

Introducing the United Church of Christ

I Corinthians 12: 17 – 31 and the Preamble to the UCC Constitution

A sermon preached by Rev. Wendy Vander Hart, Association Conference Minister

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Grace and peace be to you from Jesus Christ the head of the church. I bring you greetings, blessings and all manner of good wishes from the 70 churches of the Metropolitan Boston Association of MA Conference, UCC.

I want to thank Rev. Jenny and church leaders for the invitation to be here, preach and be present with you today. It is a blessing to be in this space to worship God and lift up our covenant connections as church. Bless you Rev. Jenny as you engage in ministry for this season. Bless you Church in the ministries you fulfill and for the ways you live the love and justice of Jesus in this community and beyond.

I celebrate who you are in the present and I am praying for your future. Before we move fully into this sermon, would you help me celebrate who you are in the present by thanking someone next to you for being part of this ministry? Reach out to someone and say “thanks for being part of this ministry!”

If you are a visitor today, or a long-standing participant, I hope you will find this a provocative sermon for your personal life. But overall these words are posed to the whole of you, church.

As part of this work of transition in pastoral leadership, you are looking at your roots as a congregation. Being dually aligned with the Unitarian Universalist and United Church of Christ traditions, I appreciate this opportunity to address the UCC side of your shared life. And just to be clear, I will be speaking from a United Church of Christ perspective and hope my words are received as invitational of conversation rather than prescriptive of belief and consent.

This is a tall order to speak to the breadth of the United Church of Christ in one sermon! I could go with a historical treatise because history does matter. I could go the way of personal testimony and how the United Church of Christ changed my life, and I will do a little bit of that. I could do a theological survey and map the changes over time from our reformed Protestant roots. I could examine the synergy of the ecumenical movement and its embodiment in the endgame of the United Church of Christ which would be to put Christian denominationalism out of business. I could notate all of our “firsts” as a denomination in the United States such as the first to ordain a black person, ordain a woman, ordain a gay man to ministry.

But I think where I want to go today is to name the gifts the United Church of Christ has to offer the world and hopefully therein you will find some sense of why your forbears chose to embrace this body as its own.

The first gift – congregationalism. The words I chose from the Bible are drawn from a letter written to a new church start founded by the apostle Paul. As he went off to other places to plant new churches, word got back to him that the church folk in Corinth were squabbling with each other about where people were sitting at the communion table and who was eating more than their fair share. In responding to what has trickled back to him, Paul uses an image of the body to address these issues and provide us 2000 years later with a beautiful image of the church – the body gathered in Jesus’ name.

The interdependent image of the body was not a new image for that time and place, but Paul twisted the use of the body for a different purpose. Where in the Roman world, (especially among politicians) the image of the body had been used to reinforce who was the head, and that the other members served that head to strengthen hierarchy, Paul wrote of the body with an emphasis on the unity of all parts as essential for the wholeness of the body.

Pauls’ words to the church at Corinth meant that contrary to accepted opinion of the times, the head could not lord it over any other part of the body – all had equal and important parts to play for a body to exist at all. In other words – this is the first text that asserts congregational governance! Our United Church of Christ ancestors believed that the body of Christ- the church- was constituted not when

the pastor was in place preaching and teaching but when the body was gathered discerning the movement of the Holy Spirit.

And on this bedrock belief of the power of a gathered body, congregational practices seeped into the founding of our democracy and who we are as a nation today. Even as we imperfectly practice these ideals in our political government, the idea that each part working together makes us whole, is a gift to the world.

The second gift of the United Church of Christ to the world is the practice of testimony. There is much in our Preamble to the UCC constitution reading that could be unpacked in a sermon series, however I want to lift out two ideas therein that focus on the phrase – “it is the responsibility of each generation to make this faith its own.” The United Church of Christ, even as it stands on the foundations of ancient creeds, does *not* make a practice of demanding tests of faith. Rather we regularly invite and practice testimony to faith. In so doing, we rehearse together making this faith our own. It is much like the practice of your beloved covenant – by stating together “In the love of truth and in the spirit of Jesus, We unite for the worship of God and the service of all” – there is no expectation of agreement on who Jesus is – but there is opportunity to share how living the spirit of Jesus informs who you are and how you move in the world.

