Sunday, September 4, 2016

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Philemon 1-21

FAITH FORMATION SUNDAY

A New Identity

What do you see outside your front door? Are there farms and rolling hills? Does the horizon stretch for miles so that the sky is like a blue canopy? Or is there a city street singing with the sounds of cars and people? Do you have children and a swing set, or do you live as a couple, or by yourself? Are you a young adult? Or do you collect social security? College? High School? Mechanic? Farmer? Teacher? Office worker? Unemployed? Nurse? Where you live and whatever you do, you see the world from that place.

In today’s scripture there are three characters, a slave, a slave owner and Paul, the apostle, friend to both. Each of them has to have a very different perspective on the moment Paul describes in this letter. How could slaves see things the way their owner does? It would hardly seem reasonable to expect they would.

When John Dorhauer, General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ, taught a class in White Privilege to students at Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis, the assignment he gave at the end of every class was: “Tell me what you see.” That would be a great question to ask ourselves as we go out the door every morning. What do we see? How does who we are and where we live affect the way we see the world?

The next question to ask ourselves might be this: How would the world look if we could change the color of our skin? If we could, for a day, wear the life of someone else. If Paul could be the slave and the slave could be the slave owner, how would their viewpoints change? Today, look around you. What do you see? Imagine how your view would shift if you could be your neighbor and your neighbor could be you.

Sunday, September 11

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

1 Timothy 1:12-17

God Only Wise

Our God is so big and unimaginable it’s hard to believe that we can feel so forgiven.

Hard for us to comprehend that the same God who spins black holes and makes stars can also show such mercy to individuals so that a life is transformed and love is made visible. We are in the business of changing lives and transforming communities. In the United Church of Christ that’s what we call mission. We believe that the church is called to change the world by changing individuals, by changing unjust systems and by being an example of the power of Jesus Christ to shine the light of love on the world.

Paul the Apostle believed that about his own life and the power of his own transformation to change the lives of others. The letter to Timothy speaks of that theme in Paul’s message. Throughout the history of the church people have tried to write of the mystery of God and the power of Christ to transform. No hymn is probably better known on that theme than “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise.”

Written by Walter C. Smith, a Scottish pastor in the nineteenth century, it still resonates with congregations across denominational lines. The lyrics were inspired by today’s scripture passage. These words, first penned among early Christians and an inspiration to a poet/pastor centuries later, still resound today in churches across the world.Sing then, of our great God who is both mystery and tangible hope, who made the moon and also saves the sinner. The transforming God who informs our mission.

*O, Immortal Invisible God, remind us of the power of this Gospel we share. Stir in us its message of hope and change for a world that resists its message of transforming power*. *May our churches be a light for all people who long for the unbounded love offered in Jesus* *the Christ. Amen.*

Sunday, September 18

Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

1 Timothy 2:1-7

Prayerful Knitting

It’s been almost twenty years since Janet Bristow and Victoria Galo began what now seems like such an obvious a ministry: knitting shawls and sharing them with others as a tangible sign of the prayers of the community. Many United Church of Christ churches have a prayer shawl ministry. This ministry has come to mean so much to the people who knit, to those who deliver the shawls and to the people who get them.

Every week across our country people meet to knit shawls. Some of them use a three-part pattern in order to focus on the Trinity; some pray as they knit in silence; some pray over each shawl as it is finished. These shawls are never for sale. They are not for fund raising. They are for comfort and outreach and sharing spiritual bonds, prayers for encouragement and community. When finished, the shawls are given away to anyone and everyone who might need to know that they are loved and cared for.

Congregations sometimes send the shawls to places where disasters and violence have created chaos and despair. East Congregational UCC in Milton, Massachusetts, sent prayer shawls to the victims of the 2011 earthquake in Japan. UCC churches sent shawls to Biloxi, Mississippi after Katrina. Among the gifts a group from Global Ministries brought for children in Swaziland were a number of prayer shawls. The shawls were used as blankets for the small children to warm them in the cool evenings.

People who knit these shawls know the power of this ministry for deepening one’s prayer life and for bringing comfort and love to others. The knitters say they get as much from knitting a shawl as the recipients do from receiving one.

Sunday, September 25

Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

Covenant Faith

Sitting in a city under siege and locked in the palace, the prophet Jeremiah had no reason to think that things would ever get better, and yet when God told him to go out and buy some land, that’s just what Jeremiah did. He bought land in a battlefield while the battle was going on! Now that’s faith!

