

“WHERE THE PAST MEETS THE FUTURE”

John 14:8-17, 25-27; Acts 2:1-21

May 27, 2007 - PENTECOST

The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger

Today is Pentecost, the day we call the birthday of the church. In the early days of our faith, Pentecost was a celebration only slightly less important than Easter. It marked, not so much a birthday party for the church, but a remembrance that the church was fully birthed on this holy day. On Pentecost, the church was loosed, if you will, from the umbilical cord of immediate connection to the Risen Christ present in its midst, loosed to breathe on its own, to grow on its own, to mature, and finally to take upon itself, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the responsibility for pointing to and working for the coming of God's kingdom.

Pentecost as originally celebrated was a time for taking stock. If God has given the work of the Kingdom into our hands, how are we doing with that? It was a good question for the infant church to ask itself, given all the growth, changes, and controversies of those early years. It's an equally good question for us to ask ourselves now, and I would say an especially good question for us this year, as we in the United Church of Christ mark our 50th birthday. God has given this small corner of the church universal into our care. How do we think we're doing with that this Pentecost morning?

Two weeks ago was the annual Assembly of the Central Pacific Conference. John Thomas, President and General Minister of the UCC, was the keynote speaker. He gave two addresses, one Friday night and another Saturday morning. How many of you here have ever had the chance to see or hear John Thomas? Well, I am a John Thomas fan. Before he was our denominational president, he was our chief ecumenical officer. Which means that he worked in both ecumenical and inter-faith settings, in this country and around the world, listening, being in conversation, looking to clarify points of agreement and disagreement and to build alliances. Ecumenical work is demanding and exhausting; it requires intelligence, biblical and theological depth, and great patience and personal restraint. John Thomas has all those. He combines a passion for the United Church of Christ with a knowledge and appreciation for the rest of the Christian Church and the religious world beyond the Christian church. I find him thoughtful, careful, compassionate, a quiet but persuasive leader.

At the assembly, Thomas spoke about the UCC on this its 50th birthday, an assessment of the celebrations and challenges we face at this point where past meets future. In good Pentecost tradition, I'd like to share with you my rememberings of some of what he said, because I think he said it well, and it's an important "taking stock" message. I hope I can do an equally good job as his interpreter.

Thomas began by talking about the "brand identity" of our denomination. How have we distinguished ourselves in the world of Christian faith? What is the part of the Christian message we best understand and live out? From its roots as a uniting church in the 1950s, the UCC has grown into what Thomas names the Church of Extravagant Welcome. Isn't that a wonderful phrase. Extravagant Welcome. In Jesus Christ, God has shown us God's extravagant welcome, and calls us as well to an answering openness. Which means that within the church, we are ever opening our arms one embrace wider to

bring together as many kinds of Christians as possible, and turning outward, outside the church we welcome into common cause the poor, the oppressed, the victimized, all those marginalized by the larger society. If there is a part of the gospel we truly get, one insight that binds us together, it is this. We, The United Church of Christ, when we are at our most faithful, can be truly the church of extravagant welcome. On the one hand, that is the cause of our deepest celebration. It is also, Thomas pointed out, the biggest challenge we face.

Paying lip service to diversity is easy; reducing our common life to platitudes of love and community is easy. Honest commitment to holding together those of divergent points of view about worship, theology, political action, and culture is difficult. By definition it creates conflict, often significant conflict. The UCC is committed to hearing all its differing voices at the common table. An admirable goal. However, to do that well means all of us schooling ourselves better in biblical study and articulation, in careful listening, in the humility that truly accepts that anyone else at the table has a right to express their truth and that that person, even if they disagree with us completely, might have a better understanding than we. It's a hard discipline, but what better discipline at which to grow proficient? In the 1600s, we Congregationalists claimed the high calling of being a "City upon a hill," with all eyes turned towards us as we sought to form a society that modeled God's perfect church and state. In the 1950s, we challenged ourselves to re-knit the fractured members of the body of Christ; now we call upon ourselves to extravagantly welcome the widest possible community in the name of Christ and to deal faithfully with the conflict that creates. We've never lacked for some combination of arrogance and high calling! But I agree with John Thomas, that if we can learn to do this well, if we can honestly, deeply, and faithfully live out our diversity, then we will have done something important for ourselves and for the church of Jesus Christ. Our greatest celebration and our greatest challenge rolled up in one.

Beyond that, Thomas challenged the church to grow in the areas of personal piety and evangelism. We in the UCC, we're relatively adept in the language and practice of welcome and social justice. We are less adept at nurture, both the nurture of our individual faith life and the nurture of the church. My younger sister is a conservative evangelical Christian. Prayer to her is as natural and almost as frequent as breathing. She reads her Bible every day, and has brought up her children to pray, reflect, and seek God's counsel in all decision making. What would Jesus do? It's more than a slogan for her household. And while I disagree with her on many, if not most, issues of theological interpretation, I understand what Thomas means about doing better at nurturing personal piety. There is an organic wholeness between my sister's faith and life that most liberal Christians I know, including myself, fail to attain. Her faith is a resource for her when times are hard, bringing resilience and new life. We can do better at that, for ourselves and for our children; and in fact, Thomas reminded us, we must, if we are to stay the course of the exacting work we have cut out for ourselves. And as for evangelism, the dreaded "E" word, doesn't it strike you ironic that we who pride ourselves for the welcome we extend, most of us become terrified at even the thought of inviting a friend or neighbor to church? Why are we so timid about inviting others to join us? We're not talking about hog-tying them and forcing them into the pews. Inviting. Some would consider it a first step in welcoming. And quite frankly, if we are to do the work we want to do in the world of extravagant welcome and social justice, we need more people and we need more money. Our dwindling resources, both personal and financial, play a large role in turning the former mainline denominations into sideline denominations. Is that what we want? Aren't we smart and

creative enough and grounded in our integrity that we can find a way to invite without seeming to impose? The denomination can launch as many "Still Speaking" campaigns as it can finance, and buy expensive TV commercials, but there is no more effective evangelism tool than personal invitation. Another challenge from our denominational leader.

There was more. Thomas spoke about his desire to turn the UCC into less of a three-ring circus and more of a circus parade, giving up some small measure of our independence to work together more effectively towards commonly agreed upon ends. He spoke of the challenges of structure and finance, the relationship between the national church and the local church. He expressed his sadness over the reality that the UCC's support of gay marriage cost us congregations who have distanced themselves or just plain left the denomination. He didn't regret the stand we took, only that we couldn't build more unanimity within the church over this issue.

That was the major thrust of John Thomas's assessment of how we have done this year at Pentecost with the part of the church God has given into our care. It's a mixed record; we have many challenges ahead of us. But for myself, I choose them. On this Pentecost day, at the intersection of past and future, I choose to be part of the church of extravagant welcome with all its blessings and all its work to be done. I hope you would choose it as well. Thanks be to God. Amen.