

A Genuine Life

United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
September 3, 2023 – Sunday Morning Worship with Communion
6th Sermon in the Series: *Why church...*
Text: Romans 12:9-21

Anyone who knows me at all knows I am not exactly the outdoorsy type. I would much rather curl up with a good book in my favorite chair or settle in to watch a good movie on television than go on a hike, for example. Should I opt for the hike? Probably. But with my luck, I'd turn my ankle just as I reached the farthest most point on the hike meaning I would need to hop all the way back. Or, I would become a movable feast for every mosquito within a 20 mile radius of the trail on which I was hiking. Either way the outcome for me is not a desirable one, so give me a comfy chair and good light for reading any day.

All this is why even I was surprised that a recent article in *The Atlantic* caught my attention to a surprising extent. Entitled “Retailers Bet Wrong on America’s Feelings About Stores” I was initially interested in just how this bet has gone wrong so I planned to skim the first few lines and then move on from what I was sure would be a boring exploration of retail market forces in the 21st century. I was so wrong. I was hooked by the very first couple of sentences: “The Bass Pro Shops is bigger than you think it will be. This is true of all of the outdoorsy retailer’s locations, but its especially true of the one retrofitted into a 32-story metal pyramid on the banks of the Mississippi River.”¹ I mean, 32 stories of shopping??? I am so there if I ever make it to Memphis where this flagship store of the Bass Pro Shops chain is located. They built it in a redesigned arena once home to the NBA’s Memphis Grizzlies. Amanda Mull, the author of this

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2023/09/american-department-store-shopping-experience>

compelling piece, describes it as having been designed with a Disney-esque feel to it. It was carefully created to evoke what the chain describes as a “lost wilderness” motif and, according to Mull, it delivers 100%. She was there to attend not one, but two separate events connected to a wedding of all things and then she returned again as she says, “just to wander around the sales floor, which is full of man-made streams and faux cypress trees dripping with decorative Spanish moss.”² Honestly, I can’t even wrap my head around what this must look like but I know that I would love to go there to spend a few hours just walking around. Who knows, I bet even I would find something to buy. And that’s the whole point, as Mull points out. She also draws a provocative link to the American shopping experience of days long gone by as she sees in this mammoth retail outlet a 21st century version of the full scale department stores of days long gone. And I think she’s on to something.

I can still remember what a huge deal it was when the big department stores in the downtown Pittsburgh of my childhood would put their magical Christmas windows on display. Anticipation would build for weeks and then the newly revealed glorious windows would be the feature story on the evening news. The next day everyone would flock downtown to see them. The trolleys would be standing room only. Parents would take their kids out of school to see Santa before the lines got too long as Christmas inched closer. I remember lunch at the elegant Garden Terrace restaurant on one of the upper floors of Kaufmann’s, or maybe it was Horne’s. I just know that in those magical days before Christmas every one of those stores was jammed with shoppers and dreams, mine included. And this is what Mull is getting at in her article.

² Ibid.

She argues that when online shopping became an option, the corporate powers that be were very quick to predict the end of in-person shopping for all intents and purposes. For those who kept stores open, they would do everything they could to cut costs so they kept prices low enough to attract shoppers away from their computers. The result was lackluster sales performances but was that solely due to not being able to compete with the online experience? No, Mull argues. It had just as much to do with the stores becoming junky as aisles jammed up with merchandise, cleanliness slipped down the line of priorities and employee ranks were slashed. In other words, she says, they ended up making the in person shopping experience unpleasant because they thought it no longer mattered. She writes, “as I wandered contentedly over the wooden-plank walkways in the Bass Pro’s fake forest, alongside crowds of shoppers with armfuls of soon-to be-purchases, it was hard to ignore one problem that retailers are loathe to acknowledge: Going to a store that’s actually good at being a store is all too rare.”³

Going to a store that’s good at being a store is all too rare. Wow. I think Amanda Mull is on to something here. We have too long allowed ourselves to be manipulated into behaving as certain experts – like those in retail for example – would like us to behave. Controlling costs in order to maximize profit is the primary goal of too much of our lives these days and it needs to stop. No one is more shocked than I am that Bass Pro Shops is pointing the way forward on this. And the thing is, even though they are going totally counter to accepted thinking about retail with their mammoth experiential shopping behemoth stores, it’s working. Obviously. If it wasn’t they wouldn’t be doing it.

³ Ibid.

