September 3, 2017

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Spirit-Led Living

Romans 12:9-21

It seems like such an easy thing, doesn’t it? Love good and hate evil. Who wouldn’t go along with that as a life motto? There’s an opportunity here for coffee mugs and t-shirts. The “Loving Good, Hating Evil” line of products. The front of the t-shirts – “LOVE GOOD.” The back – “HATE EVIL.” And truly, if you don’t have some evil in this world to hate then you probably aren’t paying attention. However, there is a danger here, says Paul the Apostle. Paul’s letter to the Romans cautions that that we could be overcome by evil. Don’t become the evil you hate, says Paul.

Hate visited two UCC congregations earlier this year. It came in the form of spray-painted racist slogans and swastikas. It came to downtown Medford, Oregon, where posters appeared that said, “Imagine a Muslim-Free America.” It came to Annandale, Virginia, when anti-Semitic slurs were painted on a Jewish Community Center. In both cities, UCC houses of worship were also defaced—attacked for their radical inclusion and extravagant welcome to all people. In Oregon, the Medford Congregational United Church of Christ, and, in Virginia, The Little River United Church of Christ both had their buildings defaced with graffiti.

It seems that opening one’s doors to all people, while expressing the good news to some, is a reason for fear and loathing to others. The question for Christians is not simply that we stand up to evil but how we do it. “When we go through something traumatic like this it's important to be witnesses, that we see it, to understand what happened, to recognize the hatred that was here and move through that, and through these wounds we can begin to move forward," says the Rev. David Lindsey, pastor of Little River United Church of Christ. Little River found companions in their community who came to wash the red paint from their walls and gathered together with them in a prayer vigil.

In Medford, the congregants, along with townspeople, handed out posters that read “Hate has no Business Here.” The signs were all over town, at businesses on people’s lawns and in front of the church, flooding the community with expressions of love and welcome. The congregation also decided it was time to get serious about discussing white privilege among themselves and in the community. Our congregations know how to fight evil without becoming hateful.

September 10, 2017

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

FAITH FORMATION SUNDAY

Remember, Restore, Renew

Exodus 12: 1-14

Signs do all kinds of things. At election time, they tell your neighbors where you stand and what you support. On your car bumper they express your feelings, your family configuration, your nationality, your religious beliefs and sometimes they just tell the person behind you to “slow down.” In this origin story–this first Passover–when the Israelites painted their doors to mark themselves, the sign they painted on their doors was how the angel of death knew who would be spared. In that story, the signs meant life or death. Later, the first Christian churches used the sign of a fish to indicate when and where they would meet. In that setting, the signs meant secrecy and safety. Today, our churches use signs to announce something about themselves publicly.

What’s on your sign? The sign in front of your church? What does it tell the world about who you are, or how you worship, or what you believe? Out on Long Island, in New York, there’s a church with a famous sign. It’s been featured on CNN and in Newsday and recently received 89,000 “thumbs up” on Reddit, the social media website. Unassuming and typical in appearance, the sign’s message changes frequently and often reflects current events. It belongs to Wantagh Memorial United Church of Christ. Some of its recent signs include: “Christ came to take away our sins not our minds.” “Come and practice being human with us!*”* “Jesus was a refugee.” “Also open between Christmas and Easter.” And, “God prefers kind atheists over hateful Christians.”

The church posts photos of its signs on its Facebook page. These posts get responses from the public and are often reposted and tweeted. In an interview with Newsday, Rev. Ron Garner, the pastor of the congregation, said, “We now live in a culture where things must be 140 characters or less to get people’s attention, I just see this as another way of getting the message out there.”

What does the sign in front of your church say about your congregation and what sort of people worship inside? Who do you welcome? How do you hear the message of Jesus? What do you share about yourselves with the world? What’s on your sign?

