

**“TOGETHER”**  
**Acts 1:6-14; John 17:20-26**  
**May 8, 2005**  
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It has been more than 14 years since the Turners left Corvallis, almost that much since the organ was dedicated; and as Kathy and I head for retirement, it is very good to be back in this congregation that means so much to us. None of you looks a day older, of course. It is Ascension Day in the Christian Church, but that's too mysterious for me and I am not going to speak about that. It is also Mother's Day in American culture. Years ago, here I believe, a bunch of mothers told me I could skip talking about that since the culture, lead by Hallmark Cards and the florist industry, has pretty much taken care of it. For example, Ellen Goodman wrote this:

“I wonder what the Founding Mothers of Mother's Day would make of it all: those 19th century women who organized mothers' work days so as to improve sanitation; those post-Civil War mothers who tried to bridge the gap between North and South; and that pacifist, Julia Ward Howe, who organized the first Mother's Day for peace. What would they think of a holiday that began with feminism and pacifism and ended up with perfume and flowers? What would they make of a day to change the world that became a day to get breakfast in bed?”

So I get to preach about the Bible, the text from Acts, informed also by Jesus' prayer in John 17 that we UCCers use for our motto, our identity-or what used to be our identity.

You will not be surprised to hear that in the last decades, well before the scandal over abuse of children by clergy, the churches - and not only the Catholic church - have suffered a crisis of confidence. While large numbers believe in God, far fewer trust and believe in their religious leaders. We might be a little complacent about this. After all, what institutions and what leaders are not being questioned, and often rejected, today? Compared to physicians, hospitals and our healthcare institutions; attorneys, judges and our legal institutions; politicians, government employees and our political institutions; teachers, administrators and our educational institutions; business, finance and labor leaders, and our economic institutions - to name but a few - people who lead our churches still rate fairly high.

But let's not be complacent. Instead, let us understand what is happening to leadership and institutional trust. And then let us pledge ourselves not to become more effective, more efficient religious institutions, because that's not what we need. We will find, I believe, that what is needed first is not better religious leadership from a few who manage churches for their members, but a renewal of spiritual leadership from both chancel and pew: A recommitment to living the ministry each one of us is called to offer. And where to start?

J. B. Priestly, the irascible genius of British left-wing literature, said in one of his plays: “We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other. And I tell you that the time will soon come when, if people will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it

in fire and blood and anguish.”<sup>1</sup>

Karl Barth, the 20th century’s most influential theologian, was shaped by both world wars. Late in life he wrote: “Human being is being with other humans. Apart from this relationship we become inhuman. We are human by being together, by seeing, hearing, speaking with and standing by one another.”<sup>2</sup>

The point is that long before John Donne wrote it we knew that “No man is an island, entire of itself; each of us is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.” This was St. Paul’s central preaching to the conflicted congregation in Corinth and the major point in the epistle of First John. Priestly’s warning came, by the way, in the mid 1930s: Hitler in power but two short years. Today the consequences of not heeding his counsel could be as severe.

But here is the problem. Those same polls that tell us fewer people trust religious leaders and institutions also tell us that one big reason for that slippage is that people want a more individualized faith; that increasingly their religious affirmations are private. “It’s just between you and me, God,” is how they put it; and they surely do not want priests, ministers, congregations, hierarchies or church assemblies telling them what to think, believe and do. Even if they should commit to a church, they are likely to do so because a certain congregation has a program, or a preacher, or a feeling that meets their individual needs or the needs of their nuclear family. For the past generation, churches have felt they must minister in a climate of religious consumerism - a long way from the fellowship of the cross.

