

***“They Kept the Furniture... We Kept the Faith”***

***Exodus 27.1–8***

***The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 1 July 2007***

I really wish you could have been at the UCC's General Synod with me last week. Sharon and Jamie were there, along with 11,000 other folks to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the merger that formed the United Church of Christ. I've been to other Synods, but this one was special. Even before I left the staff of the Connecticut Conference five years ago, they were getting ready for this event, knowing that it needed to be a celebration of where we came from, who we are today, and where we will go in our next 50 years.

Even though I couldn't bring you with me, I've brought back a few words from some of the highlights of the General Synod and its incredible keynote speakers. Some of the messages are of national and international importance, others apply to use here at Plymouth, and some will inspire you in your personal relationship with God.

For me the most important keynote address came from one of my heroes, someone I've held in high regard since my days as a writer and editor, and someone whose work on PBS I have admired for years. Bill Moyers is a living national treasure. An ordained Southern Baptist minister, Moyers has found a home in the United Church of Christ, first as a member of Garden City Community Church, UCC, in New York, and now as a member of the Riverside Church in Manhattan (which is dually affiliated with the UCC and the American Baptist Church). Isn't it nice to know we still have living national treasures in our church?

We at Synod were privileged to hear Bill Moyers speaking truth to power in the language of faith...his faith...our faith. Here is what he said of his church, the UCC: “I am at home in this church. You believe in the democracy of the pew, in the authority and power of the local congregation, and so do I. You believe in a witness based on the historic tradition of scripture but also the lived experience of today, and so do I. You believe, as Anselm said, in “faith seeking understanding,” the old story reconciled with the new discoveries of science and reason, and so do I. And you believe in the power and the promise of democracy, and so do I.

“I thank God ... I thank God for your witness and for the storied heritage of this church. This United Church has the lineage that has influenced the American Experiment far beyond its numbers and its treasures. You have raised the prophetic voice against the militarism, the materialism and the racism that chokes America's arteries. You have placed ... yourself in the thick of the fight for social justice. You have aligned yourself on the side of liberty, equality and compassion, a church of prominent firsts, [the] first to ordain an African American, the first to ordain a woman, the first to ordain an openly gay person.”

But, Moyers didn't just come to praise the United Church, but to challenge us to move further: “My friends and fellow congregants, this has been the prologue. Now comes the argument.

“On this Saturday morning, June 23rd, 2007, in the opening ceremony of this Church's 50th anniversary, I've come to say, that America's revolutionary heritage, and America's revolutionary spirit, life, liberty and the pursuit of justice, for government of, by and for the people – is under siege. And if churches of conscience don't take the lead in their rescue and their revival, we can lose our democracy.”

I can't tell you everything he said, so I'm going to invite you to go to the UCC website – [www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org) – and read or watch Moyers's full speech. But, I'm not going to leave you hanging... here is part of his conclusion:

“Please, please, listen ... this new struggle for a just world – it's not a partisan affair. God is not a liberal or conservative. God is not a Democrat or Republican. (She may be a Baptist, I don't know.) But to see whose side God is on, just go to the record. It's the widow and the orphan, the stranger and the poor who are blessed in the eyes of God. It is kindness and mercy that prove the power of faith, and it's justice that measures the worth of the state, not empire. Kings are held accountable for how the poor fare under their reign; Presidents, too. Prophets speak to the gap between rich and poor as a reason for God's judgment. Poverty and justice are religious issues, and Jesus moves among the disinherited.”

Barack Obama's speech was another highpoint. Obama was raised outside the church or any religious tradition, and it was during his time as a community organizer in Chicago that he found Christianity through Trinity United Church of Christ, our denomination's largest local church. Here is how he tells the story: “One Sunday, I put on one of the few clean jackets I had, and went over to Trinity United Church of Christ on 95th Street on the South Side of Chicago. And I heard Reverend Jeremiah A. Wright deliver a sermon called ‘The Audacity of Hope.’ And during the course of that sermon, he introduced me to someone named Jesus Christ. I learned that my sins could be redeemed. I learned that those things I was too weak to accomplish myself, He would accomplish with me if I placed my trust in Him. And in time, I came to see faith as more than just a comfort to the weary or a hedge against death, but rather as an active, palpable agent in the world and in my own life.”

I don't remember ever hearing another politician describe that kind of an *engaged* faith. Obama talked about the intersection of faith and politics and made an astute observation: “But somehow, somewhere along the way, faith stopped being used to bring us together and started being used to drive us apart. It got hijacked. Part of it's because of the so-called leaders of the Christian Right, who've been all too eager to exploit what divides us. At every opportunity, they've told evangelical Christians that Democrats disrespect their values and dislike their church, while suggesting to the rest of the country that religious Americans care only about issues like abortion and gay marriage; school prayer and intelligent design. There was even a time when the Christian Coalition determined that its number-one legislative priority was tax cuts for the rich. I don't know what Bible they're reading, but it doesn't jibe with my version.”