September 17, 2017

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Road to Freedom

Exodus 14: 19-31

Yes, there’s a road to freedom, but don’t expect it to be easy. Take those Israelites fleeing Pharaoh, following Moses and standing at the edge of the sea watching him part the waters with his staff. Under their feet, the ground was dry but on either side, according to Exodus and D.W. Griffith, towered great waves of water ready to crash down. If you’ve ever been body surfing in the ocean after a storm then you know the power of waves that rise above you, and how small they can make you feel. The road to freedom is not without danger. Adrenaline pumps and people move with intensity. Fleeing a tyrant is not an adventure. Ask the refugee, the soldier, the displaced. Ask the Freedom Riders in the American south in 1961.

In the spring of that year, integrated groups of mostly young people, trained in nonviolence, rode buses throughout the south attempting to integrate public transportation. Thus, they were called the Freedom Riders, and those rides could be life-threatening. On May 20,1961, a bus originating in Nashville pulled into a Montgomery Greyhound station. Waiting and hiding, armed with baseball bats, were men bent on inflicting pain. Two of their victims disembarking from that Freedom bus were John Lewis (the current U.S. Congressman) and Jim Zwerg, who would later become a UCC minister.

Back then, Jim was an exchange student, a young man who was attending Fisk University (a historically black college) for a semester because he wanted to see what it felt like to be in the minority. He and John Lewis became lifelong friends and a children’s book was written about their friendship and their role as Freedom Riders. However, on that day, as they were being beaten, they were not sure they would live through it. Indeed, Jim was hospitalized and the photograph of his bloody face was published in papers all over the world.

Reverend Zwerg eventually became a UCC pastor and said this about that night when he was beaten: “In that instant, I had the most incredible religious experience of my life. I felt a presence with me. A peace. Calmness. It was just like I was surrounded by kindness, love. I knew in that instant that whether I lived or died, I would be OK.”

The road to freedom is often not safe. Freedom is a gift given to the present by those from the past. It’s a gift we give to the future by what we do right now. Just like those ex-slaves standing behind Moses at the Red sea, we are all walking every day on a road that could lead to freedom.

September 24, 2017

Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Tensions in the Wilderness

Exodus 16:2-15

After fleeing a pharaoh and his soldiers; after escaping plagues and securing safety for their children; after being given no time to pack; and no time to gather enough of anything, food or water, one can hardly blame the Israelites for being a little crabby. In this instance, they’re so crabby they even suggest that dying back home in Egypt might have been preferable to having come all this way to die of hunger in the desert. And, of course, they don’t think about how they might help find food or water. Instead, they blame Moses. Poor Moses. Damned if he does and damned if he doesn’t. In this case, God steps in and saves the day and rains manna for the people to eat.

Sometimes leadership in our congregations are tired and worn. They face declining memberships and new members that don’t seem as ready to take on the leadership positions that used to be easy to fill. No one wants to come to committee meetings and volunteer in the ways that used to keep our congregations humming. We’ve been walking around in the desert and we’re hungry. Wouldn’t it be great if manna would fall from the sky and our pews would be full? Magical thinking is always attractive. Blaming leaders is easy. Wishing for the past is simple.

Just as the Israelites wanted to blame Moses and Aaron for their troubles, we local church folks often keep blaming everybody and everything. We blame working Moms. We blame school sports that practice and play on Sundays. We blame society. We blame a pastor who doesn’t preach inspiring, riveting, home-spun, wise and genuine (including jokes) sermons every Sunday. But sometimes manna won’t come—at least not without a caveat, not without some thought. Even the Israelites must follow rules to eat the food God showers on them.

There is a tool prepared by the United Church of Christ on all our behalf (NOTE: It’s not a magic wand). However, it’s like manna in that it won’t go away and it needs us to gather it up. This tool is called the “Local Church Profile,” and it has been prepared in conversation with local pastors and conferences. It is especially intended for churches to use when they are in transition between pastors, but congregations are encouraged to work on this profile every five years. It helps congregations ask questions about themselves; about how they worship; about the way they organize their life together; about their communities; about their neighbors; about what they believe. Jesus walked the countryside asking questions, sharing his beliefs, healing and serving those in need. He called people to do likewise, and he didn’t stay in one place. He kept moving. The Local Church Profile is a way for us, lost as we might feel in a wilderness, to keep moving.

