

Who Are We Anyway?

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

September 15, 2024

Text: John 17:20-26

Welcome to what we are calling “Reunion Sunday” here at UCC Westerly. In years past we might have called it Rally Day or Homecoming Sunday which could have worked this year as well. Both encapsulate the overall theme of folks coming back to church after summer vacation absences. Still, they just seemed off to me for one reason or another. For instance, Rally Day harkens back images of the 1960’s and 70’s when Sunday Schools everywhere were huge and the return of the kids and their parents to school and church marked the unofficial end of summer for the whole community. We’re not there anymore. No church is. So what about Homecoming Sunday? Again, the image this evokes for me is more about the local high school football teams’ Homecoming weekends with the “big game” and the “big dance.” This imagery just doesn’t make me think about coming back to church after a summer hiatus. Although, I will admit it does convey the sense of warmth and happiness we hope folks feel as they return to church, along with all their other favorite fall activities. But still not quite what we’re going for here this year.

Reunion is the word for this Sunday we eventually settled on, the Deacons and myself, as we thought about our hopes for this Sunday. It holds such rich possibilities for the notion of folks coming back to a place they hold dear with the specific intention of reconnecting – reuniting – with the members of their family of faith here in our church. It recognizes that good reasons – like family time and sabbath time and just plain “me” time – pull us away from church in the summer months but that, ultimately, we feel that tug back into the center of faith and community and service we find here. So, Reunion Sunday it is!

Since we are a congregational church affiliated with the mainline denomination known as the United Church of Christ, it seemed to me that this Sunday also offers an excellent opportunity to reflect more deeply on the question of “Who Are We Anyway?” Put another way, what do we think of when we think of this church, our church, – the United Congregational Church of Westerly? How do *you* describe this church to your friends? When you try to describe our church to someone not familiar with it, what words do you use? (*Pause for responses*)

All good answers! Thanks for sharing those thoughts. Now let’s reflect a little more on who we are and how we came to be this church. Of course, there are still multiple ways we could go about answering that question. One way would be to recall our history as a local church. Our history begins in 1963 when two local churches – Broad Street Christian Church in Westerly and Pawcatuck Congregational Church – began conversations about the possibility of becoming one church. I’d like to point out here that, despite what some folks think, this conversation was not specifically about a merger although the two churches did come together as a result of the conversation. But it’s not a merger because our two predecessor churches ceased to exist as entities when the new church started. One congregation did NOT merge into the other. Both of them surrendered their individual identities in order to create, give birth to, this new church. Therefore, in spite of what appears on some of our old historical mugs, this church was not founded at the time those two other churches were in 1845. We originated as a congregation when those 1963 conversations led to a vote to form a new church in December of 1963. That action was formalized legally in 1964 when the United Congregational Church of Westerly was officially and legally formed. Among other things that means, dear friends, that we are in an anniversary year in 2024. We were 60 years old this past January. I apologize that this slipped right past me at the time. We’ve had so much

going on with the organ repairs and the Threshold project, that the fact of our 60th anniversary just didn't dawn on me. But, thanks to Jerin in the office who asked what year this was for the Bazaar, I did some research this past week and that's when I realized I had missed it! Good news though! We remembered in time to publicize the Bazaars as our 60th Annual!

How and why does this matter, folks may wonder. Well, it matters for several reasons. First of all, it makes us positively unique as a congregational church here in New England because we are the *youngest* congregational church in the area – by a lot! That's exciting! And, our building and all the ministries we are accomplishing here, they reveal that we in fact do have the vision and the enthusiasm of a young church on the cusp of doing new things in new ways. This church is neither old nor stuffy in any way, shape or form. Sure we have our own traditions and sometimes we get stuck in them, but it's easier to move away from traditions that are decades old instead of centuries. I'm excited we are a 20th century congregation and literally a mid-century modern church! Do you appreciate what that means? It means we're trendy!! Us! Right here in this super unusual building that drives us crazy with the raw wood, catwalk glass windows and soaring ceilings, with the leaky roof and the sprawling design – we're trendy! Mid-century modern is the design motif everyone is chasing after for everything from clothing to furniture. Mid-century modern! That's us! Who knew? How about that! We're trendy!

Before I get too carried away on this mid-century motif, though, rest assured that I know, as do you, that it's who we are as the Beloved People of God in this place that truly defines us. How we came to be here, that's important. But who we are and what it is that we believe about God and God's expectations of us, that matters more than anything else. It is, in fact, our Statement of Faith, that ultimately defines us. That comes to us from the United Church of Christ. When

the four Christian traditions which eventually became the United Church of Christ, first began their conversations together about creating this new denomination, back in the aftermath of World War II, their desire was to take a gigantic step forward toward securing world peace by working toward the goal of creating true ecumenism in the world. FYI – ecumenism is the notion that all religious faiths are valid in the eyes of God and therefore it is possible and desirable that those differing traditions figure out how to get along with each other, how to communicate with each other, how to respect each other's differences while focusing on our commonalities. In the aftermath of World War II when the world was picking up the pieces of that horrible conflagration that killed so many and destroyed so much, this lofty goal seemed attainable because people could not imagine another war tearing the world apart. People wanted to believe we could all figure out how to just get along. The United Nations grew from this same sentiment as did the ecumenical movement which originated in search of peace despite religious differences.

