

Why Does the Church Exist?

United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

July 30, 2023 – Sunday Morning Worship

1st Sermon in the Series: *Why church...*

Text: Acts 2:39-47

So, how are you all doing??? I haven't seen you in a while! Four weeks to be precise. I want you to know that I missed you and that I am profoundly grateful that my contract provides for this annual extended vacation every summer. I'll be honest and tell you that when I left here on Sunday, June 25 to begin my vacation, I have never needed time off more. By the time I reached Wisdom House for my week-long retreat, I was so exhausted that I was physically ill. I spent most of that week sleeping, reading, and not doing much of anything. By the end of the week, I was feeling a little better but still not myself. The following Monday, Peter, Jack, and I left for our week's vacation in Vermont which was absolutely wonderful. I think I speak for all four of us (I'm including Leila) when I say it was the best family vacation we have ever had. We stayed in a lovely place, ate wonderful meals together, did touristy things and just plain spent a lot of time together. We slept and rested. We read and walked. We watched movies. We talked. All on our own agenda. No deadlines. No pressure. Just being together. It was simply amazing. We were and continued to be blessed by that wonderful week. My last two weeks were spent on a whole lot of projects at home that Peter and I never have the time to work on together. That too was delightful. Our gardens never looked better. Our bookshelves are sorted and the house is clean. I mean, really clean. Who knew baseboards could attract that much dirt? All in all, it was wonderful in more ways than I can possibly explain.

I'm telling you all this not because this sermon is going to be an adult version of a grade school "what I did on my summer vacation"

essay. I am telling you this because these four weeks invited me into the midst of an incredible moment in my life which, God willing, will make me a better pastor for this church at the same time it allows me to be more fully the person God created me to be. What this all means is not something I can explain in a few sentences in a sermon on muggy Sunday morning in July. But I hope and trust it will become clear as the days and weeks in the life of our church move forward. One change you will note right away this morning is the addition to the order of worship of something I am calling “A Moment to Breathe.” I’ll explain what this is when we get to it in a few minutes. For now, just think of it as a gift I have brought back from vacation to share with all of you, my dear ones in this church.

Our task, then, moving forward together as the church known as UCC Westerly, is to take the time to consider more deeply just what exactly this thing we call church *is*. More importantly, we need to invest the time, energy, and effort in reflecting on what church *means* to us – each of us here this morning, as well as all those folks who are part of this congregation but aren’t here today. And we also cannot forget all those people who could very well need a church like ours in their lives, but they have yet to find their way to us. As our church confronts the present reality of what life is for us in this fractured and damaged world we live in, God first needs us to reclaim who we are as people who follow Jesus. We need to be clear, and dare I say joyful, about our decision to be a part of this church and all that means. In short, we need to reclaim the covenants we made when each of us joined this church whether that was through Confirmation, Affirmation of Faith, or Letter of Transfer. In order to do that, we must rediscover our roots and I’m not talking about the Broad Street and Pawcatuck Congregational Churches who are our parent churches. I’m not talking about the New England Congregationalists

of the 18th century. I'm not talking about the Pilgrims and Puritans of the 17th century. I'm not talking about the original instigators of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. Nor am I talking about the 1000+ years of Christian history of the Catholic church before that. I am talking about the very earliest days of what we now think of as church as is described by the writer of the Book of Acts in the text we read this morning.

This passage from the second chapter of Acts is describing the very earliest moments of what became the church when the first followers of Jesus came together to love and support one another even as they attempted this entirely new way of being in relationship with God. The writer here tells us the story of what happened in the immediate aftermath of Pentecost when the tongues of fire rested over the heads of the apostles in the room where they were gathered. It describes the moment when the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles as Jesus promised it would when he left them for the last time to ascend to God. Its purpose is to provide the apostles with the divine authority they needed to engage in the ministry Jesus was calling them to now, in this moment when he was no longer with them. It is not the only story in the Gospels about the Holy Spirit coming into/on the apostles certainly. But this is the one which was definitive. This is the one upon which the foundation of what was to become Christianity was built. As such, it is the only place it makes sense for us to begin our reflections and conversations together as we ponder the answer to the question of why the church exists.

