

Myths and Realities

A Message for 50th Anniversary Service of Re-Dedication

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC

March 15, 2019

Texts: 1 Kings 8:22-30 & 1 Corinthians 3:1-17

Please allow me to begin by once again thanking each of you for being here with us today for this wonderful celebration. 50 years may be no big deal for some of our sister churches who have literally been around for centuries, but for us – 50 – that’s a big deal. It’s so much more than an anniversary marking the passing of time. For us this 50-year mark is a true accomplishment and living proof of the reality of God’s steadfast love for God’s people made real in this congregation.

Let me also say, it is incredibly humbling to have the responsibility of standing in this pulpit on this exciting and noteworthy occasion. I am keenly aware in this moment of all the leaders of this church, clergy and lay, who have stood in this pulpit before me. I know that I am here now because of all that they said and did before me. That being said, it is also incredibly humbling and more than a little challenging to have given myself the task of preaching on the texts Rev. Maclean, the first pastor of this church, chose for the occasion 50 years ago. And, just to make it a little more interesting for myself, and hopefully for you too, I decided to use the same sermon title he chose – “Myths and Realities.” Okay!...

First of all, Rev. Maclean could not have picked two more appropriate texts for his words than the two he chose. Both precisely reference the occasion of dedicating a new congregation, a new gathering of God's people in a particular location, in a new place. The text from 1 Kings provides us with the first part of Solomon's grand and glorious prayer at the dedication of the first Temple the construction of which he had overseen. That prayer actually goes on well past the point in verse 30 where Rev. Maclean chose to end the text selection. But I think I know why he made that decision. The part of 1 Kings, Chapter 8 that we read covers the most important elements of Solomon's prayer. First is his acknowledgement of God's faithfulness to the covenant God had made with David. Then, Solomon acknowledges that no building, not even this most magnificent Temple ever constructed, could contain God. Solomon reminds the people that the building is more for them and their worship of God than it is for God. God is God, beyond time and space, and certainly buildings.

Finally, Solomon asks God to hear always the prayers of the people. Solomon pleads that the Temple remain the place where the people can come to find forgiveness for all the foolish, unkind, selfish and sinful things they will inevitably do precisely because they are human. Foundational in these beautiful words of Solomon's is the concept of *hesedh*, God's steadfast, unchanging love for God's people. Solomon makes clear that this is the true

foundation of the Temple, and of the worship of God. It is this *hesedh* that makes the Temple possible and with it the unique relationship with God the people have the opportunity, and the responsibility, to develop and cherish.

Rev. Maclean's choice of the 1 Corinthians text is also equally appropriate for the day that congregation of 50 years ago had waited so long to enjoy together. In this text, Paul is writing to the church in Corinth to address, for about the zillioneth time, the fact that they were continually quarreling. They were just constantly picking at each other. In fact, the quarreling was so prevalent that it was all they did, meaning God's work – Jesus' mission – was left by the wayside to languish and Paul was having none of it anymore. Paul reminds the people that it doesn't matter which of the church's founders they felt the most allegiance to – him or somebody named Apollos. What mattered was their common task as servants of God. What mattered was what God needed them to do as followers of the Risen Christ. Where they came from didn't matter. What preacher they thought was the better one didn't matter. All that mattered for the people of that ancient church in Corinth was Jesus Christ. Jesus was and is the foundation of all the work the church – any church – this church -- is called to do in service to the living God.

So, when Rev. Maclean was faced with delivering a message to two old, established congregations – Pawcatuck Congregational

and Broad Street Christian – sitting before him in the brand new church they were creating together he reminded them of the most important thing that would form the foundation on which they would build this church: the steadfast love of God made real in Jesus Christ and empowered and enlivened by the Holy Spirit. He reminded them that it didn't matter which church they came from. All that mattered was what they would do together for the glory of God in this new church they were creating together. Great! Got it! Still works! But what's up with the whole myths and realities thing?? I have no clue what he talked about in that regard 50 years ago.