It was into this milieu that the leaders and theologians who first imagined a denomination like the United Church of Christ first came together to talk about possibilities. This was no easy task because the four Christian traditions in the United States which began this conversation about the possibility of one new denomination were really, really different from each other. Those four strands were the Congregational Churches, the Christian Churches, the Reformed Church in the United States and the Evangelical Synod of North American. Their polity structures, or systems of church government, were vastly different from each other in particular. Their beliefs too were very similar, but definitely not identical. Yet their determination to become a living example of what can happen when Christians with differing traditions set aside their differences to focus on what they had in common as followers of Jesus kept them talking. Ultimately, they

realized their best chance would be to agree on what they believed first, and the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith was created. It is a clear and concise statement of the beliefs these four very different traditions agreed they had in common. In the interest of time I won't read it now but you've heard it before, I'm sure. If not, ask me and I can get you a copy. This statement, dear friends, is an extraordinary document. This IS who we are because this is what we believe. There is SO much to unpack here, so much robust thought and work and faith that went into it. I'd be happy to lead a workshop or study group on it here if folks would be interested. Let me know!

While we're on this subject, here's a little factoid for you. This Statement represents the work of many, many people – ordained and lay – theologians and scholars and regular people from the pews on Sunday morning. But one of the authors is someone you probably know, even if you don't know his name. It's Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the founding fathers and primary theologians of the United Church of Christ. Name not ring a bell? Not to worry. You already know one of the most famous things he ever wrote – the Serenity Prayer: *God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.*¹ Dear ones, this beautiful and simple prayer, known to millions around the world, tells the story of the UCC's quest to be at the forefront of the ecumenical movement when it was formed in 1957. What you may not know is that our church – this church – was formed when our two parent congregations learned of this great and wonderful goal of the United Church of Christ and were excited at the prospect of bringing that new quest for Christian unity to life right here in Westerly-Pawcatuck. Our records clearly indicate this is why these two churches

¹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serenity_Prayer

decided to come together. They wanted to be a part of history. And so they are, so we are too.

The text I chose for this morning is the one which contains the Scripture text which provides the foundation for the United Church of Christ – what it has always striven for. In this text from John’s Gospel, Jesus is praying to God for the well-being of his disciples when he is no longer here on earth. Jesus wants them to know how precious they were to him and that they are indeed equally precious to God. Even more importantly, though, Jesus wanted their unity as a group to survive what he knew would be very scary days following his death. He knew what they would face, and he knew there would be jockeying for position and authority among them when he was no longer there to mediate. Jesus didn’t want them to lose their greatest asset which was the community they formed together. He knew it would be this community that would enable them to nurture and sustain each other through the days to come. He knew that it would be their mutual sharing and remembering of all he had taught them which would enable his work for God to go on as they took responsibility for it on their own. Jesus’ prayer was a simple one, and he prays it over and over again in this one passage we read this morning – “that they may all be one.” This was what he wanted for them because he knew they would need their common strength, their common knowledge, their common faith in him to continue on. He also wanted them to know what he had experienced of God’s love through this becoming one with each other. He prays, “The glory that you have given me, I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one.” Jesus is praying that God draw them into the unique relationship Jesus has with God. That’s what Jesus says he wants for them. And he says one more thing too. He prays this same prayer for you and me, and all of us who seek to be followers of Jesus. Right as this particular passage begins, he prays, “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me

through their word, that they may all be one.” Dear ones, that is us. Jesus prayed for us, for each and every one of us, here today because we believe through the words which have come down to us through the millennia that originated with those first disciples. That they may all be one – those original 12 and every single person who has stepped up since to claim Jesus as their own. Who are we anyway? We are the people of Jesus in this place, ready and willing to do as Jesus asks, as best as we are able.

In closing, I would like to share a beautiful prayer I came across just yesterday at a funeral for a friend of mine, my former Spiritual Director, Sister Mary Costello of the Sisters of Mercy religious order. When a sister dies, many funerary traditions kick in for women religious and one of those practiced by the Sisters of Mercy is really quite lovely. All the sisters who are able to come to the funeral and just before the mass begins, they offer what they call a Communal Service of Prayer for their departed sister. It is led not by the presiding priest but by the nuns of the community for that community specifically. But on this occasion, they invited all of us present to participate. It was deeply moving. I’m telling you about it this morning because the closing prayer of that service, created by an order of Roman Catholic nuns, sums up so perfectly what the United Church of Christ and our church hopes to be as we live into God’s call to be the people of God witnessing to the glory of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit to all the world. I can think of no better way to conclude this morning. So, from the Sisters of Mercy ...

We pray in thanksgiving for all who have allowed the message of Jesus to find generous expression in their lives. We pray in thanksgiving for men and women of all faiths who bring love and peace and hope into the world. We pray that our awareness of oneness with God and all people and all that exists will expand our hearts and minds to allow the Spirit of all life to move ever more freely in us. We pray this prayer for ourselves, our church, our country, for all humanity and for all creation. Amen.

