September 2, 2018

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

**Be Love**

James 1:17-27

This letter, written by James, who was probably Jesus’ brother, probably the first Bishop in Jerusalem, is a diatribe against anyone who thinks that following Jesus Christ doesn’t mean “doing.” James is sardonic and clear and crusty as he imagines somebody looking in a mirror and turning away and instantly forgetting what they look like. If you love Jesus, he might say, how can you forget what that means or what that looks like? When you follow Jesus that’s who you are and how you are. Be that love. Show the world what it looks like…don’t just tell them about it…be the church! DO something!

The borough of Hatboro in Pennsylvania has roots that reach back into William Penn’s land and the history of that state. It’s a tiny place with only about 8,000 residents but it is also the home of Love in Action UCC. This small church sitting in this suburb of Philadelphia is big in its expansive love and welcome for all of God’s people. It is a church born in the idea that faith is more than a set of beliefs. Faith is shown in actions. That’s what their statement of belief says. One of their many ministries is an open and affirming stance to all people – especially those in the LGBTQIA community.

When Jennifer Angelina Petro was transitioning to female she says she found a home and the emotional and faithful support she needed at Love in Action UCC. Then, when Vox Media, along with Divided States of Women were planning their documentary telling the stories of marginalized women approached Jennifer, she was clear that her story and the story of her church were intertwined. The producers were amazed to hear that there was a church supporting and affirming Trans people. And in the film, she tells her story of coming out as Transgendered in a world that doesn’t always embrace the trans experience. Her church, a UCC church, was a huge part of her journey.

This is love in action. This is what James was talking about. This is how you be the church, opening your arms and creating a safe space for all those who feel unwelcome and “different” and unacceptable. You do that as Love in Action UCC did for Jennifer. They embraced her gifts for music, her ability to teach and wanted to know her as she was, just as God knows deeply who she is. As James the Apostle writes, a religion that is pure looks after those who are weakest in the world. For James, that was widows and orphans. In our world, it includes many more who seem to have no place. But they do in Hatboro, PA where Love in Action UCC is Being the Church and Loving their Neighbor.

September 9, 2018

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

**Be Opened**

Mark 7:24-37

*Faith Formation Sunday*

What does it mean to be opened? To find oneself changed and transformed, maybe even stopped in one’s tracks by the touch of Jesus. Certainly, the touch of Jesus as described in the gospels as an expression of a great love. Love is more than an abstract thing. It is felt by the giving and receiving of it as in our Three Great Loves Campaign – Love of Neighbor, Love of Children and Love of Creation. There are so many ways to love our neighbor. We can feed them and house them and clothe them and welcome them. Another way to show love is to show respect for each other especially when we disagree.

While divisive conversations may seem like a product of the 21st century, Ben Franklin (signer of the Declaration of Independence) thought his own age to be quite uncivil. He organized discussion groups in which moral questions, politics and philosophy would be debated with an eye for truth and civility. These groups began with his friends in 1727. His friends were a scrivener, a joiner and two cobblers – not, as you might think, erudite folks from Harvard or Yale, but working people who met with him every Friday evening at a Philadelphia “alehouse” to discuss issues of morality and politics. That was Franklin’s answer to incivility in his day – structured discussion with a diverse group of friends.

Churches, today, in the UCC are figuring out ways to have civil discourse about things that matter to our world, among those have been churches who have embarked on loving discussions about LGBT inclusion in the life of congregations. At Rocky Hill UCC, in Rocky Hill, Connecticut, they developed a Covenant that would order these conversations. It says:

**Covenant:**  *Our purpose is to promote understanding. We will treat each other with caring and respect, as God's beloved children. We will take time for prayer. We will speak in the first person "I", and from our own experience. We will speak one at a time. We will listen for understanding, especially when we seem to disagree. We will speak and seek the truth in love. We will allow each other equal "air time." We will ask questions for clarification, not for judgment.*

Rocky Hill UCC understood themselves to be a diverse congregation theologically but they still embarked on a two-year conversation based on the above Covenant. At the end, they voted overwhelmingly to become Open and Affirming. Loving one’s neighbor can be about a process as much as a result.

September 16, 2018

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

**Who Are You, Jesus?**

Mark 8:27-38

Jesus doesn’t take any prisoners in his denunciation of Peter at Caesarea Philippi. He calls him Satan. That’s a pretty strong condemnation for what might seem a small thing.