We aren’t exactly in the middle of a battlefield, but the local church may feel under siege these days. There’s a whole lot of data that points to the decline of mainline Protestant denominations. It’s not the same trauma as having the Babylonian army destroy your city, but it is a time to be reminded of our faith and re–covenant with each other to live faithfully. John Dorhauer, ever since he became President and General Minister of the UCC, has been saying that he believes the Holy Spirit envisions a future in which the UCC matters. Envisioning that future was the theme of his installation service–all three of them.

The installation of Reverend John Dorhauer took place in three cities over three days in April – New York, Chicago and Seattle. Three cities because we are a denomination spread across this country and not in one place. Three services planned to follow in succession, each service building on the other and culminating in Holy Communion at the last service in Seattle. Three services so that there would be room to accommodate all those who came to bless this ministry. Three services and nine preachers! Nine different visions of that future the Holy Spirit has in store for us. The music! The prayers! The people! And, at the final service, when he was duly installed, all the people said these words in unison:

 *We receive John Dorhauer as General Minister and President, promising to labor with him and support him in our common ministry of the gospel. We covenant with John as a sign of our mutual ministry in Christ’s name. Amen*.

Sunday, October 2

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Psalm 137

Neighbors in Need

Across this country and throughout the United Church of Christ, grants are given each year for mission projects and partnerships and UCC-related ministries that reach into our neighborhoods and make a difference. Your gifts to Neighbors in Need make those grants possible. They fund community gardens, food banks, special ministries to the homeless, interfaith programming on college campuses, college and career counseling for inner city youth, programs to help with housing for at-risk families and children, and just about anything our congregations can envision a need for in their communities.

Look around your neighborhood. What neighbors are there who have a need that either you can help fill or that you can manage with the help of an existing organization? What needs might inspire you to start something yourself? Where might your congregation be called to lend a hand, make a difference, and be there for someone who needs the love of God made tangible? How can you make your town/city/village be better because there is a United Church of Christ worshipping and proclaiming the love of Jesus in its midst?

OFFERING PRAYER:

Oh God, thank you for all that we are able to give.

Breathe your blessing on this offering.

Send it into the world on the wings of the good news of Jesus Christ..

May the givers be as full of your love as those who receive.

May these gifts shine in the hearts of your people so that the hungry are fed.

May all hear the message of hope born in our generosity.

We are your church offering your love in the best that we do. Amen.

Sunday, October 9

Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

Planting Life

*Seek the prosperity of the city, for if it prospers you will also.* God spoke those words to Jeremiah and God is still speaking them to us. In them is the truth that if we attend to the world around us then we will be blessed. Our welfare depends on the welfare of others. Another way to think of this is that who we are depends on who we care about. As the visible church, whose prosperity do we seek in our communities?

It used to be that the annual Yearbook and Directory of the United Church of Christ

published information only about our churches’ internal existence. We printed statistics about how many members we had and how many in worship. However, those numbers didn’t seem to say enough about the people our churches served and the extent of our influence and mission. We needed a new way to think about the numbers we collected—and perhaps even spark some creative thinking about ways we might be called to expand our influence in our communities.

Thus, starting with this year’s directory, the numbers we collect will reflect the many changing ways people understand church membership and the myriad spheres of influences our congregations reflect. Now, we are asking churches to report an estimated number of **Total Church Participants**. Those would include people who come to education events, and prayer groups, and Bible studies, as well as people who use the pastoral services of your pastor or lay visitors. There is also a category for **Community Engagement.** These people are the ones your congregations touch every week through soup kitchens, or church events, or prayer shawls, or vacation Bible school, or any of the many activities to which people are invited. This gathering of information is done to enable us all to think about how wide and deep we work to seek the prosperity of our cities.

Sunday, October 16

Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 18:1-8

Ask Boldly, Live Justly

Even a crabby old judge who hates people will cave and grant the widow her wish if she’s persistent. That’s what Jesus tells us in this parable from Luke’s Gospel. Go ahead, he says, this is how you should pray: keep on asking and don’t give up. Keep knocking on the door even if it feels like nobody’s home. Push past the receptionist, wave your petition in the judge’s face, beg and ask and ask again. Probably, if you’re bothering a judge, you should also have a high tolerance for embarrassment as well as a dogged attitude.

Prayer, says Jesus, is a vigorous exercise. The good news about being a church–goer is you don’t have to go it alone. Churches all over the UCC pray together. At Westminster UCC in Spokane, Washington, they share their concerns and their joys during worship. These get bundled into a congregational prayer and then lifted up again during the weekly prayer and meditation group. First Congregational, Charlotte, Michigan, has a prayer circle that meets twice a month. Their website proclaims: “We believe that a united and focused prayer accomplishes more and that there is more to God’s vision for our lives than what we settle for. We know that God delights to answer prayer.” What does your church do to keep a persistent presence of prayer in your congregation?

