

Doing Church
February 22, 1998
John 17:11-21
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I remember it as clearly as if it were yesterday. It was a very nice woman, poised and friendly. "What church do you go to?" she asked. "Union Congregational United Church of Christ" I answered. "Oh--is that Lutheran?" she responded.

Have you had this conversation? I can't tell you how many times I have answered the question of where I go to church, only to be met with raised eyebrows or blank, unsure faces. I was constantly trying, as a youth, especially in high school, to explain what my church was. I became friends with a whole group of fundamentalists during high school who were good folk and nice friends, though not as wonderful and all consuming as my friends from church. Still--good kids. but they could not get a handle on this UCC thing, and finally one of them even came right out and told me that he wasn't sure if I was even Christian, and wouldn't I like to come to his church and be baptized correctly? I declined--not very politely!

I did better in college, because the professors at St. Olaf were well aware of the UCC, and the kids there pretty much didn't care, since I was very active in the campus ministry program.

And then i went to seminary, and stopped even being asked! At least until I moved to Omaha.

And then it started all over again--what church, what is that, do you believe in the

virgin Mary, in baptism by immersion, in the literal interpretation of the Bible (that phrase always kills me--a literal interpretation?)--who are you, anyhow?

I have always had a really odd list of stuff that I tell people, depending on the context of the question. I have told people about the Puritans and Pilgrims. I have told people that we are basically mainline church folk. I have talked about being diverse and joked about the UCC standing for Unitarians Considering Christ. I have boasted about my love for the church, and reminded people that our denomination founded colleges all across the country, starting with Harvard, and never looking back.

But there has never been one, simple answer. I can't seem to say to people anything that rings a bell, such as telling them that I am Lutheran or Catholic or Presbyterian or even something like Mormon or Jehovah's witness would. It seems as though the UCC is best known, not by the words or words that we claim, but by how we live and the actions that we stand by.

I remember, at a continuing education event a couple of years ago, identifying myself as a pastor from Pilgrim UCC, and having the person respond, "Oh, you're the church with that big outreach fund, right?" I nodded, and he continued, "and didn't you have a lesbian minister once?" I nodded again. "And I bet I know some of your members." And then he rattled off several names of people who are both members here and very active in various ways around the community. At which point I laughed, and told him that he seemed to have us clearly identified.

What makes us unique is, by and large, the way that we seem to do church. I mean this to include a wide number of areas. The way that we do worship is relatively

unique, believe it or not. Many years ago, when the earliest folk who eventually became the Congregationalists started to come to the surface, they were Anglicans, part of the Church of England. They had become disillusioned with the amount of pomp and fuss involved with the Anglican liturgy and worship, and concerned about the use of creeds, and wanted to reform the church, to take it back to a simpler, more basic service of the word from the scripture. In frustration at not being able to change things enough, many of the ones we called Puritans--as in trying to purify the church--became Separatists--those separating from the church. That, of course, became illegal, and the Separatists left England for Holland, and eventually, joined with the Puritans, went to the New World in order to create, not just freedom of worship, but a religious community, with all people required to be part of their church. The worship of God was full of preaching, praying, and music that was simple, based on the psalms, and with very little or no instrumentation.

Our worship now is still made up of the basics from that time--we emphasize the use of scripture, we focus our worship on the sermon, and we have nothing in our service that we do every week, except maybe the Lord's Prayer, which is part of scripture.

But it wasn't just worship that created the schism in the Anglican church. Those early Puritans and Separatists were focused on living what they read in the Bible. Life was entirely wrapped around following the word of God in the New and in the Old Testament quite closely. Though there might be arguments about some meanings in scripture, it was the centrality of that word and the obvious need to follow through on what was written there that became the basis for running not only the church, but the family life, the individual life, and especially the community of each village and town. Early settlement government was based on Biblical principles and early church practice. One didn't just say that one would honor their father and mother, this became

a very clear set of behaviors. One didn't just read Jesus' command to spread the gospel, one did it--to neighbors, to the native tribes, to everyone around. One didn't just say that one loved one's neighbor, one did it--with food, with clear eyed judgment, with help in harvest, with firmness and hope.

And this has certainly carried through the centuries.

I truly love the windows in this church, and actually some of my very favorite windows are those that are in the formal entryway, through those doors. They are historical windows, but they emphasize how much we have been involved in doing church, with the whole of our lives. One scene shows the people leaving Holland, with their pastor encouraging them and reminding them that God always has more light and truth to break forth from the holy word. These people, with all of their faults and frailties, left for a new place because they wanted to follow the word in their own way. They were not contented to live by someone else's standards, but felt that God had given them a new word to follow. It took guts.