Jesus has openly declared to his disciples that he’s going to be crucified and resurrected. Peter has a kind of “parking-lot-conversation” with Jesus. You know what that means. It’s the conversation that happens outside of the regular church meeting where people say what’s really on their mind. For whatever reason, Peter doesn’t want to “rebuke” Jesus in front of everybody so he pulls him aside. Maybe he even lowers his voice and keeps one hand on Jesus’ arm or back, trying to tell him that talk of crucifixion, even with resurrection, is not a marketable message.

But Jesus, who rarely minces words, tells him that it is all or nothing. If you want to follow me, he says, then take up your cross. There is no middle way here. If you want to save your life then you must lose it.

Mark’s Gospel is told against the backdrop of the Roman Empire, an empire that fostered inequality and corruption and by the time Mark’s gospel came into being, had destroyed Jerusalem and burned its massive Temple to the ground–scattering a whole population, decimating a religious tradition (Judaism) and slaughtering thousands indiscriminately.

You could not, as Mark’s Gospel outlines, work on behalf of the poor and outcast and not be considered an enemy of Rome. It’s hard for us to imagine a world where your inclination to help others would be suspect and, that to be a member of a religion might mark you for a horrible death. Mark’s world was a world of secret meetings and hushed voices and fear.

When he takes Jesus aside, Peter is embodying that fear. We might think it reckless and, if we cared about Jesus, we might, like Peter, pull him aside and whisper, “Shhhh.” That’s the kind of thing Jesus did in declaring his death.

So how’s that going for you, O twenty-first century Christian? Have you denied yourself? Fought for anything that might get you into trouble? Have you put your life on the line for the Gospel?

What have you done to advance the idea of “A Just World for All?” How has your church led the way? Have we been willing to give up our lives to save them?

September 23, 2018

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

**First in Caring**

Mark 9:30-37

Sometimes children and youth are the ones who show the rest of us the way toward a “Just World for All.” An abiding continuum of Love of Neighbor and a willingness to educate themselves about the world outside their neighborhood has led some UCC youth in Indiana to do remarkable things for the sake of the Gospel and all of us.

From assembling and distributing kits for the homeless, to building wells in Niger, and raising money to buy land for a school in Haiti they have done it all by following Just Peace principles. A signature movement that was born in the UCC 30 years ago,” Just Peace” has inspired many in our congregations to the work of doing justice and seeking peace in the manner of Jesus the Christ whose message tells all that “Peace is Possible.”

Who are these remarkable young Christians? They live in Indiana and belong to one of two small rural churches that share a pastor – St. Peter, in Lamar, Indiana and Trinity UCC, in Fulda, Indiana. That pastor, Reverend Paul Jahn, has been their Pastor since 1979. That’s almost 40 years of growing remarkable disciples for churches that are decidedly mission oriented. What wonderful the experiences they have had and the places they have been in mission to world beyond their small towns! You don’t have to be big to make an impact and change lives.

These churches share two youth groups. One is called the Young Disciples for grade school children and the teens have a joint Youth Fellowship. It was the younger group that built the wells in Niger and the older group that secured the land for a school in Haiti. Over the years, they have forged a sense of accomplishment and community together.

The great call to Love of Neighbor can seem daunting, especially when one hears about stories such as these. But such a call can urge us to take a small step. The Just Peace movement has resources and inspiration and ways to begin to educate your congregation about what is possible and what small steps you can take to broaden your best hope and share your love with the wider world.

Go to *ucc.org* and search for “Just Peace.” There you will find a way to begin. You can also subscribe to the UCC newsletter “Keeping You Posted” and read all about what other churches are doing to spread Love of Neighbor, Love of Children, and Love of Creation.

September 30, 2018

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

**Courage for Community**

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22

*American Indian Ministry Sunday/United Samoan Ministries Stewardship Sunday*

What if we should lose our saltiness? What if we should lose our taste, or our ability to make the world taste good, at least better than it does? In a way, our vision of a Just World for All is also of a world that tastes good, or a world that has not lost its saltiness. Jesus said we should be salt among ourselves and be at peace with one another. There are those in this world who salt it by their presence. Such a one was Juanita Helphrey (“Maaodagabagi Oxhaadish” White Flower)

In 1997, Juanita and five others were arrested for burning a Wahoo (“Chief” Wahoo is the mascot of the Cleveland Indians baseball team) effigy outside the gates of the World Series. The charges were dropped but she was indefatigable when it came to speaking up for Native American peoples, especially for the people of North Dakota. She herself was a member of the Mandan-Hidatsa-Arikara Nation and a member of the National Staff of the United Church of Christ from 1991-2004.