October 1, 2017

Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Neighbors in Need • World Communion

God’s Sustaining Presence – Neighbors in Need

Exodus 17:1-7

You don’t know what you have, as the song goes, until it’s gone, or until you’ve experienced its lack. Like water in the desert. In the Exodus story, God’s people are discovering that the world of the wilderness does not have water available at every step. It was a great idea to flee Pharaoh, and the desert seemed better than a life of slavery, but sometimes even the greatest ideas need a little help. For the Israelites, Moses’ staff helps find water in an arid and desolate geography. If they’re going to get to the promised land they will need to figure out how to get food and water. Sometimes, inspiration needs a boost to make its dream come true. In this case, the promised land is far away and they have a lot of territory yet to cover.

For all of us embarking on any journey, especially one begun by faith, there will come a moment when taking the next step will need a little help from some place other than ourselves. Have you ever had that experience? Perhaps your life seems to come to a halt and you don’t know if your aspirations, or your security, or what you want for those you love is possible. In that moment, you are like the Israelites waiting for water in the desert. Everything stops as you search for something to slake your thirst.

Organizations and congregations can have the same experience. They coalesce around an idea, or partnership or a plan for their community and suddenly, they discover a world of reality – they discover that water is hard to find in the desert. Neighbors in Need is a program of the United Church of Christ that does just that for churches. They help burgeoning mission projects, especially those faithful and creative ideas designed to help reach out to the marginalized in our neighborhoods. Neighbors in Need supports programs made by churches like yours. Your money supports a fund that gives grant money to churches trying to build a sustainable bit of material hope in their neighborhoods.

When you give to Neighbors in Need it’s like waving Moses’ staff and watching water gush from a rock making flowers bloom in the sand and saving lives. It may seem outlandish to compare these grants to water in the desert, but it feels like that when you get one of them. Just ask the members of Open Table UCC in Mobile, Alabama. Their church has opened its doors every Saturday evening as a safe space for all LGTBQ teenagers in the Mobile area, no exceptions. Programming, movies, conversation and just plain welcome and hospitality for young people who may never have thought that a church would be a safe space for them. Keeping their doors open will be easier because they received a Grasstop grant from Neighbors in Need. Such a gift is indeed like water in the desert.

October 8, 2017

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Access Sunday

Wisdom for the Way

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9,12-20

Just like the Constitution of the United States, lots of people swear by the Ten Commandments but few have read and studied it or them deeply or paid them much mindful attention. And just because they were written on a stone doesn’t mean they should feel like a stone around your neck. Jesus said that the Sabbath was made for us and we were not created for the Sabbath. This tablet, this list of “do nots” is a gift so we might be better humans and treat each other with compassion.

Instead, they often get treated as if they were written as hand, feet and heart cuffs intended to restrict and adjure. Perhaps they are more about a way for us to love together and not a rule book to use as a hammer.

The idea that things are made for us and not we for them is a way to think of our buildings. Today is Access Sunday. Winston Churchill once said, “We shape our buildings, thereafter they shape us.” That’s an interesting notion—the idea that buildings create us. If they are not welcoming then we inhabit that inhospitality and bring its philosophy into our own beings. Our interactions do get shaped by the flow and levels and decoration of our buildings, and our buildings learn from us what our needs are. Buildings may become their best when we are willing to refine them and teach them what we have learned.

