

“Generous Communities in Community”

Exodus 33:12-23, I Corinthians 12:12-27; Matthew 22:15-22

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens
Senior Minister

October 22, 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>

“Generous Communities in Community”

Exodus 33:12-23, I Corinthians 12:12-27; Matthew 22:15-22

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 22, 2023, 21st Sunday after Pentecost, dedicated to Retired Brig. General Mark Arnold and the work of medical relief for Ukraine, for the choirs and people of Ukraine who gathered in our sanctuary last night, for Sean and Sarah Duesing as they begin their life together, in memory of Rick Henderson who entered eternal life on Friday, October 20, and for Lourdes as she grieves the love of her life, for my granddaughter, Hazel Elizabeth Sitler Stadie who turns one year old today 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.*

+++++

The musical “Wicked” is the story of two unlikely friends – Elphaba and Glinda – who most of us know from their titles in the Wizard of Oz – The Wicked Witch of the West and Glinda the Good Witch. The musical follows their friendship as it struggles through their opposing personalities, viewpoints, same love interest, reactions to the Wonderful Wizard’s corrupt government, and, ultimately, Elphaba’s fall from grace.

As the musical ends, the second to last song is entitled, “For Good.” Shared with me years ago by Grace Glaros, it is a song that has shaped me and

touched my life deeply. It is a song that delivered me through many difficult days and nights. I am sure many of you know the song. I will share the lyrics to the opening – sung by Glinda the Good:

*I've heard it said That people come into our lives for a reason,
Bringing something we must learn, And we are led,
To those who help us most to grow,
If we let them, And we help them in return.
Well, I don't know if I believe that's true,
But I know I'm who I am today Because I knew you:
Like a comet pulled from orbit, As it passes a sun
Like a stream that meets a boulder
Halfway through the wood
Who can say if I've been changed for the better?
But because I knew you
I have been changed for good.*

These words and those that follow, bringing the two seemingly dispirit women together as friends reach to the heart of love in community. Love often looks and feels knocked from its mourning, but it changes us – for good. Through conflict and struggle, people are united in new ways. I felt that unity in the spirit last night, receiving blessing upon blessing of Ukrainian music from voices of people who never would have found each other, been brought together, and even made music together if it were not for the horrible war wrought by the evil of Vladimir Putin. Knit together by trauma as a result of being forced into exile as refugees, brought to this new land, this new city, children and adults found each other – and their lives have been changed – for good.

Church is like that too. We are drawn together for some reason – call it destiny, call it fate, call it the movement of the Holy Spirit, but look around you – you are in the midst of a community you did not create a community that you have blessed by your presence, a community that has changed you for good – a community you have changed for good – as well.

Albert Einstein wrote these words years ago: *“Strange is our situation here upon the earth. Each of us comes for a short visit, not knowing why, yet sometimes seeming to divine a purpose. From the standpoint of daily life, however, there is one thing we do know; that we are here for the sake of others; above all, for those on whose smile and well-being our own happiness depends; and also, for the countless unknown souls with whose fate we are connected by a bond of sympathy. Many times a day I realize how much my own outer and inner life is built upon the labors of others, both living and dead, and how earnestly I must exert myself in order to give in return as much as I have received and am still receiving”* (Day By Day, Rabbi Chaim Stern, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 1998, pp. 101-102).

We are knit together in community in ways we cannot imagine but we can celebrate. Last week, during his Stewardship Moment, Sheldon Taft talked about the communities in community. In our case, the communities in community are the places we specially and Especially connect within the whole body of Christ known as First Congregational United Church of Christ. Some of these communities in community are more obvious than others – like the choir (which has communities within that community – in sections and special friendships), the Deacons, the Trustees, the Stephen Ministers, the Care Ministry Team, House and Grounds, Trustees, fellowship groups and classes – such as the Bible Study Class and the Adult Education classes, youth group, youth mission group, the staff, various boards, working groups, committees, task forces, The Church Council, Liver and Onions fellowship group, BREAD, and many more connections – communities within the community. Within each of these parts, we form even closer bonds with some people. Our community grows and strengthens through these bonds and connections we form.

Something else happens. We can either become more generous because of the bond we share, or we can become less generous. While the ideal is always greater generosity of spirit, of giving, of financial nurturance of the whole, of time and talents shared – out of the abundant joy we feel in relationships – sometimes our communities can become less connected and less empowered.

Sometimes the bonds that hold us together, can pull a community apart from others.

It is at the stress points or the joints where the body is held together. Here is where I find the Apostle Paul so helpful. In I Corinthians 12, he speaks of the Spirit of God which binds us together. In chapter 13 he will address the Love of God in Christ and our love for one another as the perfect binding compound in community. But, here, in Chapter 12:12-27, Paul speaks of our “body parts.”

At least 350 years before Paul, Plato drew his own picture of the body and parts. The head was the citadel, the neck was the Isthmus between the head and the body; the heart was the fountain of the body; the pores the lanes of the body, the veins were the canals of the body.

To Paul the Church is The Body of Christ. In Christ, all the diverse parts find their unity. As such, Christ has no hands but our hands to do his work. He has not feet but our feet to go out into the world and care for others. He has no voice but our voice to tell people how he taught and healed; how he laid down his life for us and rose up from death – overcoming the end to bring a new beginning. He has no help but our help to lead people forward in faith to a better way.

Each one of us is a nerve, a sinew, a muscle, a finger, a toe, an eye, an ear, a nose, an arm, a leg – a heart - in the body of Christ. Each one of our little communities reflects the totality of Christ in its entirety. When our youth are in mission, they represent us. When each of us leave this cathedral of hope each week, we are the body of Christ spreading good news to others about his grace, his healing power, his love for all.

And we come to realize as giving body parts, as generous communities in the community that several things are true about the body of Christ we know as First Church. A body is healthy and productive when each part is functioning perfectly. The parts of the body cannot covet each other and become useless if

they are jealous of each other – (the eye can't be the hand; the ear can't be the foot).

We need each other. Every single one of us needs the other. We don't live in isolation. Each one of us needs the work of the other one to succeed.

We must respect each other. In the body, there is no question of relative importance. If any limb or organ fails to function, the whole body is thrown out of gear. I remember years ago, when my grandmother had a fall and broke her hip (for the second time, a second hip). The doctor said, the fall didn't cause the break. Her hip broke because of years of bone deterioration and then she fell. Bone density was the issue – not tripping or falling. Each function, each part must respect the other for the body to truly work.

We need to sympathize with each other. If one part of the body suffers, if one member of the body dies, we all lose a part of who we are. Betsy Zahn, Pat Groseck and now Rick Henderson have died within only a few weeks. Shortly before that, Jenkins Smith died – and the list goes on and we move through our life together. We are connected to each one of them – saints in glory now. Our body – the body of Christ – has lost large with the passing of these beloved ones. We are more than individuals. We are more than our family units. We are the Church – the body of Christ.

So let us reflect the light, life, and love of Christ to others. Like him, let us be generous in sharing our resources – our very lives. Like him, let us be kind to everyone. Like him, let us be extravagantly loving. In each of our communities within the community known as First Church, let us be givers not takers. Let us be the best we can be as his body – here on the corner of Cleveland and Broad.

Being generous, kind and loving will change us. It will change us FOR GOOD. Amen.

