

“27 Women and 15 Men”

Exodus 16;2-15; Philippians 1:16-30; Matthew 20:1-16

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September 24, 2023

From the Pulpit

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“Forgive 77 Times or 490 Times – 27 Women and 15 Men”

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 24, 2023, Proper 20, dedicated to David Mailer and all who did research for this project, to James and Leslie who join in our membership today and to the 27 women and 15 men and their children who together founded Third Presbyterian, later First Congregational Church on September 26, 1852, and always to the glory of God!

42 is a number made forever memorable by Jackie Robinson. Each year on April 15th everyone everywhere in baseball wears 42 on every team at each level of play. And, that number is not allowed to be on any jersey for any team any other day of the year. 42 is Sacred in Baseball.

42 is also sacred for us. 42 is the number of people who started our congregation. The first 27 women and 15 men who founded First Church were amazing people. They were titans and “temperers of tools.” They were homemakers and one was the 11th Mayor of Columbus. They were railroad engineers, office clerks, bankers and newspaper men. They were farmers, horticulturalists and temperance movement leaders. They were jewelers and grocers. They were lawyers, doctors and authors. Two of them founded the Columbus Museum of Art and the Columbus College of Art and Design.

One founded Mt. Carmel Hospital (later Grant Hospital) and Children's Hospital inspired by our forebearers – were founded by later members of First Church. Some were born in Ireland and England, some came from families who founded Worthington and parts of Ohio, and some had just arrived from Massachusetts, Connecticut and Missouri.

They were young and older (62 was the oldest); rich and poor; 64% were women and 36% were men. By my counts they brought at least 15 children between the age of newborn to teens. They would produce many more.

They were all amazing. They were all talented. They were all faithful to the work of social justice. They were all convicted with the call of Jesus Christ to serve the least of these – particularly African American sisters and brothers who were enslaved and needed to be free – forever.

Thanks to the hard work of one of our members and archivists, David Mailer, we have garnered information on 26 of our 42 members. He turned to people at The Ohio History Connection, the Columbus Public Library and more. Historians all over Columbus were helping us. We will share more with all you as the picture becomes more complete. For today, I hope and pray, I may do a little bit of justice to the mighty 27 women and 15 men who started this congregation. Please join me in prayer.

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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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On this actual day, Friday, September 24, 1852, 42 people transferred membership from Second Presbyterian Church to form Third Presbyterian Church. 171 years ago, today, our congregation’s history began in hearts and minds of faithful dissent. By the late 1840s, a growing movement of Christian abolitionists was gaining strength in the struggle against slavery. Abolitionist Christians could no longer abide in the union of Christian faith and a nation which embraced – in any way – the existence of slaves and slave-owners.

In Columbus, in 1852, “a cluster of believers” – as they called themselves – decided that they were Congregationalists at heart, and they parted amicably with Second Presbyterian Church. The members of Second Presbyterian Church sent them off with this benediction:

“In view of the importance of this occasion, we add our expression of sympathy with those who leave us, and an earnest desire that the great Head of the Church may be with them and help them. May He make them a church of His own, to glorify Him and promote His Kingdom in the world. May those who remain and those who go, when toil is here finished, meet in heaven, and together form a part of the church triumphant there.”

With a \$1,000 loan (the equivalent of \$39,362.31 in today’s dollars) provided by their siblings from Second Presbyterian, our newly formed church purchased a lot on the northeast corner of Third Street and Lynn Alley (where the entrance to the parking garage at the Renaissance Hotel is today). There a frame chapel was erected.

A formal call was extended to The Rev. William H. Marble. Under the Rev. William Marble's earnest and integral leadership, the chapel was dedicated, and the congregation first worshiped in their new chapel on Sunday, September 26, 1852, as the 27 women and 15 men gathered to praise God and turn their resistance to slavery into faith in action. They officially signed the charter of organization on Wednesday, September 29, 1852.

By 1856, the church was fittingly renamed The First Congregational Church, Columbus. And for Tom Brownfield and all our Welch-heritage members, I have to add, there was a Congregational Church in town already – the Welch Congregational Church. So, our Forebearers went over to them and asked if they would like to claim the name of “First Congregational.” The Welch declined –happy with their name. So, it was decided.