Dear ones, first we must acknowledge that this question of the church's existence is more vibrantly alive now than it has ever been since this upper room moment almost two thousand years ago. Why? Because the church is in deep trouble. Surveys done by prestigious and respected institutions such as Gallup and the Pew Research

Foundation among others all report significant declines in both church membership and church attendance. In an article published by writer Wendy Wang just this past December she observes:

A recent [poll](#) by Pew Research Center shows that the U.S. Christian population has been declining steadily in the past decade. Today, 63% of Americans describe themselves as Christians, down from 75% just a decade ago. The share of Americans who identify with non-Christian faiths (6%) holds steady, but the share of secular Americans is up by 10 percentage points from a decade ago.¹

Religion and society writers and researchers have been scrambling in their efforts to answer the question of why this is happening. Those answers run the gambit from the major hit Covid had on attendance to the ongoing scandals plaguing far too many churches, Protestant as well as Catholic. These scandals crush trust in church authority and leadership, literally pushing some people out the door never to return. For others just hearing about such scandals keeps them from coming in the door in the first place. Added to this are the all too visible and negative impacts of conservative Christianity's "culture wars" which have pushed agenda items unpalatable to the vast majority of folks in our country and around the world. Topics like women's health care and reproductive choice, homophobia and transphobia and even the all too visible and dangerous climate crisis are now associated with "crazy Christians," much to the detriment of faithful traditional Christians like you and me.

So, where does that leave us – a small vital church with numbers for attendance and new members smaller than we would like them, need them, to be? Well, examining, exploring, and reflecting on all of this is where I propose we go on these Sunday mornings for the remainder of this summer, and into September. This is our reality, folks, and we must face it in order to understand it. Only by understanding it can we hope to deal with it. But we cannot, must not, let this documented reality of declining numbers in churches generally

¹ <https://ifstudies.org/blog/number-2-in-2022-the-decline-in-church-attendance-in-covid-america>

define us and who we believe God is calling us to be in 2023 and beyond. Instead, we must find within ourselves the courage, and even more importantly, the willingness to look at this situation square in the face so we can figure out how we want to respond. And that will always come back to who we believe God is calling us to be as a congregation of God's faithful here in this place. This is why I chose Peter's words to that first crowd of the curious who came to hear him speak when the crowd in the streets heard all the commotion of Pentecost. He said, "For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." What is this promise? That God's love for each and every person is real as is the promise of forgiveness of sins and the possibility of new life as beloved of God. That each of us can and will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit as the agent of inspiration and action in our lives, if we are open to the possibilities this offers. This is the promise, and the hope, God offers to everyone. Absolutely everyone. Our task as church is to live this message into reality by how we conduct ourselves as a community of the faithful every day.

But still, we have to wonder if this message is enough. In this day when so many are intentionally leaving the church behind because they no longer trust it as an institution, is this message of God's love and new life enough? I don't know. But I do know it worked for Peter. Those who welcomed his message on this long ago day were baptized, and that day about 3000 persons were added. Yikes! Now there's a spectacular group of new members! Could that happen here? No, probably not. But, 30 is possible. Especially if we add in those folks who are already members but have drifted away. Especially if we work hard to reveal to the community who we are and what we have to offer that is unique. And, dear ones, this is exactly what happened with Peter's group. I'm willing to bet that a chunk of

those 3000 had already been following the disciples and Jesus around for a while. They just hadn't made the jump into belonging. But with Peter's urging that day, and the enthusiasm and support of all the apostles, they did. And the Scriptures make clear they loved it!

“They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers.” Hey! We do that already!! But wait, there's more... “All who believed were together, and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” This is the piece that sounds both impractical and impossible. But I actually think we're not that far off from this in that we are so mindful of doing what we can to offset the need we know is so abundant in our community. Of course, there is always more to do! But the one sentence here I think is so important is the one most often overlooked: “Day by day, as they spent much time in the temple, they broke bread *at home* and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the good will of the people.” This makes clear they were NOT living together. This is important because our tendency on hearing this passage is to consider this was some idyllic hippie-like commune and it most definitely was not. These first Christians had not come to some common area to live together. They were worshipping together and that was the centerpiece, the starting point, for everything else that followed and became church, continuing on for thousands of years. As they came together, they were learning about God and Jesus and how to be transformed by that learning into an entirely new way of living life each day. This text also tells us that they were known and respected by the other people in the community who had not yet joined their fellowship as followers of Jesus.

So, why does the church exist? Because God needs it to. God needs it to so that people have a place to gather to experience God's love and abiding presence with others doing the same. It exists because Jesus invites us into daily service as we seek to love the other as much as we love ourselves and the church is where we learn and practice doing that together. It exists because the Holy Spirit is always present with us, energizing us, activating our energy and creativity, sustaining us through those moments of exhaustion and discouragement. Dear ones, in the final analysis, the church exists because it is needed, not by God but by God's beloved people. We who are the church today have been entrusted with this sacred responsibility of nurturing and sustaining this community of God's faithful here in this place. How we do that is always in process. That we do it is never in question. The church has always been in flux in one way or another from its earliest days, so these challenging times are just the latest iteration of that in our long history. Dear ones, our church exists right here and right now because we need it to and, even more importantly, because God needs it to. Are there challenges ahead? Absolutely. Are we up to them? I believe we are for many reasons but there is really only one that truly matters. Because with God all things are possible. Now, who can YOU invite to come with you to church next Sunday? Amen.