Another idea to lift out of the Preamble is the responsibility to make this faith our own- not bowing to tradition for tradition sake. We need to keep listening and enliven this faith for a new day. Tradition is important but tradition for tradition sake is not life-giving or as Jaroslav Pelikan put it, “Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”

This past week I was blessed to attend a 310 year-old tradition of UCC clergy gathering for the General Association meeting in CT. The title of it was “Ancient Gifts, New Gatherings.” We were led by one of my favorite UUA leaders, Rev. Sue Phillips. She and her co-leader Angie Thurston invited us to look at applying ancient practice to emerging practices. Through the lens of where and how new generations gather they invited us to consider re-mixing our traditions for the emerging world. They posited that fundamental human needs have not changed over time however our practices have not kept up. They challenged us to become spiritual technologists – to find the sweet spot of maintaining core values/ancient gifts but delivering them in new ways. Our charge was to give up what is not working and say yes to what is! I heard in this another version of - It is the responsibility of each generation to make this faith its own...

The third gift- the core values of the United Church of Christ expressed as “extravagant welcome, continuing testimony and changing lives” are spiritual food for a generation seeking meaning. Here is where I want to share some personal testimony in how the United Church of Christ changed my life.

I am a preacher’s kid born to a Reformed Church in America Pastor father and Music Director mother. I never sat with my parents in church. By high school I was the President of the adult Supper Club and so steeped in church it was hard to understand why my friends also did not have church at the center of their lives. I went to a Reformed Church in America college and in my junior year, after settling on religion as a major, was handed the catalog for Andover Newton Theological School with the words – “this is the school for you.”

At the same time I was coming to understand myself as a same-gender loving woman and wondering if God truly accepted this unfolding new me. Soon after arriving on Andover Newton’s campus I was invited to worship at Church of the Covenant in downtown Boston. A whole new world of Christian life opened up for me in this congregation that practiced the use of expansive language for God, took stands for justice in Central America and provided the genesis for the Open and Affirming movement of LGBTQ folk in the United Church of Christ.

For me, a young preacher’s kid steeped in judgy Jesus, it was a revelation and dare I say a life-changing, even life-saving moment to know a denomination like the United Church of Christ existed. To proclaim extravagant welcome – that ALL God’s children are beloved in the sight of God, To affirm

continuing testimony - that God is still speaking in our day and age and the word of God is to be taken seriously but not literally, To embrace the power of faith to change lives – these core values expressed in living groups of people, indeed saved this person’ life. I suspect many here can give similar testimony to finding the UUA as a spiritual home.

Finally, the fourth gift the United Church of Christ has to give to the world, is Jesus. You can read in my introductory paragraph in the order of worship that we have embraced a new mission and purpose as the United Church of Christ in Southern New England – “to live the love and justice of Jesus.” I hear echoes of our new purpose in your call to ministry that we will say together as our service ends – “to be faithful to the vision of Jesus.”

In speaking about Jesus it helps me to turn back to words written by Marcus Borg in his book, “Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time.” Here is how Borg closes that book, “For those of us who grew up in the church, believing in Jesus was important... But I now see that believing in Jesus can (and does) mean something different than that. The change is pointed to by the root of the meaning of the word *believe*. *Believe* did not originally mean believing a set of doctrines or teachings; in both Greek and Latin its roots mean “to give one’s heart to.” Believing in Jesus does not mean believing doctrines about him. Rather it means to give one’s heart to, one’s self at its deepest level, to the Post-Easter Jesus who is the living Lord, the side of God turned towards us, the face of God, the Lord who is also Spirit.<sup>i</sup>

In UCC circles there is a play on the initials that is descriptive of many of our congregations – rather than United Church of Christ some joke it actually stands for Unitarians Considering Christ. Whether we are living into the joke about what UCC stands for – Unitarians Considering Christ- or whether we are working “to be faithful to the vision of Jesus,” as your covenant states, if our collective life together can help turn a morally unmoored society to the vision, values and justice of Jesus then we would accomplish something great.

In closing I want to turn us back to the body metaphor and remind us that even Jesus did not act alone. He gathered disciples, he was funded by widows, he slept in other people’s homes and said whenever two or three of you are gathered, there I will be in the midst of you. To be a body gathered in Jesus’ name is not a solo proposition. The one body Jesus has in the world is the church. And how wacky is it on God’s part to entrust something so precious to not just one human being but to put many human beings together and expect that what we do and who we are will give the world a glimpse of Jesus still alive and living in this world. The church exists because God wants it to- through us and many times despite us. My colleague Kelly Gallagher says – “no one can kill the church, many have tried but because it is God’s, it will never die.” That does not mean the church is not a fragile thing, most bodies are. But I can tell you this – especially with growing division in our nation and world, there are not many churches that can hold two different faith traditions together and still pass the peace genuinely amongst each other. So I bear witness to the resilience of this body among the bodies that make of us the United Church of Christ.

There is much more to say. I pray that this sermon has evoked a desire to be in deeper relationship and further conversation about the shared gifts we have, to enliven faith traditions expressed through First Parish in Lincoln. May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Marcus Borg, Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time, p. 136-7