Sermon given by John H. Kemp
Pilgrim Congregational Church
Duluth, Minnesota
August 14, 1994

WILL THE REAL JESUS STEP FORWARD?

I Corinthians 3:9-11
Ephesians 4:1-6

***

It's an unexpected setting for one of our favorite hymns - "The Church's One Foundation Is Jesus Christ Her Lord." Back in the 1860s the Church of England was in turmoil. For decades it had been attacked for remaining a bastion of the British establishment, indifferent to the social ills brought on by the Industrial Revolution. Now, scientific thought debunked traditional religious verities. Astronomy, geology, and, most significantly, Darwinism, made agnostics out of many formerly God-fearing Anglicans.

At the same time an even more devastating movement threatened those who remained religiously-inclined. The new science of biblical criticism sought to discover through careful research and study the original documents and chronological order of the Bible's books. This, of course, challenged old assumptions of biblical inerrancy, that the entire Bible was the revealed Word of God, every word to be accepted literally.

In the face of all this, not surprisingly a large part of the Church of England hunkered down to protect its supremacy. The High Church movement developed, fighting social reform and ignoring scientific advances, convinced that the inerrant Bible, the Sacraments and liturgy would save England from the evils of democracy, atheism, and spiritual and moral degeneration.

In this setting Samuel Stone, young Anglican priest, wrote today's hymn, which was to become one of the beloved hymns of the church. He wrote it out of an impassioned conflict in his Church which, of course, to him was the one true Church. It seems a South Afrcian bishop became an outspoken advocate of modern biblical scholarship (a Bishop Pike of his day) and was duly condemned, then excommunicated by his superior. Stone's contribution to the controversy was this hymn, a rousing defense of High Church doctrine, particularly as grounded in the Apostles' Creed. That defense was supplemented by some not-very-subtle mudslinging at the opposition, namely the radical bishop and all others who dared accept biblical scholarship. Somehow that verse got dropped from our current hymnal:

"Though with a scornful wonder we see her [the church] sore oppress by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distrest'"

But right shall prevail; those heresies will be weeded out..."and soon the night of weeping shall be the morn of song!"

Isn't there a bit of irony in a hymn rooted in intransigent creedal orthodoxy becoming a favorite even of our free church, non-creedal tradition? Sometimes I think we're seduced by singable tunes and give the lyrics scant notice. But with this one I'd like to believe we do affirm and celebrate Jesus as the church's one foundation. After all, isn't it he who makes the Christian community distinctive, regardless of creed? But who is that Jesus?

When I chose the other hymns for today, I picked a couple of old gospel hymns for contrast. What I suddenly realized Friday was their origin in a very different tradition and approach to Christianity, namely American frontier religion - about as far as you can get from High Church Anglicanism.

American frontier religion - which shaped much of the spirit of American Protestantism even today - grew out of the 19th century revival and circuit-riding preachers. Its entire focus was personal salvation. Jesus was the instrument of that salvation: "What a friend we have in Jesus all our sins and griefs to bear;" "He Leadeth Me, by his own hand he leadeth me!" And the offertory solo: "Blessed Jesus, thou hast bought us, thine we are..." They are words that have brought comfort and hope to generations who've sought strength from personal faith. They still do. At the same time, what a contrast to Jesus Christ, Lord and Foundation of the Church as defined by its historical creeds! Yet we sing these hymns side by side. Will the real Jesus please step forward!

There are common strands. Both traditions turned away from social reform (though frontier religion did spawn the temperance movement). Both rejected modern science and biblical scholarship. But they moved in different directions: high church Anglicans reinforcing English class structure, frontier religion the radical individualism that promoted our peculiar notions of equality; the Anglicans moved into high church doctrine creedally grounded; American Protestants into low church fundamentalism that, in truth, has been governed by its own creedal strictures.

In both, conflict continues: in the Anglican Church, now over women's ordination, in which many dissenting high church priests would return to Roman Catholicism rather than see their creedal understanding perverted; in American Protestantism, the ongoing conflict between fundamentalists and those with less literalist, more human justice-oriented understandings of a biblical faith - women's rights, abortion, and gay rights all reflect this struggle.

All the while, we've continued to sing their songs with fervor and pleasure, while taking our own journey, celebrating our rootage in the historical church, honoring Jesus as its head and

our Lord, and seeking a deeper understanding of our biblical roots, in both old and New Testaments. Will the real Jesus please step forward! A part of our quest has been to understand who Jesus was and what he means to us today. We honor the work of scholarship; we also search for some kind of personal relation with him as a living Presence in our own lives.

After Albert Schweitzer wrote The Quest for the Historical Jesus early in this century, scholarly interest shifted to literary issues in our Scriptures. Only recently has interest renewed in discovering the historical Jesus, unwrapping him from the layers of doctrine applied by the church from its early generations on.

Two weeks ago I attended an exciting seminar on the new Jesus Studies led by Marcus Borg and other scholars who are coming up with important findings as they distinguish between the historical Jesus of the gospels and the post-Easter Christ as the church interpreted him. This is really an exciting time to tune in to New Testament studies: they offer us an understanding of Jesus relevant both to his time and ours and stripped of a lot of doctrinal garb. This fall I want to share some of these ideas with you.

We return to today's hymn. Despite its origins in a nasty Anglican creedal tiff, it still offers us a strong foundation for our faith - in Jesus Christ, as we undertake our faith journey in our family called church.

Turn to it again in your hymnals, this time to its second verse. These words, based on the passage from Ephesians we read earlier, remind us that despite our divisions, despite our contentiousness, as Christians we're called to be one in Christ. We in the UCC were born with this vision, very much in the ecumenical spirit of this century. Still, we're hardly immune from our own forms of contentiousness. We know that very well in the life of a local congregation. Also we often find ourselves differing sharply from other traditions, particularly those who do not share our passions for human justice or those with restrictive, judgmental doctrinal positions.

In our liberality, we may afford them the right to pursue their own course, even when they don't reciprocate. At the same time, aren't we, like every one else, tempted to feel ourselves superior to other paths? After all, if we didn't, we wouldn't believe or behave as we do! The danger is the small step to arrogance which only builds walls, never bridges. Our unity in Christ remains a vision toward which we're all called to strive.

The final verse concludes with a prayer that we be faithful in our journey together. As we seek Jesus and his meanings for our lives, those words lift our spirits to the God of us all, the God who offers us presence and strength as we move through life, day by day.