With church membership steadily increasing, First Church entertained plans for a more spacious building. First Church followed the admonition of Henry C. Bowen, a leading Abolitionist and Congregationalist who said, *“Buy a lot facing your State House and build a good building. Make them see that you are there. The bravest policy is the best.”* They did just that. They purchased land directly across from the State House in 1856 on the north side of Broad Street and began to build their church under the leadership of their new pastor, The Rev. J.M. Steele.

Only five months into his pastorate, the young and energetic Rev. Steele set out for New York City to raise \$7,000 for the Norman-style building. Tragically, he contracted smallpox during the pursuit and died shortly thereafter. Grieving their loss, the brave little congregation pressed ahead and on December 23, 1857, they dedicated their new building at 74 East Broad Street. That became the location of First Church for 74 years until we opened this building at 444 East Broad Street 89 years ago – in December 1931.

First Congregational Church was the first White Abolitionist Church in Columbus. As early Christian Abolitionists, we joined with several other Black congregations – including Second Baptist Church, under the leadership

of the Rev. James Preston Poindexter (1849-1898) – to free slaves and support the Underground Railroad. Second Baptist was right behind First Church on Gay Street (our back doors met in Lynn Alley). Our fellowship in those early years was tied closely to our sister Black abolitionist congregations. Together we formed the first interracial work for justice in Columbus' history. Our origin story is a remarkable story of determination and commitment to racial justice.

I have often wondered what happened on the first day of First Church (then Third Presbyterian Church). We know there were 42 charter members – 27 women and 15 men. Here are their names and the alphabetical order by which they signed the book (as best as I can interpret the spelling of their names): Mrs. Amelia Adams, Mr. Thomas S. Baldwin, Mrs. Matilda A. Baldwin, Mr. Michael B. Bateham, Mrs. Josephine C. Bateham, Mrs. Elisa Birgraft, Mrs. Eleona Edgar, Mrs. Sarah Ann Edwards, Mr. Charles H. Goss, Mrs. Sarah Goss, Mr. Andrew Gunning, Mrs. Mary M. Gunning, Dr. J. C. Hamilton, Mrs. Rachel H. Hamilton, Rev. Warren Jenkins, Mrs. Mary M. Jenkins, Mr. Matthew Long, Mrs. Mary Long, Mrs. AEB McGrary, Mrs. Mary E. Osgood, Mr. George Otscott, Mrs. Elizabeth Otscott, Miss Dana C. Pearson, Mrs. Phebe D. Rankin, Mrs. Mary Jane Reed, Mr. LL Rice, Mrs. Sarah Rice, Miss Elizabeth Ridgeway, Mrs. Mary Searles, Mr. Francis C. Sessions, Mrs. Mary J. Sessions, Mrs. Lydia C. Stanton, Mr. Samuel B. Stanton, Mrs. A.E. Stricklen, Mrs. Elizabeth Tuttle, Mr. James R. Tuttle, Mr. C. Wahl, Mrs. Elizabeth Wahl, Miss Mary White, Mrs. Jane Wilkins, Mr. Abram Alvin Wright and Mrs. Mary A. Wright.

Who were these people? What were their stories? How did they get to America? How did they get to Ohio? What work did they do? How many children did they have? What became of them in the years that followed? What drove them to do the right thing for racial justice, for social justice?

We learned a few things about the 27 women and 15 men – mostly from obituaries. The oldest was 62 and the youngest was 17 when they signed the

book. We know many of them lived long lives and a good number stayed at First Church well into the years of Washington Gladden and some beyond Gladden. Most died in Ohio and are buried here, but some are buried in Hawaii and other states. The longer they lived the better chance we had to find information on them. I will share parts of what we know.

Like a hearty stew, these people are deep and rich. So are the treasured truths we found out about them. I will start from the least amount of information to the most.

