

The Heart of Us

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC
September 19, 2021
Text: Matthew 6:19-21

Welcome to this second Sunday of a sermon series I originally envisioned as a sort of “short course” on the United Church of Christ generally and our church more particularly. I decided this might be a good series to offer since I am guessing that whether you are new to the congregation or have been a part of us for all of your lives, most of us could benefit from a refresher on what the United Church of Christ believes and does, on what makes a UCC church – our church for example – different from all the other Protestant Christian churches in our community.

I was reminded of this, our congregational identity, just this past week as I was invited to officiate the service and burial of a local man by the Buckler-Johnston Funeral Home because the man’s daughter wanted a “Congregational” minister. In fact, when I called her to discuss what she and the family would like in the service, the first thing she said to me was “are you a Congregational minister?” “Yes,” I quickly assured her. “I pastor the United Congregational Church here in Pawcatuck.” “Oh, good,” she said. “That’s what dad wanted.” But, the more we talked, the more clear it became that she had no idea what it meant to be a congregationalist. She barely had an idea of what it meant to be a Christian of any sort. She did explain that one of her brothers had become a Southern Baptist so he wanted to be sure I would mention the “resurrection and those things.” I assured her I would as that is key to all the prayers offered at a memorial service and burial. “Oh, good,” she said.

I tell you this because I found it so curious that someone would be so clear about wanting a Congregational pastor for a funeral when they had so little involvement with any church or seemingly even God for most if not all of their lives. And this is not the first time I have done funerals for people who specifically requested a Congregational minister for a funeral or burial

or, as in this case, both. This has happened probably a half dozen times in the ten years I've been here. And every time it's been because the family had some deep connection to Congregationalism somewhere in their family roots, the how and why obscured by time and neglect. But here in this final moment of farewell, of transition from this earthly life to whatever comes next, those Congregational roots suddenly mattered. A lot. Why?

My best guess in these cases is that the family just was honoring whatever instructions the deceased had left, either in writing or verbally. That's obvious enough. But why did these people who apparently lived their lives with no meaningful connection to a church suddenly want a Congregational minister to bless their departure from this world? Well, one distinct possibility is that, this being New England, the family did have at some point – perhaps even generations earlier – strong Congregational roots. After all, as we discussed last week, this part of New England was settled almost exclusively by Puritan and Pilgrim colonists, who gave birth to congregationalism here in the so-called “New World.” It certainly wasn't new to the indigenous peoples already living here when they arrived but that's a whole other sermon for a different day. The truth is, Congregationalism dominated New England from the beginning. To this day in calendars around the world celebrating the beauty of New England, the ubiquitous white clapboard church on the green surrounded by glorious fall foliage is most likely a congregational church. Our New England roots are still strong and deep, even today. But, not all congregational churches are UCC churches.

Our brothers and sisters in the church down the road in Stonington, the one affectionately called “The Road Church,” is actually the First Congregational Church of Stonington and it is not affiliated with the United Church of Christ. At the time the United Church of Christ was being formed in the late 1950's, not all Congregational Christian Churches wanted to participate in the merger. The Road Church was one such church which decided to join with a small group of other churches to form the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches instead. I mention this only to clarify that not all congregational churches are automatically UCC.

Many are, but not all. In fact, the word “congregational” refers primarily to our polity, or operating structure, rather than what we believe as our particular brand of Protestantism. A congregational church of any sort is a church that operates independently from any larger governing church body. In other words, a congregational church stands on its own. It does not need the permission of a denominational structure or official to make decisions of any sort.

So, if that’s true, what exactly is our affiliation with the United Church of Christ? Excellent question! Our relationship with the denominational structure of the United Church of Christ is a covenantal one. “Covenant” is a lovely word with its roots in the Scriptures which basically means we choose to be in relationship with each other and we accept that this relationship comes with particular expectations and responsibilities when it comes to what we believe about God and how we act in relation to the denomination and to other churches within the denomination. Truthfully, this could be said about other Protestant denominations, like the Presbyterians, the Methodists, the American Baptists, and even the Lutherans and Episcopalians. But, there is one huge difference between us and those other “mainline” churches. Each of them have aspects of congregational structure – they have boards and committees for example – but they also have a church hierarchy which can directly intercede in how the local church operates. For example, the Methodists, Lutherans and Episcopalians have bishops who control where clergy serve and how long they stay. The Presbyterians have a similar system with local presbyteries, but not quite so rigid. The American Baptists are probably the most similar to us in terms of how the local church operates both internally and in relation to the denominational structure. But, the American Baptists only practice adult baptism and some of their churches have decidedly more conservative practices and beliefs than you would find in the vast majority of UCC churches.