Our church buildings are gifts from the past and they are often made of stone, which makes them difficult to adapt. But they were made for us and intended to be tools for mission, as the church was built for mission. The United Church of Christ Church Building and Loan Fund (CB&LF) is an affiliated ministry of our denomination, and it is the oldest church building and loan fund in the U.S., going back to 1853. It is their mission to lend financial and advisory support for how we interact with our buildings. Through their loan programs, congregations can get low-cost loans to make their buildings accessible. CB&LF is also available to help churches think through a vision for how to use and adapt their property.

Rev. Jamesetta Ferguson, pastor at St. Peter’s United Church of Christ, in Louisville, Kentucky, reached out to the Building and Loan Fund for help. Her church needed extensive rehabilitation and it sat across from a 760-unit public housing complex. In conversation with the Fund, the congregation discerned a larger plan, a greater vision for its ministry and missional use for its property. In addition to rehabilitating their building, St. Peter’s built a two-story retail and office building. This property will provide the church with rental income and space to offer ministries and social services to the community. 70% of this 7,000,000 dollar project was funded by the CB&LF. Our property and buildings are gifts to us. We are not owned by them. Our buildings can learn from us.

October 15, 2017

Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Laity Sunday • Children’s Sabbath

Praiseworthy Living

Philippians 4:1-9

Have you ever had a bad fight with a friend? Can you remember what started it? Hurt feelings? Misunderstanding? Stupidity? We all have the capacity to act like a jerk . . . sometimes. In the busy days and pressure of our own lives, we can be thoughtless. Each of us can. None of us is perfect. None of us has completely pure intentions always. When mistakes happen, it can be heartbreakingly difficult to disengage and disentangle our feelings for justification. We want those with whom we are in conflict to stop, turn back, and say, “I’m sorry. You were right.”

But does that ever happen? Sometimes we need help to have difficult conversations and to move toward reconciliation. People that work in conflict resolution and mediation often say that conflicts are rarely resolved, but they are honestly looked at and people find ways to move forward, to work together, and, sometimes, to reconnect and reaffirm the relationship as whole and positive . . . once again.

In Paul’s letter to the Philippians he specifically mentions two women with ancient and unfamiliar names, Euodia and Syntyche. (FYI: If you are called upon to read scripture in worship you can often find biblical names pronounced for you on the Internet.) We know nothing about these women except that their relationship is in jeopardy. It must have been especially difficult for Paul because he was writing this letter from prison. Under normal circumstances, it’s hard to watch people we care about fight, but even harder if you are separated by distance and incapacity. As Paul’s letter testifies, people within Christian communities do sometimes disagree and sometimes hurt each other. The question for us, as Christian communities, is not why we fight but how we address disagreements and how we journey toward consensus and hope and just relationships within our congregations.

The Conferences of the United Church of Christ have resources for churches that help us talk to each other through the things that divide us. The New York and Wisconsin Conferences, among others, have teams of trained mediators ready to help churches. In 2017, the Southeast Conference of the UCC organized a “Mediation Skills Training Institute for Church Leaders.” This training was available for lay leaders as well as clergy and will be an ongoing Continuing Education opportunity for everyone. Wherever your church is situated, you will find that your Conference has people and programs to help you through difficulties.

Paul asks the Philippians to help those women because they had struggled with him in the work of the Gospel. We are all doing the same work. Let hope in reconciliation always be our guide.

October 22, 2017

Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Living Messages

Exodus 33:12-23 • I Thessalonians 1:1-10

Paul puts a lot of pressure on those Thessalonians. He begins his letter with a whole list of all the wondrous ways they are doing ministry. Of course, high on that list, is the fact that they are imitating Paul in their willingness to be persecuted and offer themselves as living examples to that end. Most clergy, these days, are probably glad that the prevailing world empire no longer has coliseums for throwing Christians, or anybody, into lions’ dens. If we did, it would probably further depress the rates of young people entering seminaries. But even without the lions, clergy have a difficult task.

