

# “Saint Solomon”

Genesis 22:1-14; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40- 42

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens  
Senior Minister

July 2, 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](mailto:home@first-church.org)

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

## “Saint Solomon”

Genesis 22:1-14; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40- 42

A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, July 2, 2023, dedicated to the memory of Solomon Washington Gladden, Jacob Riis, and Walter Rauschenbusch who share this Saints Day, to Thompson Scott Graham on his birth to Michael Bukach and Caitlin Graham, and brother Graham as they all begin their journey together, to John Anderson and Rev. Margot Conner on their marriage on June 29th, to Melissa Kulwicki as she begins as our full-time Communications Manager, to Gary Glover and the Stephen Ministers of First Church – those brushing up on skills, in training and in leadership training, as together, they revitalize this blessing ministry in our midst 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.*

+++++

In the early hours of this day, July 2nd, in 1918, Solomon Washington Gladden breathed his last breath and passed into eternal life. He was 82 at the time of his death – having served as our Senior Minister from 1882-1914 and as our Senior Minister Emeritus from 1914-1918. At his bedside was his favorite poem:

*Tonight, I lay my burdens by, as one who rests beside the road,  
And for his wearied back unbinds, the 'whelming load.  
I kneel beside the hidden pools of prayer,  
still waters fraught with healing power,  
In God's green pasture, I abide this long-awaited hour.  
I know that day must bid my face courageously my task again,  
Serving with steady hand and heart, my fellow men,  
To hold my sorrow in the dark, to fight my fear, to hide my pain,  
And never for one hour to dream the toil in vain -  
This be tomorrow, now tonight, Great pitying Father, I would be,  
Forgiven, uplifted, loved, renewed, Alone with Thee.*

The voice of the prophet of the Social Gospel was stilled and his eternal light began to shine.

A little over seven months earlier, during the last week of November 1917, Solomon Washington Gladden had a serious stroke that had left him paralyzed on the right side. He spent the winter learning to type only with his left hand. He never stopped creating and writing. He wrote monthly poems and hymns for the congregation throughout the Spring of 1918. We just sang the last hymn he ever wrote (9am will sing it later). He also continued to write letters to President Wilson and others calling for the end of war. He never stopped fighting for peace.

He finally returned to worship for one last Easter Sunday service on March 31 to hear the new Senior Minister preach.

At his funeral, that new Senior Minister, Dr. Irving Mauer, who had only arrived in January 1918 from Northampton, Massachusetts, shared the story of riding with Dr. Gladden in his car through Franklin Park in the Spring that year. As they rode along, Dr. Gladden pointed out where members and friends lived.

On the ride, Pastor Maurer asked Dr. G. about his ability to speak out on issues of social justice. How could he have done it for so long and so well? Gladden responded, *“It was the hardest thing I did – to speak out on social injustice in our city and world. Every time I spoke it took something out of me. But, every time I was silent, I could hear the voices of those who had no voices crying out. So, I would speak again. My silence was killing those who had no one to speak for them.”*

On June 28th he completed his final writing project. It was an article for women whose husbands were either at war or who were widowed because of WWI. He demanded equal pay for the work they were doing in the war effort and a full pension for the loss of their spouses. His left hand typed his last words and then the hands of the Father of the Social Gospel rested from his labors.

That evening he went riding around Columbus with John Preston, his African American coachman, in an electric automobile the church had given him in 1915. The next day, Saturday, June 29th, he had a second stroke that left him unconscious, though without pain. His sons traveled from the east to join their sister and his only granddaughter, Alice, and be with him in his final days.

On Monday, July 1, The Ohio State Journal had a headline that read, “Rev. Dr. Washington Gladden is Dying.” Never regaining consciousness, he died early on Tuesday, July 2nd. That night, The Columbus Evening Dispatch announced that “Columbus’ First Citizen Has Died.” President Wilson sent a telegram to the Gladden family on July 3rd – “His death has impoverished us.” Headlines across the country hailed his memory. People of all religions filed by his coffin for two hours the day of the funeral, at which America’s leading Rabbi, Rabbi Stephen Wise spoke alongside other faith leaders. His coffin was escorted by local clergymen who formed an escort of honor as they walked beside the hearse to Greenlawn Cemetery. As they went, the bells of Trinity Episcopal Church, the other church on Capitol Square, played Gladden’s favorite hymns and the assembled mourners outside 74 East Broad

Street sang “O Master Let Me Walk with Thee” as the bells rang out the tune. He would be laid to rest next to wife Jennie and daughter Helen at Greenlawn (and later Alice, Fred and George).

