

“Democracy Cannot Be Mocked”

Genesis 29:15-28; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

**Part I of VI in the Summer Sermon Series,
“The New Social Gospel”**

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 30, 2023, 9th Sunday after Pentecost, dedicated to the blessed memory of Robert Monahan and to his beloved wife Jane Carter, to all the young girls and women of our congregation and to all the women in our state and nation who have to battle daily for equal rights and justice and always to the glory of God!

Today, I want to thank Rev. Samuelson and Rev. Nirote who preached and led worship the last three Sundays. Also, thanks to all the liturgists, the Deacons and the musicians who led us in beautiful services of worship. Thanks, as well to all of you for your constant and faithful presence in our family of faith.

Today, we begin a six-part sermon series entitled, “The New Social Gospel.” All our sermons will be delivered from this pulpit – which was the pulpit of First Congregational Church when we were located at 74 East Broad Street (on Capital Square) from 1856-1931. We often refer to it as the Gladden Pulpit – in recognition and celebration of our seventh Senior Minister, The Rev. Dr. Washington Gladden – “Father of the Social Gospel Movement.”

But it is important to remember, this was the pulpit of our church 26 years before Dr. G and another 13 following his death. From this pulpit the Word of God was preached for more than 75 years. This

Social Justice Pulpit will be the pulpit for our preaching through Sunday, September 3rd. Thanks be to God for all the people who have brought forth God's Holy Word from this pulpit for the past 167 years and for all who have led us in worship and praise of God for our 171 years of life together.

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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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In 1912, Ohio held a Constitutional Convention and made adaptations to our State Constitution. President Theodore Roosevelt came to Columbus and stayed at the home of our pastor, the Rev. Dr. Washington Gladden. He was here to speak at the convention and for changes which included – what was then known as – “The Initiative.”

Led by Progressive Republicans, who convinced Progressive Democrats and Independents to join the cause, the initiative was passed and became the law of our land in Ohio. Under this constitutional mandate, ordinary citizens could and still can fight for the control of monied interest that holds sway over elected officials. For 111 years Ohioans have had this power and used these rights judiciously. In fact, only 19 of the 71 Initiatives have passed in 111 years. That makes only 26% of all the initiatives brought forth to our ballot. My friend, Mike Curtin - like me a devoted lover of baseball – pointed out that since 1912 there have been 20 perfect games pitched in baseball in tens of thousands of games played. A perfect game is a “blue moon” event and voter approval of a citizen-initiated amendment is even rarer.

This past week, I read through all 50 pages of the changes brought to the ballot box in the past 111 years which were passed by our voters. I read all 71. Of the 71 brought for our vote by fellow citizens, among the 19 “perfect

game” resolutions that have passed, these resolutions have done the following: added support for our aged citizens (1933), abolished an excise tax on items purchased in stores (1936), prohibited money from taxes on cars and gasoline going to anything but infrastructure and highway repairs (1947), established a 30 day voter registration to election threshold for every election in Ohio (1977), passed three different decisions putting limits on elected officials serving in the US Senate (four terms) and all elected offices in Ohio, (1992), prohibited the wholesale taxes on soft drinks and nonalcoholic drinks (1994), declared marriage was only between a man and woman (2004) (which was overturned by the Supreme Court in 2015 – although there is a billboard on US 71 declaring it still); increased the minimum wage (2006), abolished smoking in public places (2006), established casinos in four cities – after three previous initiatives failed to do so (2009), protected state workers’ rights to organize and have union representation (2011), protected health care rights for all Ohioans (2011), a strong anti-special interest amendment to the Ohio Constitution which says that the power of the constitutional initiative SHALL NOT BE USED by anyone to create any special benefit. Voters closed and locked the door against special interests in our ballot votes in 2015. So, the assertion that another casino-style amendment could come down the pike is a falsehood (to use a kind word); we established rights for crime victims (2017) and of course in 1949, my favorite, permitted the manufacture and sale of oleomargarine – which makes me wonder if the State Fair figures are made of real butter or oleomargarine.

Right now, Conservative Republicans in our General Assembly, hand in hand with fundamentalist Christians of both Protestant and Catholic background – want to change this law. That is exactly what will happen on August 8th if we stand by and do nothing – and that is why you need to vote NO.

All of this will change if you vote “Yes” on August 8th. Against the better judgement of two former Republican governors and two former Democratic governors and apparently 58% of the polled electorate, the General Assembly wants us to support the requirement that every ballot initiative must have 60% of voters to pass a new constitutional amendment, instead of a simple

majority of 50% plus one. It also would do the following – It would require citizens who want to place an amendment on the ballot to collect signatures from at least 5% of voters from the last gubernatorial election in all 88 counties, instead of the current 44 and dangerously eliminate a 10-day cure period that allows citizens to replace any signatures deemed faulty by the secretary of state's office.

One of my friends put it this way – if Issue 1 were a football game, it would mean that even though Ohio State outscored Michigan 59-41, Michigan would still win. This is wrong – unless of course – you are a Michigan fan.

In addition, by all these standards – NONE of the initiatives brought forth in the past 111 years would have met three of these thresholds. In other words, we would have had NO citizens actions ever in Ohio.

I know what your thinking – what would Ohio have been like without Oleomargarine? Or care for our elderly? Or minimum wages increase? Or banning smoking in public places? And more?