Here we go:

Abram Alvin Wright was a “Temperer of Tools” (someone who makes the tools work) – **31 when he founded First Church**, who was born in 1821 in Massachusetts. **Mary A. Wright** was his wife – also born in Massachusetts in 1828 – **24 when she founded First Church**. **Sarah Ann Edwards** (1825-1903) is listed as one of our first female members – **27 when she founded First Church**. Sarah A. Rainer Edwards was married to Stephen Sturgis Edwards (1819-1899) and they were married in 1843. Both are buried in Green Lawn Cemetery. Sarah’s mother is listed as **Mrs. Mary Searles** (1791-1881) – **61 years old when she founded First Church**. **Elizabeth Tuttle** – **62 when she founded First Church**. She was the mother of **James R. Tuttle** who was a **30-year-old lawyer when he founded First Church**. They both came from New Jersey where James was born.

Lewis L. Rice was a **50-year-old when he founded First Church**. He was a newspaper editor and publisher of The Ohio American – an abolitionist newspaper. He founded a Cleveland paper called The Cleveland Daily Gazette. He became an attorney and served as the private secretary for Ohio Governor Salmon P. Chase (who almost became president of the United States), and then served in the cabinet of Abraham Lincoln. After Rice edited The Lorain County News during the Civil War, he moved to Columbus where he served as Superintendent of Public Printing for the State of Ohio during the next twelve years. He went on to be editor and publisher for the Painesville Telegraph.

Sarah Coleman Rice was 52 when she founded First Church. We do not have information on her other than she was born in Middlefield, Massachusetts and died in Oberlin at the age of 77. She was mother of two children, Mary and William who were 14 and 11 when we began.

Andrew Gunning was 19 when he founded First Church. He was a railroad laborer and engineer. Born in Ireland, he was married to an Irish-born woman, **Mary M. Cook Gunning** who was 17 when she founded First Church, the youngest of our founders and a homemaker when the church was founded. He lived to 79 and she lived to 85.

Matthew C. Long was a merchant and 32 when he founded First Church and his wife, **Hannah Mary “Mary” Tuttle Long** was 32 when she founded First Church. Their three children, William 6, Margaret 4, and Jacob was one when they started. Matthew was actually born in Columbus – Mary was born in New Jersey.

At the age of eleven years Matthew entered the treasurer’s office of Franklin County, and for six years was deputy county treasurer and collector under his father, spending his falls, winters and springs in the office and his summers in school. For seven and a half years he was a clerk in the bookstore of Whiting & Huntington in Columbus, afterward for two years in the same business and at the same place, under the store name of Randall, Aston & Long. Always having a desire to be a farmer and his health failing him, he sold his interest in the store and purchased a farm in Licking County, and for ten years followed agricultural pursuits on the farm. He eventually moved to Iowa where he was extraordinarily successful in farming, business and politics. He was a state senator. Then on to Southern California, back to Indiana and finally Missouri. He also served as President of Wabash College in Indiana. He and Mary both lived into their mid-80s and are buried in Marshfield, Missouri. Long Street is named for Matthew Long.

Rev. Warren Jenkins was a 48-year-old clergyman when he founded First Church. He was also a merchant, newspaper man and broker who had served

as Columbus' 11th mayor in the 1830s. His first wife, Marion, was mother of four of his children before her death in 1849, and then married **Mary M. Gardner Jenkins** – his second wife who was **46 when founded First Church** and together, they had five more children. She was listed as “Keeping house” when they began.

Dr. John Waterman Hamilton was a **29-year-old physician** married to **26-year-old, Rachel Warden Hamilton** when they founded **First Church**. Together they had six children. Dr. Hamilton's obituary painted the portrait of an absolutely beautiful man and an accomplished surgeon who performed some major surgical procedures never done before his time. It appears that Rachel was dedicated to raising her six children. There is little more we found on her.

Sarah “Sally” Cheever Goss was **33 when she founded First Church**. She was married to **Charles Henry Goss** who was a clerk and **35 when he founded First Church**. They had six children. **Lydia G. Conrad Stanton** was **28-year-old homemaker** married to **Samuel Billings Stanton**, was a merchant and grocer, and a **43-year-old when they founded First Church**. They had five children. **Thomas S. Baldwin** was a **31-year-old** jeweler when he and **Matilda Ann Pierson Baldwin**, at **32, founded First Church**. They had one son, Arthur. I might add that Dr. James Fairchild Baldwin, a later member of First Church, founded Grant Hospital in 1900. I am not sure what relationship there was, if any.