“And right here in the UCC, we're hearing from God about what it means to be a welcoming church that holds on to our Christian witness. The UCC is still listening. And God is still speaking.”

Obama also called us toward using our religious experience as a means of drawing closer together, rather than as a wedge to divide us one from another. “So let's rededicate ourselves to a new kind of politics – a politics of conscience. Let's come together – Protestant and Catholic, Muslim and Hindu and Jew, believer and non-believer alike. We're not going to agree on everything, but we can disagree without being disagreeable. We can affirm our faith without endangering the separation of church and state, as long as we understand that when we're in the public square, we have to speak in universal terms that everyone can understand. And if we can do that – if we can embrace a common destiny – then I believe we'll not just help bring about a more hopeful day in America, we'll not just be caring for our own souls, we'll be doing God's work here on Earth.” Again, you can read or watch his whole speech at [ucc.org](http://ucc.org)

I've seen Lynn Redgrave in films for years, but I had no idea that she was a member of First Congregational UCC in Kent, Connecticut. She also addressed the Synod, sharing the story of her battle with breast cancer, and how First Congregational Church reached out to her and how their minister, Melinda Keck, helped her through the ordeal. Though she was baptized and confirmed in the Church of England, Redgrave seldom attended church. Having found a Congregational church in Connecticut, she spoke of the power of her UCC congregation not only in giving her hope in the midst of her disease, but of how it changed her life by broadening her vision and adding new dimensions to her faith.

Here is how she put it: "We can't control whether we live or die, but we can control *how* we live and have faith that you're in great hands.... Now, I know it's how I live each moment and how I reach out to others.... I admire the UCC so tremendously. I go online when I'm on tour and find what UCC church I can reach on Sunday and still make the matinee. I want to thank you for giving me faith in America. In the last few years, as a naturalized citizen, I have lost a great deal of faith in the country that I chose and that has been so good to me. The UCC and what you believe in and your diversity gives me faith. If the UCC ran this country, we'd be okay. And I mean that."

Easily the most amusing keynote address came from the Rev. Peter Gomes, chaplain at Harvard (and an American Baptist, not UCC!). You may remember that Sharon and I took our confirmation class to hear him at First Congregational UCC in Boulder last January. So far as I know, he is the only African-American, gay, Republican, American Baptist on the faculty of Harvard Divinity School, which has a historic relationship with the UCC.

And this is where we finally get to the text I selected from the book of Exodus. It describes in exacting detail how the altar for burnt offerings should be constructed. And there are similarly involved instructions for the main altar, candlesticks, priestly vestments, and the other accoutrements that would be used in worship.

Today, we take time to honor our forbears who constructed this building in the late 1950s and also those who today make our current construction efforts possible. In our United Church tradition, we don't have specific instructions about how we are to build altars. And unlike the Roman Catholic and Episcopal traditions, we don't consecrate our sanctuaries by saying words of blessing. We consecrate them – we make them sacred – by using them, by allowing them to be a part of the rituals of our common life of faith. From the font, we received the waters of baptism. On this altar, we dedicate our gifts. On this communion table, we gather for the Lord's Supper. From the lectern, we are led in worship. And from this pulpit, we hear the word of God expounded and explored.

In 1959, our altar and font were brand new. In the 1970s, this pulpit and lectern were used for the first time. And they have witnessed baptisms, weddings, funerals, and been present for thousands of Sundays of worship. It is in living with them that we make them sacred. It is our faith and practice through which they are consecrated. And so we will decommission them at the end of today's service.

Now, Peter Gomes grew up in Plymouth, Massachusetts, the home of the Pilgrims and the namesake of this and many other UCC congregations. What you may not realize is that First Parish Church of Plymouth – gathered by the Pilgrims in 1620 – became a Unitarian church in the early 1800s. And we Trinitarian Congregationalists started another church in town called the Church of the Pilgrimage. When Mr. Gomes was a boy he recalled seeing a sign in front of the UCC Church, the Church of the Pilgrimage, that

disparaged their Unitarian brethren over at First Parish. The sign said, "*They kept the furniture, but we kept the faith.*"

I don't want to sell short the meaning that our furnishings have for some of our members. I know that it is important that perhaps you heard Bill Coffin preach from this pulpit or that your first communion was blessed on that altar or that you yourself were baptized from this font. Those experiences are sacred moments...moments that will always live with you, because you and this community made them sacred – regardless of what furniture was present or the room in which you were gathered. And when we return to this sanctuary in August, we will have different furniture, but the faith will remain the same. And as we live through the days and years of our lives and as we mark our lives in this place, we ourselves will consecrate our new chancel furniture, making it sacred through the living out of our faith. Amen.