Not only that, but it will also give this General Assembly free reign to do anything they like and establish any laws they see fit to establish (or not establish) with absolutely no checks and balances from the citizens of our state – proving once again that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Why is it so important that, after this General Assembly declared that we should never again hold a special statewide election in the summertime, that we now have go out and vote (with over 24 of our voting places closed to us on August 8th)? In a statement issued June 8th, Secretary of State Frank LaRose (who runs the elections in Ohio) said it plainly and clearly – as he telegraphs his voters to turn out – “this election is 100% about abortion!”

That's strange. Because abortion is nowhere mentioned in this ballot initiative we have been forced to vote on in the middle of summer! What Mr. LaRose really meant was that the initiative now set to appear on the 2023 November

ballot establishing guidelines for protection of women's bodies and protection for reproductive rights – which is favored by close to 59% of Ohioans and was set on the ballot with over ¾ million signatures – including many of ours – will be struck down by this deceptive, deceitful, devious and undemocratic initiative before us now.

From this pulpit in 1912, Dr. Gladden led the charge for The Constitutional Initiative. I might add that he along with others in Franklin County proposed 42 changes to our state constitution during the Constitutional Convention that year. Of the 42, 40 were accepted and put into our constitution. The only two that failed were the establishment of women's rights to vote and the end of death penalty or capital punishment in Ohio. Ohio could have led the nation in two wonderful ways, and we walked away from them. But we had many positive changes made.

I believe, our democracy is in crisis. We are faced with what I call a Democrisis. Too many politicians have sold out their votes and values to the highest bidder. Too many voters have given up in despair about the state of affairs in politics. The fewer the voters and votes, the worse the crisis becomes. The cynical politicians in the statehouse are counting on very few people showing up right now to vote on or before August 8th. If only a few show up, their anti-democratic, anti-American initiative will pass and forever doom any future initiative from coming before the citizens of our state.

I worry for my children and grandchildren living in a state which has stepped backwards and continues to back pedal in response to big money and special interests and abandons a commitment to serve the people of Ohio.

In February 1912, former Republican President, Theodore Roosevelt's spoke at the Ohio statehouse about the initiative. Roosevelt began by channeling Abraham Lincoln, who 53 years earlier made his first visit to the Ohio Statehouse (Sept. 16, 1859), where he reprised his "house divided cannot stand" remarks against slavery.

Roosevelt said, “With Lincoln, I hold that this country, with its institutions, belongs to the people who inhabit it. Whenever they shall grow weary of the existing government, they can exercise their constitutional right of amending it,”

He continued, “You are engaged in the fundamental work of self-government . . . framing a constitution (to allow) the people . . . to do justice and absolutely to rule themselves.”

Roosevelt warned of the “false constitutionalism” of conservatives beholden to monied interests. “The true Progressive, the Progressive of the Lincoln stamp, is the only true constitutionalist, the only real conservative. We are engaged in one of the great battles of the age-long contest waged against privilege on behalf of the common welfare. This country, as Lincoln said, belongs to the people.”

Lincoln, a keen student of history, knew of Alexander Hamilton’s warning, in Federalist 22, of requiring supermajority votes. “What at first sight may seem a remedy is, in reality, a poison,” Hamilton wrote. Empowering minority rule increases the likelihood of bribery and corruption, he warned.

Our supposed leaders in the statehouse allowed, and a number participated in, the largest bribery scandal in Ohio history to take place on their watch. They are not to be trusted. Many of them are either independently wealthy and/or are bankrolled by big money interests which are purposefully intended to dilute grass-roots power. Our Voting NO at the Ballot box on or before August 8th is one way to stop the big money interests.

Vote NO on this anti-democracy ballot issue. Join with two former Republican governors, two former Democratic governors and a host of other democracy loving Ohioans to end this madness. Join with millions of other Ohioans to keep in place the power of the ballot initiative process – 50% plus one vote – for years to come.

Before I sit down, I need to address those who are concerned about me bringing politics into the pulpit. It would be nice if we lived in a world which could easily and comfortably compartmentalize faith and life; politics and spirituality – but we have never lived in such a world, and we never will. Our challenge – is rather – to find the balance we need to thrive in the world in which we do live. Sometimes that means standing up, speaking out and acting when something is wrong and what I have tried to say today is that I believe with all my heart that the process and the content of this ballot initiative is wrong. You may disagree with me. I look forward to further conversations if that is the case. But, in the meantime, we all need to step up and say either Yes or No to the initiative presented to us by the Ohio General Assembly. Sitting on the sidelines and doing absolutely nothing is not the answer and it never will be. Democracy must not be mocked.

In this series on the New Social Gospel, I will point out that Jesus was just talking about the world in which we live in the parables we heard today. We tend to spiritualize the parables by referring to “the Kingdom of Heaven.” The actual translation from the Aramaic is “the Empire of Heaven.” Jesus is juxtaposing the Roman Empire to God’s Empire of Heaven. He points out that dull hearts and minds get sucked into the empires of earth. God is trying to establish a just and equitable empire – as the Lord’s Prayer says – on earth as in heaven. Our God is not so heavenly minded that God is no earthly good – nor does God want us to be. We have to plant our small seeds of hope and watch them grow. Please note that Jesus links the Empire of God to a woman at work in her kitchen – and more. Jesus is genuinely concerned that the supposed leaders of the people are completely out of touch with the people and with God. Jesus wants the folks who are soaking in the parables to be reflections of God’s reign on earth – which is coming down from heaven to bring new hope. Each of the parables point to new ways of establishing such hope. I look forward to the weeks ahead as we journey deeply into the new social gospel. Thanks be to God. Amen.