But I do know very clearly what I would name as the myths and realities this church faces now in the 21st century. The first one, it seems to me, is that the church is struggling. Not just this church is struggling. Big churches with long histories, strong denominational ties and deep pockets are struggling. Little storefront churches with self-appointed pastors are struggling. Truth is, virtually all churches are struggling – with attendance, with money, with finding qualified ministerial leadership and being able to afford it. This is clearly a reality. But it's also a myth. Why? Because the assumption is that struggle is a bad thing, and it's not. Struggle is movement. Struggle means life. Struggle proves that people do care, that people do want a relationship with God and are struggling with how best to make

that happen. Struggle is exactly what the ancient Israelites had been through in order to build the Temple Solomon was praying in. Struggle is exactly what allowed the Corinthian church to work harder at becoming what God needed them to be. The myth of being a struggling church is that struggling is bad. It's not. Struggle is life-giving. Struggle is part of birth and new life. Struggle is the gateway to what has been and what will be.

The second statement I would suggest for our consideration is that the church is irrelevant. In this day and age when we are literally overwhelmed under an avalanche of information about anything and everything including God, some would and do say the church is irrelevant! Think about it. The church is no longer the primary social hub of the community. It is no longer the only place to connect with other young families or older adults. It is no longer the only place to pray, to sing, to experience the transcendent presence of the divine. These things can be found other places so the church no longer has a corner on this market. Plus, you don't have to get up early on Sundays, the only free time of the whole week. Of course, the church is irrelevant some say. Or is it? Again, a seeming reality I would argue is just another myth. The church is relevant because God is relevant. The church is relevant because the Gospel of Jesus Christ has never been more relevant, more pertinent, more directly on-point to all that is happening in the world around us as it is today. The drumbeat

message of the world in which we live remains always the same – me, Me, ME – first, last and always. What do *I* think? What do *I* need? What do *I* want? It's all about *me!!!* The heck with other people. Let them fend for themselves. It's all about me and the people who agree with me! Except it's not. And we're learning the hard way every day that the me-ism of contemporary life is a dismal failure. The booming economy hides rising poverty and homelessness levels. The advances in medical science are belied by rising infant mortality rates and declining lifespans. The crazy weather points to the lie that climate change isn't real or, even worse, is God's will. All this is why I would argue that one of the few places left in our world that *is relevant* to the evolving chaos *is the church* which preaches that everyone has value, that everyone is equally beloved of God and therefore deserving of our love and support, that Creation and the care of Creation matters, and that it's never, ever too late for forgiveness no matter how far we have drifted from God and God's plan for our lives.

Finally, one last statement to consider is that the church is dying – this church and all churches. Look at how small they've become, people say. Even those big Catholic churches that used to be jammed are half empty at fewer services. People aren't getting married in churches anymore. Destination weddings are the thing and, heck, anyone that fills out the right form with the state can officiate so who needs a pastor? Same thing with

funerals. Cousin Mildred likes to write poetry and Uncle Fred plays a mean guitar so who needs a church funeral? We'll just keep grandma on the kitchen shelf in that crockery pot she liked so much and one of these days we'll do something with her. Who needs church?

You do. You need church. I need church. We all need church, even today in the 21st century where driverless cars loom and drones are already a pain in the neck. Who needs church? Everyone, really. Most people have just forgotten that. Or, they've been driven away from church by bad experiences that left them scarred. Or they've never experienced what church can be. What this church – our beloved, 50 years old today church is. This church – United Congregational Church of Westerly, United Church of Christ – is the place where God's people gather together each week to remember, to recover and to rediscover what it means to be the beloved people of God. The church is where we practice with each other what it means to live life as followers of the living Christ so we know how to do it out in the world. The church is where we celebrate together whose and who we are. That is our reality – for the past 50 years and with God's help, the next 50 as well. Thank you again for being here. Amen.