Yes, Paul faced lots of issues around the care and feeding of congregations, but even he might be astounded at the expectations of today’s pastor. A 21st century reverend has got to be team leader, CEO, administrator, public relations expert, spiritual counselor, social worker, mediator and brilliant speaker, storyteller and an all–around great communicator. They should also be adept with children, babies and older members, and be both young and funny and experienced and wise! Sometimes pastor’s families feel the stress of being “on display,” and pastors are often expected to be always available.

The good news is that support and resources are a phone call away. Our UCC Conferences have developed programs providing opportunities for clergy to continue to grow and flourish in ministry. This is good for churches. This is good for all of us.

Back in 2000, the power of having “Communities of Practice” nurtured in corporate culture was extolled in the pages of the *Harvard Business Review*. Such communities provided places for creative employees to gather around topics of joint interest and learn from one another in an organized yet informal small group. It would be a place where ideas could be shared, people could risk in a safe and confidential setting, and interdepartmental cooperation could be fostered. This idea is currently at play in many of our UCC Conferences. Communities of Practice, a part of the Pastoral Excellence Program, are organized around kinds of ministry, and interests of pastors. Meetings are scheduled by the Conferences. More than simply support groups, these practice communities work at creating an attitude of discipline and ongoing education around the skills and knowledge needed to be an affective pastor in the 21st century.

For Paul’s world, there was risk to ministry. That risk was a risk of persecution. At least for today, our risk is that our clergy will get complacent and burn out from lack of challenge and constant availability. Communities of Practice are a way to support our ministry together.

Why don’t you ask your pastor if there is a Community of Practice in your Conference for them?

October 29, 2017

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Compassionate Life

Exodus 34:1-12 • Matthew 22:34-46

Jesus could have been a great Twitter warrior, sending zingers right and left. Today’s story from Matthew begins just after he had “silenced” the Sadducees. Wouldn’t it be great to have that ability? To be able to quiet all those who use obnoxious speech on Facebook? Or create a pause in the “mansplaining” (though women can do it, too) around the table at family gatherings? To be able to create a breath or pause in the onslaught of political name-calling and absolutisms that swirl around this world in which we live? Oh yes, that would be swell.

We could go back to Matthew’s Gospel and see just what Jesus did, and bring that way of being into our own relationships with those who oppose us and get in our face about it. After all, that’s what the Sadducees did. They “got in his face” by asking a ridiculous question. Of course, Jesus has a perfect answer and they go away silenced. But that skill—to respond immediately with exactly the right words—is not one we all share. Most of us get tongue-tied.

There are other ways to have civil conversations with those who disagree with us besides “silencing them” with a brilliant retort. Probably a good beginning is to decide what you want from the encounter. Is it about winning? Or is it about continuing the relationship?

If you want to continue the relationship then the first step is probably to take a few deep breaths and then proceed with empathy and hope in our shared humanity.

One way toward silencing hurtful or bullying speech requires developing a kind of compassionate curiosity. If we know that others are human like us, share the same connection to God and all things, and have feelings and want to be understood just like us, then we might approach an uncomfortable encounter with a genuine desire to understand what brings that person to speak as they do.

Keystone United Church of Christ in Seattle hosted a workshop last spring called, “Bridging the Divide: Constructive Communication in Difficult Times.” Open to anyone willing to pay the nominal fee, it was facilitated by people trained in mediation and conflict. What a gift to the community in these divided and polarized times! The workshop offered training for individuals in listening with a purpose, developing awareness under stress and finding healthy ways to engage with difficult conversations. This is a model of how our church buildings can be used as resources for continuing education in our neighborhoods, helping all of us learn skills, build relationships and create a better world in service to the Gospel.

November 5,2017

Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

*Partners in Service*

Matthew 23: 1-12

 *“The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.”*

 Mahatma Gandhi

There is nothing clearer about the Gospel of Jesus Christ than that it calls us to service. We all weigh our service to our families and our own well-being against the call of a world full of need. Work and church and community all vie for a place on our calendar. However, after years of working, you might find yourself moving into a part-time job or retiring. Or, you might be a recent college graduate with a summer to volunteer. Do you ever think that volunteering away from home in an unfamiliar setting could also be a kind of adventure? Do you have time in your life to have an adventure and be of service to others?

