

“Salty, Yeasty People”

Matthew 5.13–20

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 20 January 2008

Sometimes, we who find ourselves in the liberal tradition of American Protestantism, are reticent about expressing who we are and what we stand for. (After all, we don’t want to foist our value system on anyone.) I use the word *liberal* intentionally, because that is the word historians have used to describe an important theological tradition that starts with Friedrich Schleiermacher (a German Reformed theologian of the early 19th century) and in this country from Horace Bushnell in the mid-1800s up through Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich and into the current day.¹

Sometimes I think that we who find ourselves as the heirs of liberal theological tradition are so afraid of offending that we often shrink back from expressing our opinions and our faith. Just because we don’t claim to have the *one, sole* truth does not mean that we don’t have something significant to add to the dialogue.

Here’s an example. One of the classic things that happens in interfaith gatherings among folks who are not used to working in an interfaith setting is that the liberal Protestants fawn all over the minority religious traditions and downplay their own tradition. (“Oh, the rabbi was so marvelous!”) It’s almost as if we adore them because we find them exotic. (That’s not exactly firm theological ground on which to stand.) And maybe the reason we find them exotic is that some of us are not so well acquainted with our own tradition.

I can remember when I was teaching our confirmation class a few years ago. I had one parent who was really upset with me because I hadn’t planned visits to the synagogue, the Islamic Center, and a Roman Catholic parish. It isn’t that I don’t think understanding other faith traditions is important – I do! – but it is absolutely critical that we understand our own tradition first. And these young people had very little understanding about the stories of our faith, what we believe, or the history of Christianity. *We need to know ourselves – the glories as well as the warts – before we can truly appreciate and understand others.*

And we mainline Protestants do have something to say and something to offer in our theological understandings, our national dialogue, and in terms of ethics. *If we hold our tongues for fear of causing offense, the dialogue will be greatly impoverished for our absence.*

Think of it this way: What if Horace Bushnell had not allowed himself to expound upon the new college they were looking at forming out across the bay from San Francisco? We wouldn’t have UC Berkeley, and people like me, who were educated at the University of California, would be out of luck!

What if Reinhold Niebuhr had held his pen still, rather than inscribing the Serenity Prayer because it mentions God? Millions of people in Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-Step programs would be deprived of the richness and deep truth of his words: “God, grant me the grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, the courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.”

And what if Barack Obama denied his own faith and his membership in a congregation of our United Church of Christ? What if he rolled over and played dead when Erik Rush and Sean Hannity accused his UCC congregation of being non-Christian and questioned Mr. Obama’s Christianity? (By the way, it is called Trinity United Church of Christ...not Trinity *Unity* Church! And it’s the largest church in our denomination. And

¹ See the three-volume masterwork, *The Making of American Liberal Theology*, by Gary J. Dorrien, published by Westminster John Knox Press.

article in *Psychology Today* last month identified us as the *Unitarian Church of Christ*...now that's ironic. Having done media relations for a living for 15 years, I can attest that some journalists have trouble stringing more than two words together without messing it up.)

And what if Jackie Robinson had decided to play it safe and stay in the Negro Leagues in baseball? (You may not know that Jackie Robinson was UCC and served as president of United Church Men within our denomination.) How would the still-unfinished business of opportunity for people of all races in this country be different today?

These are people from our own United Church and Congregational tradition. People who have made, and are continuing to make, a difference in this nation and around the world. "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

Each of these people refused to keep their faith in the closet, but rather used their own sense of faith as the grounding for their public engagement...to change God's world for the better!

And you know where I'm going next, don't you? Where would we be if Martin Luther King, Jr., (not a member of the UCC) had decided that it would be easier to keep his nose clean and his lamp hidden in Birmingham, Selma, and across the South? What if he had refused to let his faith inform his speech in Washington in 1963 – a speech replete with biblical references?

We owe it God's world not to hold back! In our covenant with this church, we have pledged ourselves to God's service unreservedly ... that means taking the bushel basket off your light and letting it shine brightly and with clarity. You – here in the pews at Plymouth Congregational UCC – have an obligation to let your light shine! It's not just that you owe it to this great nation...you owe it to God's world!



Since its very beginning, the people who formed the United Church and its predecessor denominations have been a salty, yeasty people who are determined to be bearers of Christ's light in the world.

It is not the case that ours is simply a *feel-good* religion. Our tradition calls us to incredibly deep commitment. Others may talk about how they observe the law, but the truth comes out when we see how we live our faith.

"For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

What exactly is *righteousness*? We may think of righteousness as being strictly pious or moral. The Greek word that the gospel writer uses is *dikiasune* – which can be translated as righteousness or justice, and its root-word is *dike*, also meaning justice. Let me read that last verse again, using a different translation: "For I tell you, unless your *justice* exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Christ calls us to do care about the things and the people he cares about. One of the things we know about the historical Jesus was that he opposed Rome's empire by espousing God's kingdom. We need to care about the things that Jesus himself cared about. That is why we are a church that seeks justice and promotes peace. Those twins – justice and peace – are in many ways subversive because they are anti-imperial when they are joined together. Caesar sought peace through conquest and victory...not peace through justice.



How will you let your light shine? How will you follow in the long line of salty, yeasty people who have formed this church and been formed **by** this church? That's your call...just be sure to let your light shine. Amen.