People who pray together are not shy about their faith. The widow bothering the judge was not afraid of asking, not afraid of knocking on God’s door. Making the commitment to pray together is a way of making sure you do it—like a walking group that helps you stick to a resolution to exercise. Prayer groups help you keep on praying even when you feel too busy or stressed. Sometimes, just knowing that people are counting on you gets out of your chair and heading to church, where finding others in a circle ready to pray for the world is community worth praying for and with. Keep on knocking!

Sunday, October 23

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 18:9-14

Don’t Judge

Though popular news outlets might sometimes project otherwise, it is probably *not* true that religious folks are the most judgmental people in their behavior. Everyone seems to eat at the “judgy” bar with impunity. Judgments are plentiful all over the Internet; judgments about body size; about what people wear; about their political opinions and religious beliefs. People seem to have something to say about everything.

Clearly, this is not just a 21st century problem. It must have been rampant back in Jesus’ day as well. Otherwise, this parable about the haughty Pharisee would not have been a necessary teaching. Imagine all the generations of judgmental folks that have passed on this earth between that Pharisee and today. Imagine the centuries of damning words piled high—perhaps high enough that we could climb to Mars. Think, then, how refreshing it is to find a church that has a simple motto–“No Judgments, Just Jesus.”

That is the motto of Immanuel United Church of Christ in West Bend, Wisconsin, “No Judgments, Just Jesus.” The lack of judgment and an open and inquisitive spirit is what identifies the UCC. That’s why the Gracie Allen quote, “Never place a period where God has placed a comma,” resonates so well with our ethos as a denomination. Our congregations do not all share the exact same beliefs, but what we do share is the belief that if we want to know God we only have to see Jesus. And in him can be found the openness and compassion we understand as the heart of our extravagant welcome. *No mater who you are, or where you are life’s journey, you are welcome here . . .* without judgment.

Sunday, October 30

Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 19:1-10

Shared Hope

Zaccheus, the hated tax collector, was also short and curious and wanted to see Jesus. Nobody liked him. Everyone was shocked when Jesus talked to him. But Jesus reminds them he came to save the lost—especially those who knew they were lost, or, at least, didn’t think of themselves as special and “not-lost.” In that light, it would be interesting to know what Jesus would think of our elections this year.

Elections can be a time of great division, and the church is obviously not a place where we should demonize those who support one candidate over another. It’s a place to remember that we share our humanness and, as Christians, we share a hope for the Realm of God made visible in the world. We share a hope that such a realm might embody God’s love so completely it would be a place where everyone could find a home, even an unloved tax collector named Zaccheus.

As Americans, we share a hope for this country, and as churchgoers, we share a vision of its worthiness before God. In that spirit and hope, the United Church of Christ worship team has put together a collection of resources for use during our national election. These can be found on the UCC website, and include prayers, hymn suggestions, sermon helps, and this invocation:

 *We pray for our nation that we be united as a people*

 *tied to a single garment of destiny.*

 *We pray for those who we elect to serve all citizens*

 *that they may be guided not by ego, politics or money,*

 *but by compassion for all people.*

 *Guide us as families, as a community of faith, as a nation*

 *to follow the path of love.* (ucc.org/ourfaithourvote)

Sunday, November 6

Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

Welcome the Refugee

In the world today, we are facing the worst refugee crisis since the end of World War II. Those of us born in the United States cannot even imagine the experience of being forced to flee, or to choose what we may keep from our settled lives by how much we can carry on our back. Sometimes there is not even time to stop and take one last look at the village or city street where you grew up. Imagine having to leave everything behind in a hail of bullets and the sounds of people screaming. Imagine landing somewhere in a place where you don’t know the language and the customs and everything is different, strange, foreign to you.

Refugee resettlement is a ministry and mission of the United Church of Christ. We partner with Church World Service, a coalition of humanitarian and religious groups, working together to welcome refugees. If you want to support refugee families in your area, go to *refugeesarewelcome.org* to discover resources and ways your church can participate. Of course, gifts to One Great Hour of Sharing designated for refugee assistance will fund supplies like food, blankets and medical equipment, as that offering has always done.

Important things congregations can do are: be informed about the refugee crisis, keep the needs and plight of refugees in your prayers, and find ways to help, either through donating to One Great Hour of Sharing (ucc.org/oghs) or supporting efforts to welcome refugees in your community.