Partners in Service is a program of the United Church of Christ that offers opportunities for volunteer placement around the country. The placements can be as short as a summer and as long as twelve months. You could be rehabbing houses in Fresno, California, supporting humane borders in Tucson, Arizona, or working with LGBTQ youth in Atlanta, Georgia. How about volunteering at Heifer International Farm? Working with addicts and health services? Want an international volunteer placement? If you are an adult of any age, and have the time, you can have an adventure in service. Go to ucc.org and search for the application to Partners in Service.

Betzi Yungclas is a member of the First Community United Church of Christ, Dallas, Texas, and a serial volunteer for Partners in Service. She saw a brochure for Partners at a Conference-wide meeting and knew that it was something she could do. She had spent thirty years working for AT&T where she was the first woman in the country to climb telephone poles. Now, volunteering is her work. She has been placed in a variety of disaster relief settings from Katrina to her more recent work helping the recovery effort after Hurricane Matthew. She has also spent a long-term opportunity working with Humane Borders in Arizona.

One of Betzi’s co-volunteers is Jon Wallace, a member of Park Hill Congregational United Church of Christ, Denver, Colorado. Of his experience Jon says, “Bringing communities together, teaching, and companioning them towards recovery and resilience, brings joy and gratefulness as I see God at work through the hands of the church and others."

What about you, or someone you know? Is there time on your hands? Do you wonder what it would be like to work for peace with others of a like mind, to help embody justice, to create hope in hopeless situations, advocate for clean and affordable housing, build new homes after a disaster? Betzi says that picking up that brochure long ago changed her life. Do you want a change in your life? Remember Jesus said, “The greatest among you will be your servant.” Is there service in your future?

November 12, 2017

Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Stewardship Sunday

*Tending God’s Light*

Matthew 25: 1-13

There are so many ways that we are all still, under our skin, adolescents. Delaying gratification, or planning for a possible future, or thinking beyond our own needs seem to be traits difficult to cultivate. Are we hardwired for not being able to see beyond the tip of our nose so that even planning can be a struggle? Which bridesmaid in this familiar and iconic tale from Matthew’s Gospel are you? Would you remember to bring extra oil? Would you be ready for the night to fall? Or would you be left in the dark and unable to greet the bridegroom?

When psychologists test for how some people have developed the ability to delay gratification, they notice that those who are able to imagine a pleasant outcome to their choice—rather than thinking of it simply in terms of what they are giving up—are more likely to postpone one thing for something greater. Saving is about remembering what it is you are saving for rather than how little you have for now. Another way of saying that is this: we should think about today so that there will be a better future for ourselves and others.

If the Gospel is about nothing else it is about hope. Hope in a better world and in the genuine compassionate nature of human beings that a fully human Christ makes possible. Hope is a gift from us to the future. But only if we make that hope tangible and not just a dream we embroider on a cushion. What is it we need to do, and to what do we need to give so that the future will receive its gift from us? Who will benefit from the gift or pledge we make today? Who will receive it?

These are the things we might ask ourselves as we prepare our offering to the church of Jesus Christ. What will your church mean to the future? What do you imagine that future to be?

How will what you give today manifest itself for those who will be members of this church or residents of your town years from now? It’s not what you give up, it’s what you give to.

Those bridesmaids were split between those who imagined the future and those who did not.

They saw the connection between what they did today and what might happen tomorrow. Isn’t that one of the things that is a sign of maturity? Be a mature bridesmaid and give to your church. The future is asking.