So, what am I getting at with all this? Am I talking about the labor injustices experienced by too many retail workers on this Labor Day weekend? Well, I certainly could but no, that's not my point with all this. My point goes back to that notion of a store being really good at being a store. Dear ones, that is in many ways, the secret to a genuine life for anyone, especially those of us who aspire to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. A genuine life, dear ones, is a life lived when human beings are really good at being human beings. Where Christians are really good at being Christians. In fact, the genuine life and future of the church – our church and any church really – comes to precisely that point. A church needs to be really good at being a church. And just what does that mean? Honestly, not what you're probably thinking. We don't need to have packed pews every week, although it would be nice to see more people now and then. We don't need a perfect building with no leaks, no issues, totally affordable utility bills at all times, and the grounds meticulously manicured constantly. We don't need unlimited bank accounts although leaving money worries behind would be freeing, at least to some extent.

Okay, so if we don't need all that, what do we need to be a church that's really good at being a church? In all candor, we have some of what we need already. We are truly open and welcoming to all, although we need to get better at getting that message out to more folks in the community. We put on incredible events, like the Christmas Bazaar, the Attic Treasures Sale, last year's Art Show, this year's Coffee Houses – well you get the picture. But, we need to figure out how to do these things in ways that aren't so demanding and exhausting for us. One obvious way to achieve this would be by bringing more people in but how do we do that? By being a church that's good at being a church. And the Apostle Paul reminds us very

precisely as to what that is in the text we read this morning from his letter to the church in Rome.

That first bit he says in verses 9-13, we've got that down pretty well. "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection." Yep, we got that covered. "Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer." Again, not a problem for us, at least most of the time. Continuing on, we do try always to be in harmony with each other as the life of the church unfolds and it's not always easy. But we hang in there, thanks in no small part to the work Rev. Ray Bradley did in your midst over 20 years ago as he guided you through the process of creating your Behavioral Covenant. That powerful but simple document is as relevant today as it was the day you voted to adopt it. It represents this church's best attempt to describe what it means to be a church that is really good at being church. This is summed up pretty simply in Paul's last sentence in today's text: "Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good." This simple but powerful sentence refers not to the monstrous evil that is easy to see and understand. Instead, this sentiment of Paul's is beautifully summed up in this closing section of our Behavioral Covenant:

Our Promises to Each Other in Leadership Positions

To honor and support one another as we use our gifts and service to the best of our ability to follow through on our commitments.

To support the final decision of the board, committee, or congregation whether it reflects our view or not.

We promise to uphold these covenants with the help of God.⁴

The thing is, though, that while Paul's words and our own Behavioral Covenant are powerful descriptors of how a church that's good at being a church would respond to the world, the community, in which it lives, we have to keep all this grounded in one more basic point. The church is made up of individuals. It is not a monolith independent of the people which comprise it. In other words, for a church to be really good at being a church, it needs to be filled with

⁴ UCC Westerly's Behavioral Covenant, drafted under the leadership and guidance of Rev. Ray Bradley.

human beings who are really good at being human beings. It needs to be a community of people who follow Jesus in order to live the genuine life of love and *shalom* that God has wanted for each of us, God's beloved creation, since before the dawn of time.

Easy to say, difficult to do with any consistency. I know this as well as anyone. I know how easy it is not to be your best self as the days go by, especially as the to do list gets longer, the exhaustion gets more pronounced, the body aches don't quit and the evening news is downright scary. I get it. I really do. I live it right along with each of you. So how do we – you and I – live this genuine life Paul is describing for us? How do we get really good at being the best human beings, the best Christians, we can be. Well, as my old piano teacher Miss Gilson used to say, there's only one way to get good at anything and that's practice. Lots and lots of practice. A lifetime of practice in fact. And this, dear ones, is the church's entire reason for being. It is that place to practice what it means to be a Christian who's really good at being a Christian. That's it. That's why we're here every week. That's why we do everything we do, from Trustees' meetings to Mission Drives, from fund-raisers to the prayer tree and so much more. Worship, these regular Sunday morning gatherings, is the heartbeat of the church, the time and space provided each week for us to come together and be reminded of all the nuances of being good at being human beings, at being good at being Christian. Dear ones, this is the why of church. It really is that simple.

So, what do we practice here in church when we gather together? I think Paul sums it up well, especially given these divisive times in which we live: "If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." If only, right? Think of it this way: live with love and kindness as a light shining from inside you, out into this aching world. Allow yourself to feel anger, to feel pain, to feel exhaustion, to

feel loneliness, to feel worry, of course – denying it doesn't do anything. But, even as you acknowledge these challenges and so much more, do not allow yourselves to get stuck there. Don't become mired down in the muck of your worst moments. Rise up. Rise above. And if that seems impossible, just look up into the sky and breathe. Let God's love embrace you, especially in those moments when your instinct is to stiff arm anything or anyone that feels like another ask. Let the church and especially Sunday morning worship be your oasis from all that feels like too much. Let it be your place to come to practice being good at being human, to being a follower of Jesus. Practice won't make perfect, but it reveals the way forward to the living of a genuine life. May God guide us all on the journey. Amen.