The Book of Acts records the beginning of the Christian movement, the Christian church. In chapter one, we read of Christ’s disciples, “. . .When they had come together. . .” Christ told them of the gift of the Holy Spirit and that they are to be witnesses both at home and in every corner of the earth. Then he ascends into heaven. In chapter two next week, we will read of Christ’s disciples, “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly. . .the rush of a mighty wind. . .” There will be over thirty other uses in Acts of the word “together,” not the least of them being:

“And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as had any need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts. . .”<sup>4</sup>

A favorite preacher of mine suggested that the multiple use of “together” in this formative account of the Christian witness was not referring merely to the disciples’ geographic proximity. “Together” implies a full measure of spiritual and psychological unity. It’s a Community of Faith Luke is observing, pointedly not a collection of individuals who show up regularly in the same building to meet their private needs.

This is the same hope that John recalls in his famous chapter 17: Jesus’ prayer for the unity of his disciples and all who will follow him because of them. Later in the chapter we would take a phrase for our UCC motto: That They May All Be One.

For the past years, it has been my job as an interim minister to solicit hopes and ideas from people in congregations aimed at finding a vision that might guide them as they seek a new Pastor. What I invariably find is both encouraging and not surprising. Above all, what we need and want is to deepen our spiritual life and to learn better how to nurture each other. That's the encouraging part. The not surprising part is that we are uncertain as to what that means and not sure we have time in our schedules to do whatever it means. And surely the discipline (and from that, the word 'disciple') to learn to do what they say they most want is either misunderstood or resented or both.

Many of us are experiencing conflicting emotions about our churches. We appreciate so much of what goes on in spots like this and we are honored to be part of it. We look around and realize we are greatly blessed by the levels of caring and talent so many bring with their commitments. In our better moments we remember that this is not our doing, but, rather, an extension of God's grace and the flow of God's spirit among us. But we also feel a certain uneasiness. Blessed by our great diversity of religious and national background, we wonder if we have tapped that resource well enough for us genuinely to grow in our appreciation of the variety and wonder of God's whole people. Do we exist as separate groups under one roof? This trend is most apparent to me in my own tradition, the United Church of Christ, where in the past four decades we have moved - slumped really - from a strong ecumenical commitment to Unity with Diversity, to a timid, individualistic, at times coward-like, post-modern and surely relativistic setting we now call Diversity is our Unity. That's our culture talking - and we are captive to it. Not knowing who we are, we have decided that who we are is just whatever you want to be and we will honor you for it. It is this spirit that the new pope sees lurking in his own church and is determined to head off. I wonder if he can. Sadly, I think not.

I am one who thinks the conflicts in our churches over who we are is good for us; and while I cannot share the authority structure of Catholicism, and largely disagree with what it says to its church internally, I appreciate what the hierarchy's rigidity does for the rest of us. Studies show that it is the vital congregations, seeking to deepen their spiritual roots, that are also aware of their difficulties and conflicts.

Now, we can either be frustrated by their realization, or we can be energized by all that our church is and does and determine to try even harder. OR-and this is my recommendation - we can stop the committee meetings, the rehearsals, the computer keyboard and photocopy machines, stop all the programs - at least in our mind's eye and hearts meditation - Stop! And ask ourselves again: how is Christ calling me and us as a church now, in my life in this place? And we will ask that question knowing we shall not find the answer unless we ask it together - in the full spiritual meaning of the word.

So let me suggest three points for your own contemplation about our life and leadership. First, when we are together, we realize that God is not calling us primarily to lead a religious organization and create a successful church. God is calling us through Christ to make the commitments in our lives that will build a community of faith and share a spiritual journey - marked by acceptance of God's grace for ourselves and loving and just service to others. Each

one of us, personally, and all of us-together-are called to be the body of Christ. “Church” is not something someone else does for us: some preacher or religious educator or youth leader. It means every person in this room is personally responsible for building up the community of faith-together. Only when there is “together” is there the presence of the Holy Spirit whose counsel we must have to do anything.