So, why are *we* UCC? Because back when the UCC was being formed in the late 1950’s, our two parent churches – Pawcatuck Congregational and Broad Street Christian both voted to join the new denomination. Then,

they decided to become the living embodiment of the new United Church of Christ merger by becoming one church together. And, in their incredible wisdom and visionary hopes for this new congregation, they decided to build a new building for this new congregation and that the new building would represent the future and not the past. That is why our church does not look like the quintessential white clapboard church on the green. That was a deliberate decision! Yes, I know all the reasons folks do not like aspects of our magnificent building, but even when it is making us crazy, I pray we can always hold on to the forward-looking vision this spectacular design represents.

So, we've spent a lot of time considering how we became UCC and how that is different from other churches in the area. But what about what we believe? How is that different from what other churches believe? Well, if you look at our Statement of Faith, you can see that what we believe is pretty much what other Christian churches believe. Like most Protestant churches, we recognize two sacraments --- baptism and Communion. We believe in the Trinity – the miraculous three in one God, Creator, Christ and Holy Ghost. We believe in the Resurrection and new life in the world to come. So, where it is that we become so different from everybody else? This becomes visible in what were named the “core values” of the United Church of Christ back in 2012: Continuing testament, extravagant welcome and a commitment to changing lives.

“Continuing testament” refers to our belief about the role of Scripture in faith and life. We do not believe the Bible is the literal word of God with one single and set meaning. Instead, we believe in the “still speaking God” whose wisdom is ever breaking forth anew as we read the Scriptures from within the context of our own lives. We do not need a priest or intermediary to read the Scriptures for us and tell us its one and only one meaning. Instead, our clergy are tasked with encouraging us to read the Scriptures for ourselves, offering insights and guidance on what we might discover for ourselves as we do.

The extravagant welcome piece of these core values is one this church gets and has always gotten. It means just what it says. That everyone is

welcome here, no matter who they are or where they are on their journey of life and faith, as our Deacon reminds us at the beginning of every worship service. You do not come to this church to be “saved” or to be told what to do or not do, what to think about anything. You are invited to come to this church bringing all of who you are with you – young, old, rich, poor, gay, straight, gender non-conforming, struggling with life or living your best life. This is because we believe, we trust with all our hearts, that whoever you are is who God created you to be. Our task as a church is to assist you in becoming all that God always imagined you could be as God’s dearly beloved creation. We do not judge you. We do not try to change you. That’s God’s job. We love you as you are for the simple reason that God loves you and that is enough for us.

The last of these core values is the one which has undergone the most change as it has been articulated over the years by the United Church of Christ: our commitment to changing, or as I prefer to think of it, transforming lives. Actually, the goal of changing lives hasn’t changed but how the UCC imagines that might be happening in our churches is constantly evolving and shifting. For example, UCC churches across the country have been taking the lead in their communities on a whole host of issues such immigration reform, racial justice inequities, economic justice issues, LGBTQIA+ issues, Native American concerns, climate change and eco-justice issues. And in the UCC, each church is free to pick which of these issues it will put its energies into. In our church, we have been involved in many of them, most notably our efforts in recent years with the Pollinator Gardens and raising local awareness of the vital nature of preserving pollinator habitats right here in our own community. And every time I drive by a yard which now looks more like a meadow than a pristine lawn, I know we’ve had at least a little bit to do with that transformation! Even a little church like us can, and has, and will continue to make a big difference in the lives of our own people and our own community.

So, dear ones, the heart of us is this – Our core values of continuing testament, extravagant welcome and changing lives are how we in the United Congregational Church of Westerly, United Church of Christ are

living out our call to be disciples of Christ. We in our church, right here and right now, are the living embodiment of the statement which you will find front and center on the homepage of ucc.org: “United in Spirit, and inspired by God’s grace, we welcome all, love all, and seek justice for all.” Yes, yes, yes. And I would take this full circle, back to Matthew’s summary of Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount which was our Scripture for this morning: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Dear ones, our treasure is in loving others, welcoming others and seeking justice for all God’s creatures whom we might help. We are the United Church of Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.