

The Rev. Sharon A. Benton

June 17, 2007  
UCC 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

Plymouth Congregational UCC

That They May All Be One  
John 17:20-26

No beating around the bush: today I am celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the United Church of Christ.

You are welcome to celebrate with me,  
but one of the wonderful things about being a part of this diverse and  
open-to-different-thoughts-and-opinions denomination,  
is that you don't *have to*.  
But I am, and I hope you join me.

Also, a note to visitors and non-UCCers:  
you don't have to be children of a couple in order to celebrate an anniversary with them –  
perfect strangers have been known to offer best wishes.

Furthermore, we all acknowledge that nobody's perfect –  
a union isn't always everything we'd wish;  
but an anniversary party isn't the time to dwell on such frustrations.  
The Bible is full of mandates to celebrate with joy and thanksgiving –  
for one another and the ways God has worked in our lives.  
An anniversary is an opportunity to remember the good that has come of the relationship  
and pray for its continued creativity.

The Rev. Héctor López notes this conflict in his anniversary reflection.  
As the first Hispanic man ordained to ministry in the UCC  
and the first Hispanic to serve as a conference minister,  
he is clear that he feels no pride in these “accomplishments”.  
He states, “To be first means that there were none before....  
It is a sad commentary that the UCC, formed in 1957, took until 1966 to elect its first Hispanic minister in  
the continental United States, that it took until 1996 to elect its first conference minister,  
and that it was the same person”.

Acknowledging the imperfection and slowness of any one of us individually, much less a body of many, is  
necessary; but in this same conversation, López closes with these words:

“Yet, I have a deep love and an abiding hope for the United Church of Christ.  
I cherish its hard fought faith and justice commitments.  
I treasure its soul and its spirit of openness and invitation.  
I am thankful that in the last two decades it has called persons of many diverse backgrounds to serve  
in all its settings.  
The United Church of Christ is on a journey of justice....  
Its willingness to continue the journey of faith and justice and peace  
is the reason I stayed in the denomination all these years.  
And it is why I remain”.<sup>i</sup>

~~~

This past week I've spent significant time preparing for next week's General Synod and reading the anniversary  
news on the UCC.org website. Synod in the City, as it's being called, promises keynotes from people of faith in all  
walks of life: from theologians like Peter Gomes to politicians like Barack Obama to journalists like Bill Moyers.  
Through my readings I've experienced a range of joyful tears and saddened disbelief and hopeful expectation.  
Like López, I love our church; and, if it's not already there, this morning I hope I might encourage in you even a  
portion of the passion I hold for this united and uniting church that was created out of several, much longer  
histories just 50 years ago.

~~~

Fifty years ago this week, the Rev. Veldon Grasmick, minister of Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Collins, traveled to Cleveland, Ohio as an official delegate for the Congregational Christian Churches, our then denomination.

His vote, cast among many, made the prayerful choice to join with the Evangelical and Reformed Church. Plymouth's own Rev. Grasmick took part in making history – and the making of the United Church of Christ.

This is *our* history.

~~~

I'm a great fan of history, but only as it is told as story.

Tell me *how* and *why* and *when* and *who*!

But don't do it with dates and facts and figures.

Make me feel a *part* of it;

help me *know* the people and be *in* the places;

show me a *connection* through a familiar desire, fear or wonder.

Make me *one* with the history – or I may get lost among the details.

This is similar to how the Bible reaches out to me.

I acknowledge its historical awareness;

but for my reading, its power is in the human connection we can make, in the people seeking to know their maker, teacher, sustainer.

The prayer in this morning's reading –

while often confusing and convoluted so it may lose that personal sense –

touches me as impassioned and longing.

The portion we heard is only a small part of a much longer prayer in John's gospel.

In it, and in the best way he knows, John is trying to convey Jesus' last few hours among his disciples: his love for them,

his faith in God's presence within them,

that they are already a part of *all* –

but that they must remember it, and live it.

He loves them.

And as a lover of my own communities, I can relate to that.

The same is true of the UCC's history.

While I've had to memorize a few dates and names

just so when people ask about my church, I can offer some facts,

the true power lies in the stories and coming to know the denomination through our experiences.

Because really: how can one succinctly and accurately describe the United Church of Christ?

In a 1975 article in *A.D.* magazine Oliver Powell agreed:

"It's mind-blowing" he said, "trying to think of a simple, sensible way to say what the United Church of Christ is.

What a mix! What a beautiful, heady, exasperating, hopeful mix!"<sup>iii</sup>

~~~

That *mix* is not negated by the prayer that we be made one.

Rather, it is the differences which help us to be complete;

just as the Trinity offers 3 distinct ways of experiencing the Divine,

so the differences in community serve in making us whole.