Ten years ago, the Episcopal Church set aside today as a Saints’ Day for Washington Gladden, Walter Rauschenbusch and Jacob Riis. They call it the Day for Prophetic Witnesses.

So, in that spirit, what was it that made Solomon Washington Gladden a saint of the church? What made him that set him apart? Was it his 40 books? His 35 honorary doctorates? His 58 years in parish ministry (36 of which were spent with us at this pulpit) located then on Capital Square? Was it his undying defense and advocacy for justice and peace? Was it his fearless advocacy for the poor, the forgotten and the forsaken and those who were left out and left behind? All of this helped...

In my mind, what was so singular and extraordinary about the Rev. Dr. Washington Gladden was that he grasped something that was only dimly sensed by others of his day. It was this: **The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not intended merely for the salvation of individuals but also for the transformation of society.**

This is often referred to as “the Social Gospel.” He dedicated his life to this belief. He applied his beliefs in church and society. As a result, he made a world of difference in the world. He didn’t just hold these thoughts to himself. He preached on them. He wrote books and journal articles in which they found expression. He started an entire movement that spread from this pulpit across the world. That’s why many called him “The Father of the Social Gospel Movement.”

The Social Gospel Movement which Walter Rauschenbusch and Washington Gladden wrote about and lit a fire under is none other than the truth of Jesus Christ, the law of Israel and the crying blast of the prophets of old speaking God’s word to us with fire and spirit – *“Care for my poor.”*

The Social Gospel movement was a movement that grew out of the industrial revolution of the late 19th century. It was a movement in which salvation was seen as the symbiotic relationship between the personal and the social. One could not separate one's own personal salvation from the salvation of the world.

The development of the Social Gospel and OUR NEW Social Gospel blossoming in our times will be the focus of a six-week sermon series beginning July 30 – in four Sundays. So, I will save more about the roots and the shoots of the Social Gospel for then. I invite you to return and bring others, too.

Washington Gladden arrived in Columbus, Ohio, in December 1882 – 141 years ago, and he preached his first sermon on Christmas Eve. Dr. Gladden was an unapologetic evangelical liberal – biblically grounded and scripturally centered and lived (and died) with the belief that we always need to adjust Christianity to modern times.

Here are some of his beliefs: He spoke of moral evolution – meaning we needed to get away from being troubled by original sin and deal with the sins of our current times. On Atonement he said, “*Christ bore our sins in fellowship with us, not in substitution for us.*” The creeds he said should not be tests of faith. Rather, we need to live our personal testimonies of faith that demonstrate our abilities to care for our fellow human beings. He did not see Jesus as the founder of a religious system, but simply the revelation to humanity of the Living God, the Life of God, and the duties growing out of those relations. Gladden placed great emphasis on Jesus’ ethical teachings as central and normative for Christian faith and experience. The Sermon on the Mount was at the center of his teachings as the way to live the Christian life. Gladden also believed that Christianity was not the only way to God. Other religions could lead people to God as well. However, Gladden felt that Christ was the head of the body of humanity. As the head, he could guide all the rest of the body through a better way to God.

As many of you know, I could talk about Dr. Gladden all day long. But what has driven me to begin a book about him is how he became who he was. How did he become “the father of the social gospel movement?” What formed him and informed him? Essentially, how did Gladden become Gladden?

But for today, the 105th Anniversary of his Saints’ Day – his coming home at last, eternally to God, let me finish with these thoughts.

Above us in the west transept, we have a stained-glass window dedicated to Dr. Gladden. Standing 15 feet high are the figures of Charity and Justice. Charity holds a cornucopia symbolizing generosity and compassion. Justice holds a sword (one of the biggest swords I have ever seen in Stained Glass) symbolizing the righteousness of justice. We are reminded each week to live lives of Charity and Justice. Charity calls us to feed the hungry. Justice calls us to set up systems of care that guarantee no one will go hungry today or tomorrow or ever again.

On this day, let us remember our brother in Christ, our friend on the journey, our pastor and our ever-crying witness of charity and justice – Saint Solomon Washington Gladden. Let us also remember, the prophet of the Social Gospel Movement was one of us. Inspired by Jesus and Washington, I pray that you will discover your gifts to speak out and act out for justice and peace. I pray that you will speak and act out of your experience to alleviate the suffering of others. I pray that you live this faith we call Christian as a social justice faith. Amen.