She died in January, 2018 leaving a legacy of commitment and leadership for all of us in the UCC. That legacy began in 1970 when she worked with the Council for American Indian Ministry (CAIM). In 1975 she became the Executive Director for Indian Affairs of North Dakota. After representing North Dakota at the International Women’s Year Event in Houston, she was one of the women chosen to present their resulting resolution to President Carter. She salted us all both in her work and in those she inspired.

After leaving her work with the National Staff she became a licensed minister and the licensed pastor of the Independence Congregational United Church of Christ on the Forth Berthold Reservation. When she finally retired, she stayed there in Fort Berthold with her family–her three boys and grandson, sisters, nieces and nephew and her beloved dogs.

We are all connected one to the other, even with those we’ve never met. Somehow, on this planet, in this universe we are what makes the world what it is. *Thank you, O God who has knit us together, thank you for the life of this woman who fought for remembrance and education and inclusion of all people. Her life has added salt to our world.*

October 7, 2018

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

**Enfolding Love**

Mark 10:2-16

*World Communion Sunday*

What were you doing in fifth grade? In Orange County, North Carolina there is an embodiment of Love of Children and Love of Neighbor and she’s in 5th grade. She is a member of the Hillsboro United Church of Christ. Instead of Christmas presents last year she asked for blankets and socks for people in the local homeless shelter. She’s been doing this kind of thing since she was seven years old. For her seventh birthday she got 71 coats delivered to the shelter. This year she’s headed to a family shelter to read to the children.

Maya’s mom is a single mother and when asked where Maya developed her boundless love, her mom says it was the church that helped raise her. How much more love our churches could share if we raised all our children this way. Maya sees that she has enough for her life and the joy she takes in giving is palpable to all who see her.

Love of Neighbor should be that visible. It is the way Jesus is resurrected into the world, through the church, through the way we raise our children, through how we show love.

Dorothee Soelle, was a theologian and Professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. She wrote a poem about Jesus needing us called *Not Without You*. This is an excerpt:

*Help him
that's what faith is
he can't bring it about
his kingdom
couldn't then couldn't later can't now
not at any rate without you
and that is his irresistible appeal*

This is a good way to think about our campaign for “A Just World” and “Three Great Loves.” We are the expressed love of Jesus to the world. We are his hands. When we read in the Gospels that Jesus said we should receive the Realm of God like a child, we can imagine the love of Maya and the tears of joy she sheds because people who were cold are now warm.

You can read more stories like Maya’s, and get a tool kit about the Three Great Loves Campaign by going to *3greatloves.uccpages.org*.

October 14, 2018

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

**What Must I Do?**

Mark 10:17-31

*Access Sunday and Disabilities Awareness Week*

When the rich young ruler asks Jesus his question he’s asking for all of us. What should we do, Jesus? How should we be welcoming? How should we be creating a just world? How should we embody love? What can we do to broaden our welcome and show our love for neighbor? You wouldn’t think that anything as dry sounding as the Church Building and Loan Fund could help us answer that question, but it can. Here’s how it did that for one church in Portland, Oregon.

Hillsdale Community Church United Church of Christ is an Open and Affirming church and knew that unless their building was accessible to all there were those in the community who would not feel welcome. And without that welcome, worship was not comfortably open to all. So, they set about to fix that. It was the UCC Church Building and Loan Fund that helped them figure out how to make their 1960s-era building accessible through some planning, technical advice and assistance in mounting a capital campaign. Church Building and Loan Fund will also help churches with loans for such projects.

Hillsdale did a huge amount of work, putting in an elevator, updating restrooms, redoing the office space and raising $25,000 more than they needed. All the time, Church Building and Loan Fund was there cheerleading and encouraging and helping them with the process. Now the church has an air of welcome that shows their openness to the whole world, and a sense of accomplishment in their partnership with a fund that works for all of us.

If your congregation wants to know what it can do to show its love of neighbor and expand its welcome, think about putting a call into the Church Building and Loan Fund and find out what might be possible to make your church an accessible building open to all (216-736-3834 or infocblf@ucc.org).