November 19, 2017

Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thanksgiving Sunday

*Extravagant Opportunity*

Matthew 25: 14-30

In this familiar parable from Matthew, three guys get tested with their boss’s money. It’s a test of how to grow treasure. We are all given treasures in this life. How do we care for them? What are the expectations on us as caretakers of this holy and beautiful world? One of the ways the United Church of Christ takes care of our part of the world is by working toward bold ecumenical partnerships based around ministries we share. We do this in service of witness to the prayer of Jesus, “that they may all be one.”

In the New York Conference of the United Church of Christ there is a brand new ecumenical partnership that matches the extravagant expectations made on the church of Jesus Christ to grow and not hide in the ground.

The Dutch who settled Manhattan in the 17th century brought their Reformed Church to North America. Today, there are four Collegiate churches of New York City, all members of the Reformed Church in America (RCA), and now, along with three other churches in the New York City area, they are affiliates of the United Church of Christ. This is truly a huge and extravagant ecumenical partnership. Based on a shared witness, an active social justice advocacy and an embrace of the LGBTQ community, this relationship announces an exciting turn in the expression of Christian unity.

The new relationship is not just a witness—it is also a working relationship. The seven RCA churches will make up a new association of the New York Conference –the Reformed Association. This Association was chartered on May 4, 2017.

Rev. David Gaewski, New York Conference Minister, said of this announcement that it was " . . . an important witness for large churches to make in the city—so now we have several of our largest churches in New York City being LGBTQ-affirming churches. It furthers the mission of the UCC and the New York Conference."

Think of the many things we’ll be able to do together, think of the new voices we’ll raise, think of the attention we can create toward justice and life-affirming ministries in the City of New York.

Much of the credit for the long leg work and dialogue that took place to make this happen by a unanimous vote goes to former UCC Communications Director, Reverend Bob Chase, whose organization, *Intersections International*, promotes peace and ecumenical dialogue.

November 26, 2017

Reign of Christ

United Black Christians Anniversary

Reigning Compassion

Matthew 25:31-46

In 1953, the *Daily Worker* published a “wanted” poster. It showed a sketch of a man with long hair and a beard. The name under the face was “Jesus Christ.” And under that was printed,

“Wanted—for sedition, Criminal Anarchy, Vagrancy and conspiring to overthrow the established government. Dresses poorly, said to be a carpenter by trade, ill-nourished, has visionary ideas, associates with common working people, the unemployed and bums. Alien—believed to be a Jew.”

In 1971 two Pittsburgh shopkeepers posted a copy of that poster on their windows and were charged with blasphemy under a statute enacted in 1794. The County prosecutor in the case asked that the charges be dropped. They were dropped, and that ended prosecutions for blasphemy in the United states.

The Jesus the poster describes infers a message very like the one in today’s Gospel lesson. It’s a message that says what we do to the least of humanity, we do to Jesus. Being an advocate for those who are hungry, and thirsty, and sick and in prison is the very heart of the Gospel. Rather than a catechism listing right beliefs about Jesus, it more often offers a vision of a life that is possible for us—a life of being wholly present and committed to a just and joyful life for all. One of the charges against Jesus at the end of his life was, as written in John’s Gospel, “Blasphemy.” Perhaps being an advocate for those who are excluded and marginalized is a kind of blasphemy to those in power. A blasphemy in service to justice.

There is a seminary scholarship fund that supports ministers who model that understanding of Jesus as one who advocated for justice and have proven a history of leadership through their service to the church and the world. The scholarship is funded by the United Black Christians for African-American seminary students in their second or third year who are in care in a UCC Conference or Association. Named in honor of Rev. Dr. Joseph Henry Evans, the third president and first Black president of the UCC, the fund was established in 2009 in covenant with the UCC’s Local Church Ministries.

Remembering how important the Black church has been for the survival and community support for African–Americans in our country, the United Black Christians are organized to assure the continued support and growth of that church, and keeping those voices in service to those on the margins alive and well in our pulpits.

If you want to support that fund, or if you know of a ministry student who would be a likely candidate, email *scholarships@ucc.org**.*