

***“Gathered Together”***

***Ruth 1.1–18 & Matthew 18.15–20***

***The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 12 November 2006***

If there is any story in the Bible that exemplifies covenant faithfulness, it’s the story of Ruth and Naomi. By a show of hands, how many of you have heard this story at a wedding? It’s kind of funny that a story about two women – a daughter-in-law and a mother-in-law – is used when a man and woman are married. So much for the one man, one woman thing! With apologies to Patsy Cline, the basic message of Ruth is “stand by your woman.”

Covenants come in all shapes and sizes. This morning at the 8:15 service Todd and Kerri Mitchell made a promises as part of a baptismal covenant to teach their daughter, Addison, the Christian faith “through worship, service, and experience.” And in return the congregation entered a covenant to support Todd and Kerri in raising Addison, and to love and support Addison as she “grows in wisdom and stature with God and all people.” It’s an exchange of promises that we make to one another, and it forms a key component of what we do together as a congregation of people gathered together. That’s one of the reasons when we perform baptisms in our tradition, we do them most often in the context of a large service, so that those gathered can be involved in the covenant.

And at our 10:45 service today, we welcomed a group of new members into the fellowship of this church by exchanging words of covenant with them. These are the promises they made: “I give myself unreservedly to God’s service and take this to be my church. Ever mindful of the welfare of my brother and sister members, I promise to walk with them in faithfulness and Christian love. I promise, so far as I am able, to attend the services of this church, observe its sacraments, support its benevolences and endeavor to make it a fruitful body of Christian people.” Those are the promises we who are members of this congregation have made to one another.

You will notice that becoming a member in our church does not involve the recitation of a creed. From our Evangelical and Reform tradition, we acknowledge that creeds are “testaments of faith, not tests of faith.” The constitution of our congregation specifies only one, single right: “Members shall have the undisturbed right to follow the word of God according to the dictates of their own conscience, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit,” which comes from our Congregational tradition.

What binds the members of United Church of Christ congregations together is not that we hold exactly the same views or that we acknowledge a certain orthodoxy – or “right opinion” – it is that we have covenanted to journey together with each other.

I really love the Salem Church Covenant of 1629, which says, “We covenant with the Lord and one with another and do bind ourselves in the presence of God, to walk together in all his ways, according as he is pleased to reveal himself unto us in his blessed word of truth.” If you listen carefully to that covenant, you might even hear the message that *God is still speaking*.



Back when I was taking Greek in seminary, I was kind of amazed to learn that the word *synagogue* literally means “coming together.” So, while the Temple in Jerusalem is *the* Temple, the local congregation is a synagogue, an assembly of Jews meeting together in worship. And that notion carries across into our Congregational notions of what it means to be the church.

The church is not an organizational hierarchy. When Roman Catholics talk about “the church,” they may not talking about the local parish, but about the 1 billion Catholics

who are under the authority of the Vatican. And when we talk about “the church,” we are talking about this congregation. Now, you may think, “big deal,” but a good number of people have been martyred because they dared to think that the church is not some assemblage of bishops, priests, and adherents, but rather a gathering of faithful people in a single place at one time.

The word translated as “church” in the New Testament is *ekklesia*, which literally means “assembly,” so it is very close to *synagogue*. Now, think about it for a moment, if we tried to **assemble** the 1.4 million members of the UCC congregations in this country, it would be pretty difficult. So, the way we think about it in the UCC, the *ekklesia* (or assembly or church) is the local church. That’s why you all are members not of the United Church of Christ, but members of Plymouth Congregational UCC.

Have you ever wondered why our forbears were called “Congregationalists?” It’s because of their radical idea that the congregation is the church, and that even within a larger association of churches, the congregation is still the basic unit of the church.

John Robinson, the pastor of the Pilgrims, was an incredible religious thinker. In addition to being their minister in the Netherlands, Robinson had been an ordained minister in the Church of England (against which he rebelled and was exiled) and a professor of divinity at the university in Cambridge. His revolutionary idea was that the true, visible church is one people gathered together in covenant, in one place, at one time into a congregation.<sup>1</sup> That idea is still with us.