October 21, 2018

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost

**Great Service**

Mark 10:35-45

*Children’s Sabbath/Laity Sunday*

Much that concerns many churches in mainstream Protestant denominations are these questions: How do we grow? How do we add people in the pews? How do we survive? Trying to answer these questions often leads to reminiscing about when the sanctuary was full or there were 30 confirmands, or the pastor stayed for 30 years in the same church. Back in those days, there wasn’t much a church needed to do except have a personable pastor, probably a young man with a wife and two darling toddlers. It was a time when youth had less to draw down their time and fewer places for fellowship. So-called Blue Laws prohibiting many businesses from being open on Sundays thus carving out a space in people’s lives for Sunday worship. You didn’t have to worry much about what it meant to be church. Church was a part of the world. Today, all that is different. There is so much else to do Sunday mornings, and ways to believe in this world, and pastors don’t stay more than 5-7 years anymore. What is a church to do?

In today’s scripture, Jesus talks about service. He says the measure of being great is being a servant to all. He says, “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (NRSV) In John’s Gospel, Jesus says, “If you love me, feed my sheep.” Perhaps it’s time for us to stop thinking what the world should do for us, but what we should do for the world. Perhaps our worry is not how to grow, but how to serve. That’s the whole reason for our “Three Great Loves” campaign. (Participate in the UCC’s Child or Elder Sponsorship Program. Keep your neighbors in your prayers. Organize a neighborhood clean-up. Volunteer to serve a community meal. Help a young person learn something new.) *Love of Children. Love of Neighbor. And, Love of God’s Creation*.

You can show your commitment to Three Great Loves on a button, a magnet. Display a poster or spread the word by giving away pens. There are many ways to have that message out there, but the one that might be the most biblical response is to pick two or three and do them. Perhaps the church is not a place to simply receive and welcome, but to put people to work. If you are serving others in any way, do not hide your light under a bushel, let the rest of the churches know. Go to *ucc.org* and tell your story.

October 28, 2018

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

**Take Heart**

Mark 10:46-52

*UCC Higher Education Sunday*

Bartimaeus must have gotten asked quite often if there was anything anybody could bring him, or help him across the street, or in some way aid him but only once did the Lord of Life ask him what he wanted. Only once did someone who could change things ask him what he wanted.

What would you say – if asked what do you want by someone who could give it to you?

A person struggling to pay for their education, especially theological education, would know what to ask for. The average Seminarian debt these days hovers between 30 and 40,000 dollars. That’s a lot of debt to incur preparing for a career that doesn’t have a high salary return. The United Church of Christ has many scholarship funds for Theological students. There are funds for people going into military chaplaincy, funds for disabled students, funds for LGBTQ students, Latino and Latina students, African American students and more. If you know somebody planning to go into ministry who is a member in discernment in the UCC let them know that there is help by going to ucc.org and searching for scholarships.

Many Conferences in the UCC have all manner of scholarships. And congregations, too, have set up a variety of scholarships. In Cloverdale, California they have a scholarship for a graduate of the local High School who is the first in their family to go to college. Heidelberg University in Ohio has a scholarship for members of UCC congregations. Chapman University in Orange, California is another school with scholarships for UCC students. Cable Congregational UCC in Cable, Wisconsin has a small scholarship in the name of a former pastor.

The average monthly student loan payment (for borrower aged 20 to 30 years): $411 [based on average debt at 39,000 dollars (WSJ: *Test Your Smarts on Student Debt,* March 4, 2018]. That is a huge amount of debt to follow a recent graduate. Wouldn’t it be great to help lessen that burden–to be someone who gives what a person wants? Think about how much Higher Education means to a young person and what kind of a difference even a small scholarship could make. Many churches and conferences have set up funds. Your church probably has a memorial fund for your congregation’s future. What about building a different kind of security for the people in your church? What about a scholarship fund for the children of members of your congregation?

November 4, 2018

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

**Wherever You Go**

Ruth 1:1-18

Ruth and Naomi qualify as refugees, forced from their home by death and famine. Naomi is going back to the town where she was born but Ruth is a foreigner. These two women will forge a team that will overcome odds, deal with whatever comes up for them and survive against all comers. The result will be good for them and for their community. It’s a story that has been told and retold throughout human history, and today, in the same part of the world, and in a similar geography, people who once had homes, and communities and families are displaced and wandering.

“Week of Compassion” is a network of church partners through Global Ministries and our partnership with the Disciples of Christ. It works to ensure our faithful and efficient response to humanitarian needs around the world. Recently they sent a team of people, including a UCC pastor from New Mexico, to a refugee camp in Iraq. The job of these three representatives was to document the work being nurtured to help the women in these camps find a way to support themselves and their families. Some statistics estimate that the number of refugees from Iraq in Kurdistan may be well over 2 million people. Many of those are women and children.