Finally, I come to the Batehams and the Sessions. **Michael Boyd Bateham** was a horticulturalist, farmer and entrepreneur, and was one of the most famous agricultural leaders of the mid to late 19th century in Ohio. He became the first Secretary of Agriculture in Ohio. His wife, **Josephine Abiah (Penfield) Cushman Bateham** was well known as the national leader of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. He was **39-year-old and she was 23 at our founding**. They had seven children.

As for **Francis and Mary Sessions**, it is hard to begin. We do not have the Columbus Museum of Art and Columbus College of Art and Design if it is not for these two titans of the arts. They had no children and spent their lives investing in Columbus, Ohio. Francis was successful as he was the only child of Orange and Mary Johnson – two founders of Worthington, Ohio. Orange had a remarkably successful comb factory and lots of land. The Orange Johnson House is still standing in Worthington.

At the time of Mary's death in 1919, she and Francis had close to \$1.5 million in assets which were given back to this community to serve the poor through the YWCA and YMCA, and support the arts. It would be equivalent to a gift of \$26,590,800 in today's money. They also gave their mansion – which was next door. It was given to be an art museum or use of the land for such. In 1929 the Art Museum was started, and the mansion torn down. This was the inspiration to build our gothic cathedral at the same time.

The entrance to the Sessions' home was saved and can be seen at Bainton Hall next door today – where the art school started, and the offices of The Columbus Museum of Art remain today. The Sessions wealth came from Mary's parents' comb factory, land that her parents and her husband's parents owned, and Mr. Sessions' job with the Jeffrey Company.

There is so much more to say about our founders. Particularly the final four. I will add two final things about Mary and Francis. During the Civil War he was a leading Sanitation Engineer. He would go the battle sites and establish the safest, most sanitary care for the soldiers, especially the wounded and dying. Mary went to the Inauguration of William Henry Harrison and couldn't find a room anywhere in Washington. She ended up rooming with Eliza Hamilton, the widow of Alexander Hamilton. These multiple points of contact are fascinating.

62,455 days have passed since the first day of First Church. So much has changed. But four things remain the same. First, we have the communion table which survived all the way to our present moment. It connects us

sacramentally and spiritually with our 42 forebearers. Second, we have God's Word as our constant companion that has been with us for than 5784 years and counting. We are inspired to follow God's Word still today – as our forebearers in faith were 62,455 days ago on the day this congregation was born. Third, we share their deep call to racial justice and being antiracists – whose expression was so powerfully demonstrated by starting our congregation. Fourth, we share the Covenant they gave us that day.

Our Church's covenant has been our Covenant for 171. It is on the inside cover of worship bulletin today. I invite you to find it and read along –

We covenant with the Lord Jesus Christ and one another and bind ourselves in presence of God to live together in all God's ways as revealed to us by the Holy Spirit and holy scripture. The church acknowledges that all members have the right of individual interpretation of the principles of the Christian faith and respects them in their honest convictions. In accordance with the teaching of our Lord, the church recognizes two sacraments: Baptism and Holy Communion.

These are radical words – written 171 years ago – for us to live by today.

Following this covenant leads us to trust that God is still speaking. It means we have to trust ourselves enough to challenge what we believe is wrong and embrace what we know is right.

Today, we pause to give thanks to God for the Legacy of our First Church founders in faith who had the courage and vision to create our congregation and then trusted God, and Jesus and Holy Spirit to guide them forward. Like the Exodus story, we can only imagine the hardships and joys they encountered. Like the letter of Paul to the church at Philippi, we pray that we can continue to carry forth their encouragement, their love, their compassion and sympathy, their humility in looking out for the interests of others and their counting on Jesus to lead them to be antiracists and stop the hemorrhaging hate and abuse of native people and African Americans. Like Jesus, in Matthew's parable, we are called to be generous with all the gifts that God has given us.

I pray today that we remember and celebrate with gratitude and joy the 27 women and 15 men who had the vision and courage to follow their convictions and create a church home for us here in the heart of the Ohio, in the heart of Columbus, in the heart and the love of Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God for each one of them.

Thanks be to God for each one of you. Amen.