Whole not only as a part of one another – denomination or religion or humanity – but as a part of Creation, as a part of the Holy

“I ask not only on behalf of these [disciples],  
but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word,  
***that they may all be one.***

As you, [God], are in me, and I am in you, may they also be in us”.

...

Despite our “heady, exasperating, hopeful mix”, the prayer remains *that we may all be one* – not just as the UCC, because 50 years ago we chose those words to be incorporated into our logo, but *all* who seek God. This was the hope in which the denomination began.

Which leads me to joyously proclaim, within this cherishing of the UCC,  
my full belief in ecumenism and interfaith efforts –

Jesus’ prayer speaks loudly to me and my passion for the Divine as found through many paths.

I keep a special place for both the United Methodist Church of my youth and  
the Unitarian Universalist Association that opened me to know a God larger than I’d ever imagined.

I get excited when learning about other religions and traditions:  
I love encountering the Holy in new and unexpected ways.

But I also love the United Church of Christ:

not only because it IS ecumenical, but because it is my *home* and my *foundation*.

\*Because of the UCC I am able, even encouraged, to seek Truth in the out-of-the-ordinary corners of Christianity and beyond.

\*Because of the UCC I have been welcomed and affirmed in my experiences of Christ whether they be historical or intellectual or mystical or all or none of the above.

\*Because of the UCC I can sit at Plymouth’s LGBT Pride booth on Saturday, and stand in Plymouth’s pulpit on Sunday.

\*Because of the UCC I am able to read sacred texts and know that they hold God’s voice, speaking in new ways for my life.

These things may be found elsewhere, but I have found them here,  
and I celebrate knowing that, because I have discovered it, *others may discover its diverse welcome also*.  
But not unless we celebrate and share.

I thank God for the last 50 years’ history –  
of discovery and change and hardship and joy.

Now it’s our turn to tell our stories,  
so that the next 50 years will have a history too.

We tell our stories so others can know what we’ve found and possibly find a place among us!  
I know some become uncomfortable with the word, but this is *evangelism, the good news, the story!*

The national church has been encouraging such story-telling:  
not to praise ourselves for how great we think we are, but so we can remember why we keep coming back;  
why we hold faith in community when so much pushes us against it;  
and why others may want to take a chance on seeking God again.

Here are some of my favorite quotes that the UCC has captured:

“I love the church because it’s sort of like the Wizard of Oz – it’s about having a heart and a brain. And courage!”

“I love my church because when we cried together on Sept. 11<sup>th</sup>, we cried for the whole world”.

“I’m single and I love my church because it’s the only place I don’t feel like I need to buy a family size to belong”.

“What I love about the UCC is that it’s about Jesus – not Jesus who’s on our side,  
but Jesus who calls us to walk by his side”.<sup>iii</sup>

...

What about you? Have you a story to share?

I've opened the conversation by telling part of my story in this month's Placard – but you already know more about me than I know about you.

So tell us. What is it about the UCC? Why do you keep coming back?

~~~

Fifty-one years ago, the President of the Evangelical & Reformed Church spoke to the General Council of the Congregational Christian Church as each denomination pondered the possibility of becoming *one*.

He challenged:

“The real worth and validity of this union in the sight of God  
will eventually be measured by how profoundly and with what deepening devotion  
we set out getting God's work done in the world.  
If by the witness of our united churches  
the world's broken-hearted find hope and healing...  
if young men and women are wisely guided  
in the choices they must make  
and strengthened when they have chosen  
'the hard right against the easy wrong;'...  
if the imperatives of God's justice and love  
are brought effectually to bear on the relationships of  
men in our workaday world  
and of nations wrestling with the promise and peril of power...  
then time and the event and the silent whispers of the  
Eternal God  
will confirm our present faith that the  
establishment of the United Church of Christ  
was the doing of His will”.<sup>iv</sup>

These things cannot be measured in statistics – only by stories.

I pray that as we celebrate we will continue to work toward the hope laid out 50 years ago.  
And wherever the next 50 take us, may we open to Christ's prayer ever more:

*that we may all be one.*

Amen.

<sup>i</sup> *UCC@50: Our Future*, J. Martin Bailey and W. Evan Golder, co-editors (United Church of Christ: 2006) p. 58.

<sup>ii</sup> *UCC@50: Our Future*, p. 88.

<sup>iii</sup> *16 Ways to Say "I Love My Church"*, The Stillspeaking Initiative (United Church of Christ).

<sup>iv</sup> www.UCC.org, ([http://www.ucc.org/50/pdfs/litany\\_of\\_light.pdf](http://www.ucc.org/50/pdfs/litany_of_light.pdf)).