jesus puts it this way, *"Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."*

Chris and Stefanie, I probably should have preached this before you said you wanted Malcolm and Madeline to be raised in the faith and family of Jesus Christ! Please don't take your words back. But hold on tight, tighten your seat belts, our ride is about to get bumpier (and more distressing).

Jesus continues, *"I come to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother . . . whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me, is not worthy of me."*

As troubling as this may sound to you, this was Jesus' clear and present way of redefining the family. For Jesus, family was not a matter of whose chromosomes you carry around inside of you or who you look like or sound like. He wasn't concerned about your street address or whose prestigious last

name you carry. **He was concerned about whose image you were created in and what you carry inside your soul.**

He came from a family which included those who had no address and whose names were forgotten to all but God. His family was made up of mutts. They were “tax collectors, lepers, Roman centurions, scruffy looking men who fished for a living and ladies in robes made of gold brocade and hordes of squealing children.” There were lots of sinners and only a few saints in his family. In fact, there was no family tree on the inside cover of Jesus’ Holy Bible. As much as his ancestors mattered to him, his was more like a family forest than a family tree (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*, Cowley Publications, Cambridge, Mass., 1995, p.18).

In our marketing and advertising-driven world of the “Purpose Driven Church,” pastors and lay people are trained to seek like-minded, similar-looking, homogenous gatherings of people to bring to church and to make the next generation of Christians. We are told, churches grow from likeness. But I have real trouble with this. And I believe Jesus would have breathed fire in reaction to the market driven church.

That is where our 66-year-old church enters this story. On June 25, 1957, the Evangelical and Reformed Church (with German background) and the Congregational Christian Churches (with English and African American background) came together to form the first Protestant denomination EVER which united and didn’t divide Christianity. For 1957 years since Christianity started and 440 years since Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the Whittenburg Church door – all branches of the Christian family had been separating and creating new branches on our family tree.

On this day, 66 years ago, branches of Christianity were unified for the first time. This is, in my mind, THE most significant accomplishment of the many revolutionary accomplishments with which our denomination has gifted the Christian story. We brought people together. We committed ourselves to Unity over Division.

Our purpose statement declares that our purpose as a people of faith is: *“To love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and our neighbor as ourselves.”* Our Vision Statement follows: *“United in Christ’s love, a just world for all.”* Our Mission Statement is clear, too: *“United in Spirit and inspired by God’s grace, we welcome all, love all, and seek justice for all.”*

We have real notables in our family tree! Some of our most notable ministers and members have been: President John Adams, Abigail Adams (and ton of other revolutionary leaders, heroes and she-roes), Rev. Cotton Mather, Rev. Antoinette Brown, Harriet Beecher Stowe (who was the first woman ever to preach at First Church), Dr. Washington Gladden, John Brown, Thomas Edison, President Calvin Coolidge, Thornton Wilder, Theodore Dreiser, Dick Van Dyke, Walt Disney, Hubert Humphrey, Rev. Dr. Andrew Young, Julian Bond, Rev. Dr. William Sloan Coffin, Rev. Dr. Walter Brueggemann, Rev. Drs. Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr and Ursula Niebuhr (who her brothers called the greatest theologian in the family), Dr. Paul Tillich, Donald Hall, Alex Ross, William Holden, Rev. Dr. Geoffrey A. Black, President Barack Obama (whom Michele Obama brought to church along with their daughters), Oprah Winfrey, Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright, Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III, Common, Howard Dean, Bill Moyers, Marilynne Robinson, Leonard Pitts and the two men who broke the color barrier in baseball and football Jackie Robinson and Bill Willis, Sr. (who was a member of our congregation for 43 years). The list goes on!

In the United Church of Christ, we have always placed Jesus Christ at the heart of our purpose and vision. We believe Jesus and the cross of Christ unite people- not divide them.

We believe Christians grow FROM Jesus. Once Christians have grown from His light, His life, and His love, then His churches will grow. And clearly, to grow in Jesus (according to Jesus) is not about looking the same, sounding the same, and believing all the same. It is about taking up the cross and following Him.

Returning to the text from Matthew 10 for a moment, Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way: *“There is good news here for those who have the nerve to hear it. The gospel is not a flashlight but a fire. It can warm and it can burn. The gospel is not a table knife but a sword. It can set free, and it can divide. The gospel is not Pablum. It is powerful stuff, powerful enough to challenge the most sacred human ties, but as frightening as it is, **it is not to be feared.**”*

The peace of God is worth anything it takes to get there, and anyone knows that the absence of conflict is not peace. The good news is that in Christ Jesus, God has given us someone worth fighting about, and someone with clout enough to end all the fighting, for his word is like fire, like a hammer that breaks a rock into pieces (Ibid).

So, Malcolm Steven and Madeline Mary – welcome to your new family. We may not be the best looking (although you just shot us up the list of good looking churches!) or the best behaving (again you showed us today how to behave in church), the best believing, and certainly not the most homogenous group you may encounter, but like you, we belong to Jesus Christ. And like you, we will seek to follow Jesus to the cross, remembering his final words in Matthew’s passage today: *“Those who find their life will lose it and those who lose their life, for my sake, will find it.”* And in the end, Madeline and Malcolm, the words of Jeremiah can comfort and guide us: *“Lord, for you I have committed my cause.”*

So, take our hands Madeline and Malcolm. And while I am at it, Mark Dahnke, give me your hand, too. Let get running! You will always be part of our family. And our family will proudly carry the flags for Isaac and Ishmael. We will honor ALL our forebearers in faith and welcome all through our doors for all time. You all are always welcome here!

Malcolm, Madeline and Mark, we expect to see all three of you on the road ahead. Remember – we were born to run!

The road is calling us. While others may ask, “What on earth is going on?” you will know as we venture out together – all will be well with Jesus Christ leading our journey and our family. Amen.