*Oh God, whose love and presence knows no boundaries of race, or creed or language, we hold the hopes of people everywhere who seek safety for their children, shelter from the cold and food in hungry stomachs. May you protect the weak and assist us in finding ways to make your care visible. Amen.*

Sunday, November 13

Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 65:17-25

Infinite Possibilities

In Isaiah can be found the metaphors that inspire artists and peacemakers and hope–mongers everywhere. The wolf and the lamb and the lion and the ox all lying together in a world made new. Mission can be thought of as the church living as if that vision of peace is here now. People who live a life of peacemaking live their lives believing that peace is the norm and that our conflicted war-like ways reflect humanity not understanding the real truth of who we are: made in the image of God.

The Penn Central Conference of the United Church of Christ has started a program encouraging young people to explore the paths of peace. It’s called Partners in Peace and it began in 2013, conceived by the three Penn Central Partnership Ministry Teams: Namibia Partnership; UEK Partnership (with the United Evangelical Churches of Germany); and Dakota Partnership (with the Dakota Association of the UCC). Young people came from all over, hosted by Penn Central. They heard speakers, traveled to Washington D.C., visited the UCC’s Justice and Witness Ministries office, and they are geared up to meet again in 2016.

A new chapter of Partners in Peace will bring young adults to South Dakota and the Cheyenne River Reservation. There they will learn about peace and our past with Native Americans Toni and Byron Buffalo, and Lancaster Theological Seminary Professor, Jacquie Church Young.

Messages of discord and hatred and conflict abound in our world. Spreading new metaphors, renewing the vision of Isaiah in the hearts of our young adults, is the way of Partners in Peace. You can learn more at the website of the Penn Central Conference of the UCC (www.pccucc.org).

Sunday, November 20

Reign of Christ

Colossians 1:11-20

Together in Christ

*Reconciled in Christ, and in him all things are made new.* These words are from Paul’s letter to the Colossians. They come from Paul’s ardent prayer for the continued good of the church in that city. Thanksgiving is a time for us to pray for the continued good of all our churches and to be grateful for the ministries we share.

Sometimes "chance” is clearly the tool of the Holy Spirit—as it was thirty years ago when a homeless woman met a business woman rushing to a meeting who stopped to offer a sandwich. She also stayed and listened to the other woman’s story. That “chance” encounter resulted in a commitment to help families without homes find support and reconnection. So was born the Interfaith Hospitality Network, now called “Family Promise,” and their first partner was Christ Church UCC in Summit, New Jersey. Karen Olson, the woman who stopped and gave the sandwich, says that the program would probably not have happened without the support and cheerleading from Christ Church.

Over thirty years, this organization has developed a program that inspires not only the families it serves but the volunteers who spend nights with the families and who are often transformed themselves as they come to experience the humanity of those many consider “less than,” or unworthy. Homelessness is not an abstract notion—it has a face. In this case, meeting that face led to transforming the lives of thousands.

More than 200 of the congregations participating nationwide are United Church of Christ churches, making it one of the largest denominations represented. If your congregation is interested in meeting the face of homeless families in your community, visit *www.familypromise.org.*

Sunday, November 27

First Sunday of Advent (Year A)

Matthew 24:36-44

Live With Hope

Life is short: it withers like grass and the flower fades (I Peter 1:24) or, as Matthew reminds us, we never know when the Son of God might return. All of us are called to attention, to be mindful of our lives and to live every moment as if God will call us home today. This is the message for the church on this first day Advent. Yet Advent is the season of waiting, expecting, hoping. How do we look forward and be reminded of our mortality at the same time?

The answer to that question might be that the future depends so much on what we do in this very moment. The quality of our life, the truth of our faith, does depend on the investment we make in the only thing we can really do anything about and that is the moment that we breathe into right now. Oh, we can live in expectation and do our deeds enacting hope, but unless we love in this instant, how do we know we will love in the next hour? We cannot control what has happened in the past or what may happen in the future; we can only live in the minute we live in. As Christians we do that with faith.

The first Sunday in Advent means that in most of our churches we will be lighting the Advent wreath’s first candle—the candle of “hope.” Hope is also the name of a UCC church in Alexandria, Virginia, which offers these words of welcome on its website:

 *More than anything, we hope you can be real when you visit us. No need to pretend—no need to be “churchy.” If you’re happy, sad, worried, bursting to celebrate, or at the edge—God can hold it in worship. That’s hope.*

This Advent, may we all be real and present to each moment in our lives. Live into your future by loving your present. Live with hope.