Matthew’s gospel contains that famous line, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Now, some people think this means that it only takes two or three people to form a church. And maybe that’s right. But the gospel context is missing in that interpretation. It’s all about accountability. Covenant and accountability are the two dynamic forces that keep the United Church of Christ (and our congregation itself) together. Covenant, of course, is a set of promises and commitments we make to one another. And accountability is the way we follow through, with a sense of responsibility to one another.

In some Christian traditions, there is not a great need to rely on covenant and accountability, because substantial power is invested in a hierarchy of bishops. But our polity, or system of governance, relies far more heavily on the dynamic established in this passage of Matthew’s gospel. Think about it: If there is a problem with someone in the congregation, we are meant to approach them directly. And if you read my article in this month’s *Placard* about direct communication, you’ll hear some resonances in the gospel.

Here is an example. Let’s say that our treasurer, Judy Barth, notices that a bunch of Plymouth’s checks with my signature have been made payable to a casino in Central City. She can approach me directly and ask what’s going on. If I tried to avoid her so that I could try and get away with it, she could call our moderator, Liz McGrew, who could join Judy in confronting me. Now, if I still denied any wrongdoing, then Judy would have back-up from Liz in accusing me of financial malfeasance, and she could bring the charges to the council and even to the congregation itself.

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<sup>1</sup> “There is then had te most full, and perfect communion of the body oin the holy things of God, which is the next and immediate end of the visible church, when all the members thereof do convene and assemble together in some one place.” in *A Just and Necessarie Apologie*. 1619, p. 496.

Not only is that scripturally grounded, it's also the way our system works, because we are accountable to one another. (Of course, it would be a lot easier if we were all United Methodists so Judy could just call up the bishop who could fire me on the spot.)

We are also accountable as a congregation to the other 12 churches in our association, who are responsible for things like approving people for ordination, maintaining the standing of ordained ministers, and welcoming churches into the UCC. So, there is accountability beyond the local church.

In many nondenominational churches, there is little or no accountability beyond the local congregation, which can prove difficult in a crisis. In the recent case of Ted Haggard, his nondenominational New Life Church is somewhat unusual in that it does have arrangements of accountability that functioned well and swiftly in the crisis. I would ask you to keep that congregation in your prayers as they move through a difficult period. And I'd ask that you keep Ted Haggard and his family in your prayers as well. He is a man who has struggled with sexual orientation his whole life, and my hope is that he is able to come to grips with who he really is. Being gay or bisexual is challenging in the best of circumstances, and in a religious tradition that condemns it, one can only imagine the difficult road he has traveled.



I'm going to ask you a question for which I do not have a good, complete answer. *How do we hold each other accountable for the covenants we make here at Plymouth?* Who is going to check on all of our members to be sure that they are observing their part of the covenant?

Do we have police that check our attendance every week to see that people are keeping their promises? Are we all doing our level best at attending services, observing the sacraments, supporting our benevolences and endeavoring to make this a body of fruitful people? And if not, why not?

To some extent, the Board of Deacons is charged with this responsibility. So, if you don't come to church for a year or if you don't contribute financially or if you don't give of your time and talent, you'll get a call from a deacon asking if you would like to continue your membership here at Plymouth. To be honest, it's a fairly lax system, but some people still think that we shouldn't be holding anyone accountable for the covenants they have made to this congregation. I disagree. Ours is not a low-commitment faith. This isn't a social club or a neighborhood association. Rather, we are a people engaged in the work of being gathered together as the church in this time and place, and we are responsible for holding one another accountable. It isn't easy, but "easy" isn't a part of our covenant.



I would ask that as a congregation, we do our best to honor and observe the covenants we have made. And I'd ask that we hold one another accountable to those covenants. By speaking the truth in love...directly to the person we need to approach...we open the possibility for love and grace and health to flourish among us. Amen.