Another panel shows the haystack meeting, where a group of young college men gathered to form the first formal American Missionary Society, created with the intention of spreading the Word of God through Jesus Christ to all lands. And though we know some of the troubling stories about those people, such as the cultural emphasis they seemed to place on Christianity, putting Hawaiian women into wool, for example, still, they risked everything to share their richest treasure with people that they had never even seen.

And then there is the abolition movement, heavily assisted by the Congregationalists, who helped in the underground railroad movement, and who were the main Caucasian players trying to help the Africans in the Amistad story. The Congregational women were at the front of the suffrage movement, the

Congregationalists helped create many Black Colleges after the Civil War, not only in the north, but all over the south. Many churches were built on reservations, and all across the plains states you can find tiny Congregational churches, in every other town. (We had an agreement with the Presbyterians that they would build in the other towns--we took turns!!)

And our beautiful front window with its emphasis on education just reminds us also that the people who came before us put so much importance on the need for faith to be informed, that each person needed to discern from the scriptures what God had in store for them. They wanted an educated clergy. but even more, they wanted a people of faith who were informed about that--and about everything else. These folk were no fools.

It is a vivid story.

But it is a multi-part story, because all through Congregational History was the drive to bring people of faith together. The Puritans merged with the Pilgrims to become the Congregationalists. The Congregationalists merged with the Christian church to become the Congregational Christian Church of America. and the CC church merged with the German Evangelical and Reformed church of America to form the United church of Christ in 1957. It was at the time of the UCC merger that a phrase from scripture became a focus for the denomination, and in many ways that phrase, and the context of scripture that it comes from truly describes who we are and continue to be.

The phrase is, " That they may all be one..." It comes from a section of the gospel of John. In this section, Jesus is praying for the disciples, but also for all that he knew would some day follow the way of those disciples. It was the night before his death. "While I was with them" , says Jesus to God, " I protected them. but now that I am

coming to you, they need you more. I have given them your word", Jesus continues, "and they have been hated because of it, for they do not belong the the world, but to me. I am not asking that you take them out of the world, but that you protect them from evil, because I am sending them out into the world so that through the truth, that all who hear the word and believe it might be one."

I have given them your word. they are going to get into trouble because of it. they need, more than anything else, to be made one with one another so that that community of faith and unity of purpose will help keep them in the face of danger, fear, sorrow, and anything else that the world might dish out to the. And, of course, the faith did exactly that for the ones killed by Caesar lions, for those who had to worship in underground catacombs, or in hidden places in the woods. it worked for those who worked in foreign lands, with people from utterly different cultural contexts. It worked in little prairie towns where there was nothing to support them but each other against weather and starvation and loneliness. It worked during wars, it worked during the civil rights movement, it worked in so many ways.

That all who believe in the truth of that word might be one in the faith. It was the hope of the Christ on the night before his death. It was the hope of the founders of the UCC as they pulled people from different histories and backgrounds together in Christ. Black Christians from the deep south and New England Congregationalists, South Dakota German Congregational and Pennsylvania Reformed folk. People of Asian and Hispanic descent, people of old colonial heritage and people from hand clapping, foot stomping inner city Chicago--they all reached out to one another because of their common conviction that through Christ, God had called us to be one, telling the truth, the word of God to all believers.

Which is why, of course, that whenever you get three UCC members in a room you have at least four opinions! And yet there is one of our churches in Iowa whose church covenant describes out both their paradoxical situation and unity very well. their covenant reads, "We agree to differ. We gather to love. We unite to serve."

That's pretty much a synopsis of the whole thing. Differing people who value that difference that gather around the word of God. And that word, which is changing our lives, sends us out to bring it, in many and varied ways, into the community where the church is located, and beyond. Work with the homeless. Support human rights. Protect the earth. Nurture the youth. Value women, feed the hungry, teach those who need to learn, create clean water, sustainable agriculture, new jobs, self supporting families. Love God, love neighbor, love self. And the people of the UCC continue to be active in reaching out to all people of faith, from Lutheran to Moravian, from our Jewish brothers and sisters who are our foundation in the faith to the Pentecostals. From Methodists to Muslims. That they may all be one--all the people of God.

There may never be a simple answer to the question, "What church are you from, and what does it believe?" You are never going to be able to answer, "UCC" and have anyone at all ever say, "Oh--of course." What you will have to do is point to how it is we do church, and as you tell it, that word will have had more light and truth break forth from it once again. Thank God!