

# **“Labor, Love, Friendship and the New Social Gospel”**

Exodus 3:1-15; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

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

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September 3, 2023

From the Pulpit

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# “Labor, Love, Friendship and the New Social Gospel”

Exodus 3:1-15; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, First Congregational UCC, Columbus, Ohio, September 3, 2023, Labor Day Sunday and 14th Sunday after Pentecost, dedicated to my brother Paul Ahrens, to Jim Lowe, to Tim Barga and all who organize and fight for workers’ rights and always to the glory of God!

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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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With a bush that burns but is not burned up; a love that is genuine and good; and the way of the cross for Jesus and his disciples, our texts today show the pivot points of faith in God. Moses is in Midian; Paul is in prison. Jesus is in Galilee when God inspires each one to see what really matters as leaders of faith. God calls each of them into a deep prophetic imagination and seeing that God will prevail in ways that people cannot imagine.

God is trying to get Moses to move from the sheep herds in a rural and far away land to go and set God’s people free from slavery in the heart of darkness ruled by Pharaoh in Egypt. Speaking from a “burning bush” – a bush that appears to be ablaze with fire and yet doesn’t get burned – the still speaking God of Israel proclaims that the cries of suffering, misery and pain have been heard. Moses will be their liberator and bring them to the Promised Land. Moses is not as sure as God is about the prospect of this

happening. But, God says, “you can do it!” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “You say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Exodus 3:14). Just like that, Moses is commissioned to go and do justice. He is commanded to be the liberator of his people.

Freedom looks easier when you are alone in the desert with a herd of sheep, a burning bush and rather vague instructions from God than when you are face to face with Pharaoh in the metropolis of pain and persecution. Nevertheless, Moses gets up and goes on his assignment of liberation from oppression and the unjust labor known as slavery.

As hard as it is to prophecy deliverance from a desert, how do you free people from waywardness when you are a prisoner? Paul works with the only tools he has to free his people while he himself is a prisoner. He knows that the heart and mind; the soul and the spirit can never be shackled and tortured if they are free – if a person has placed his or her life in the hands of God.

Right now, I need you to use your prophetic imagination. Imagine for a moment, you are in a dark, damp, prison cell. You have a piece of paper; a quill pen and you are alone with God and with your thoughts – and with rats and other prisoners. Listen to these words, as they are brought home by Eugene Peterson in *The Message* – from Paul to each of us today. Close your eyes for a moment and listen to these words – written 2,000 years ago and now interpreted for each one of us.

*8-10 Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle. 11-13 Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality. 14-16 Bless your enemies, no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody. 17-19 Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist*

*on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it."*<sup>20-21</sup> *Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good (Romans 12:8-21).*

Can you see yourself as a liberator too – having faith when faced with a bush that burns but doesn't? Listening to the voice of God telling you to leave your sheep, your wife, your children, your family and go on a virtual mission of death to free millions who are in slavery? (Is it any wonder that Harriet Tubman, the great conductor of the Underground Railroad was called "Moses"?)

Can you see yourself believing in the power of God to love so completely that your enemy becomes the person you love most of all? That the one you have been persecuted by and imprisoned by becomes the source of your genuine love?

Now, can you see yourself – like Jesus – knowing you will be beaten to near death and only then hung from a tree in the shape of a cross to die there in the broiling sun with criminals on either side – turning toward this fate as your feet pivot from lakeside life to urban cruelty and crucifixion?

That is what Matthew's Gospel is telling us. Matthew 16:21-28 is THE pivot point in the gospel where Jesus gets real with his disciples. No more strolls by the Lake far from the harsh, crucifying realities of Capitol city. No more confrontations with a handful of true believing Pharisees on the edge of the empire (all the while thinking this is as bad as it gets). No more teaching and proclaiming of God's holy word; no more healing and hugging of the children and the crowds in rural Palestine. It is time to face your destiny. It is time to face the spit, the spears, the reviling and the revelation of your true Messianic destiny.

Is it any wonder that heroes of our stories today might be swept away by angst? By the sober reality of real life tempered by the social realities of their times? We live in times when people bet on everything. Who among you would place a bet on Moses, Paul or Jesus to prevail against the circumstances and odds they are facing? Probably the same ones among you who bet yesterday that Indiana would beat Ohio State in Bloomington. Let's be honest – that would be none of you.

And yet, our faith and our life are built on the overcoming of odds, the overcoming of death. Each of us knows the names of Moses, Paul and Jesus. None of us knows the names of the other shepherds with Moses that day. None of us knows the name of Paul's cell mate. Not one of us knows the names of the children, women and men who heard Jesus speak as he pivoted to Jerusalem and turned his eyes to death on a cross.

If you and I are to live the New Social Gospel for today, we need to know the **TEXT**. We need to place our faith, hope and LOVE in the people who point us to God and not to all the bets and wagers placed against God.

We also need to know the **CONTEXT** of our times. We need to get real and get informed with the social and political realities of the world in which we live. This Labor Day, as we welcome our sisters and brothers from the **Mid-Ohio Workers Association** who defend and protect Central Ohio's lowest-paid workers – who do significant and meaningful work but are denied access to traditional forms of organizing via collective bargaining, we need to hear and absorb the stories of the men and women who are witnesses for justice in our city.

They fight every day for the lowest-paid worker – believing that that if that person is safe and cared for – then everyone is safe. We also have welcome One Fair Wage into our building to organize and plan for a November 2024 Ballot Initiative calling for a Living Wage for Every Ohioan. Every day they organize for a better future for working people in Ohio.

Our context is stark. The gap between America's richest and poorest continues to expand. **The wealth gap between America's richest and poorer families more than doubled from 1989 to 2016**, according to a 2020 report by the Pew Research Center. Another way of measuring inequality is to look at household wealth, also known as net worth, or the value of assets owned by a family, such as a home or a savings account, minus outstanding debt, such as a mortgage or student loan.

In 1989, the richest 5% of families had 114 times as much wealth as families in the second quintile (one tier above the lowest), at the median \$2.3 million compared with \$20,300. By 2016, the top 5% held 248 times as much wealth at the median. (The median wealth of the poorest 20% is either zero or negative in most years Pew Research examined.)

The richest families are also the only ones whose wealth increased in the years after the start of the Great Recession. From 2007 to 2016, the median net worth of the top 20% increased 13%, to \$1.2 million. For the top 5%, it increased by 4%, to \$4.8 million. In contrast, the median net worth of families in lower tiers of wealth decreased by at least 20%. Families in the second-lowest fifth experienced a 39% loss (from \$32,100 in 2007 to \$19,500 in 2016) – Pew Research Center Report, February 7, 2020.

The gap has grown even more in the three years since this report.

Finally, you and I – as we practice our prophetic imagination and look to change the wrongs in this world that we see – need to embrace the **RELATIONSHIPS** we have with God and with one another.

Just like Jesus and Moses, we must pivot and face the truth of our times trusting that God will deliver us as we seek justice for all. Like Paul, we must step out of embattled and imprisoned mindsets and realities and overcome evil with good. We must love in spite of all that comes at us that pushes us to hate. Hate never wins. Love always Wins.

As we come to Christ's table of love and justice, we need to remember not only him – but all those he stood for and stands for still. We need to be witnesses for the New Social Gospel in this day and our age. Like Moses, Paul and Jesus, we need to make choices to stand with people who have been left out and left behind; those who are forgotten and forsaken. We need to be witnesses of love and justice. Let's soak in these truths of the Gospel. We are called every day in every way to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. Amen.