Second, it is okay to be frustrated in our journey. Think about it. We are both “little lower than the angels” and heirs of a fallen sinful race, and the struggle between those biblical descriptions of our humanity, between our own light and shadow, remains with us. St. Paul loved the church greatly and gave his life for it, but he would not have us forget we hold that treasure in earthen vessels, very ordinary indeed. We are both glorious and ridiculous. We can be holy and we can be horrid.

The fact is that the very meaning and purpose of “church” is always an open question. Martin Luther gave us several word images to ensure that our ecclesiastical apple carts never sit still long enough for the fruit to rot. Not only did he say “The priesthood of all believers.” We’re still working on that. He gave us “justification by faith through the grace of God.” Meditate on that one a while. Or, how about “the primary authority of scripture.” Think what it might mean, as we pray and ponder together, if faith, grace and scripture were what led us. Think what that might mean for us in our lives if it were just not the private needs and the multiplicities of programs to meet those private needs-and the stressed-out schedules to perform all those programs-that shaped who we are. Luther also said, surely in his most thundering voice: “Ecclesia Semper Reformanda”: the church always being reformed.

If we want to live in the spirit of God, then the key understanding is this: just when we think we have it all nicely pinned down with Christ comfortably established in our plans and programs, then again comes that resurrection shout that so scared the bejeebers out of the disciples who first thought, “Oh, well, this is sad, but at least now he’s dead and we can get on with our lives.” He’s loose! And not long after, just about now, in fact, comes the wind of the spirit to blow through our complacency, burn away our fears and get us moving in new directions. As I look around, it is really fear that is propelling so much of what we call “spiritual renewal” that we see. No, the voices I hear sound very old, indeed.

So, first is the issue of personal responsibility for the community we call “church.” Second is a certain humility about our own ideas and institutions, and our need always to stay open to new winds of the Spirit. And now, third, in John 17 at the end of his ministry, Christ offers his high priestly prayer for his disciples. The heart of this most famous prayer of Jesus’ prayers after the Lord’s Prayer, is his hope that they might be one. (There’s that together thing again.) Being “together” takes three forms, each offering a point of guidance for spiritual leadership. First, Jesus prays for himself, that now that his work is accomplished, he might be reunited with God. It is essential we learn how to pray for ourselves. Secondly, those first disciples themselves must be one: in order that the work might be carried on, that they might have joy in doing it. But then, in the third part, Jesus prays for the rest of us: those who follow after the first disciples: that we also may be one. Why? So that the world might believe Jesus’ message in the first place: the message of love and compassion and justice.

We are after far more than moral babysitting for the kids and coffee-hour conversation for the adults. What any church must be to call itself a church is the knitting together of those bonds of deep friendship that make a community of faith. We have little to teach the rest of the world, starting with our own children, if we cannot reach into the stress and anxiety that dominate our days and wrench from them that gentle compassion that makes us true disciples of Christ.

It is not for ourselves alone that we do any of this. Jesus, and the host of faithful since, remind us that in our new vulnerability, one with each other, in the community it creates around the spirit of Christ, we will learn how to reach out to those in need: the bypassed and abused and oppressed of our world. But first we must learn how to tear up our private schedules and decide that we will be together. And, therefore, the fact that I may be a woman seeking affirmation, or a man needing clarity and gentleness, or a person from a minority ethnic group demanding recognition, or a person of a minority sexual orientation seeking welcome, is not as important as the fact that I am a child of God called by Christ in discipleship to the Way of Truth, which is always the way of community, one with the other. If the United Church of Christ is to learn its founding hope anew, it has to stop being a collected caucus of special interests and remember where spiritual leadership begins.

Let us pray: Holy One, may we share the many gifts you have scattered among us in ways that benefit the whole people of God. For we know we do not live alone. We are responsible for each other. And our faith calls us to recapture the conviction that makes us one. Amen.

Notes: 1. From Priestly's *An Inspector Calls*, 1935

2. In *God Here and Now: Religious Perspectives*.

3. Not the least of them being *Habits of the Heart*, by Robert Bellah, et.al.

4. Acts 2:44-47