The UCC pastor on the team found herself in Iraq because, as she told the UCC news service, “I accepted the invitation to go to Iraq because I got tired of being numb, of reading about the latest atrocities and then turning the page. I think it's important for us, as people of faith, to see the human faces behind the headlines. Refugees are people just like the rest of us who once had homes, families, jobs, communities. We need to hear their stories." Sometimes loving your neighbor takes you on a journey.

The Pastor’s name is Reverend Talitha Arnold, Senior Minister of the United Church of Christ in Santa Fe, a church that has a long history of working with immigrants – in the 1980s it was Salvadorans fleeing a brutal civil war, in the 90s Rwanda and Kosovo swept the headlines with its refugees. Today, the congregation works with its large immigrant population in Santa Fe.

The object of ministry, of reaching out to those in crisis from other cultures, is to recognize that we are all God’s beloved creatures and share human needs for shelter and safety and nourishment and community. We have stories to tell each other. We have things to learn from each other. We have things we can give each other. Ruth clings to Naomi and will not leave her. She knows that her future belongs in following a woman from another culture, another language, another home. Ruth follows Naomi because she has no other way forward. Just like the women of Iraq and Syria and all the places that families flee to find a better life.

November 11, 2018

Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost

**Risk and Restoration**

Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17

*Stewardship Sunday*

The refugees, Ruth and Naomi, manage through a series of assimilations, tricks and an advantageous marriage, to bring a baby into the world. A baby named Obed. A baby who would be in a line along a series of begets and begots that would culminate in David, King of Israel. This baby, born of a so called “mixed marriage” (Ruth is a foreign born woman), will be cared for as much by his grandmother as by his mother. He is, after all, a baby born to a woman who had lost everything–sons and all. How will he be cared for? How do we care for the things that matter to us? And to our world? How much more precious is Obed because he is born to a woman who knows death intimately?

Do we have to have lost something so we can appreciate its return? Will we ever understand the importance of stewardship with respect to creation? Will we only learn how to care should the earth lose its resilience and ability to feed us? How do we love what we have? Protect it and keep it so that it will nurture our future? How do we do that before we fear its loss? How can we clear the path to a blessed tomorrow?

“Blessed Tomorrow” is a coalition of faith partners, including the United Church of Christ. Through this partnership, we offer resources gathered to protect this earth – our shared home, our future. For the UCC, fused with our Three Great Loves campaign, the love of everything begins with this creation. Its protection is a moral duty calling us to action. This is action born in an awareness of our responsibility to keep this beloved blue ball we call “earth” healthy enough to sustain and nurture everyone.

For Naomi and Ruth, Obed is a dear and fragile thing born in the aftermath of sorrow, held dear by that awareness. Our earth is as fragile and leans on all of us to protect it. We may not feel like environmentally savvy people, or climate warriors of any stripe but there are things we can do in this stewardship season to be stewards of the earth. If you go to *blessedtomorrow.org* you will find resources for churches and individuals. At that website, you might be empowered by seeing the cloud of witnesses and willing actors giving themselves to this great love – The Love of Creation.

If you or your church have a project or an activity that reflects any of our three loves – children, neighbor, creation – please go to three great loves at UCC pages and download the tool kit, *3greatloves.uccpages.org*.

November 18, 2018

Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost

**Praise the Holy One**

I Samuel 1:4-20

*Thanksgiving Sunday*

Where are you going for Thanksgiving? Will you be one of the many millions traveling this year? Last year, the figure for numbers of people moving around the lower 48 on Thanksgiving Day was around 50 million. Everyone is moving like a river toward and through the world swirling like circles inside of circles and ending up at almost the same meal. It may be that 88% of Americans eat Turkey on Thanksgiving. Wouldn’t it be great if we could all just stop and remember what we share?

Remember to be grateful for everything that saves us, and all of creation that embraces and nurtures and quenches our thirst. To be grateful for a growing generation that learns before our eyes how to speak truth to power. To be grateful for all those who inhabit this world with us and in gratitude see how much we need each other. Being grateful is both a response to love and a generator of love.

Perhaps on Thanksgiving it’s a good day for us to remember that we are grateful for the things we love because of what they call us to become. To love creation calls us into a world of nature and color and the genius of creatures and the suffering caused by climate change. It pulls us into the actual place we live beyond sidewalks and the walls of our homes, or the seats of our cars, or the screens of our computers. Gratitude for creation and our love of it reminds us that nature is our true home.

To love children is to love what the world may become, and be grateful, in advance, for what they will do for others. To love children is to love into the future by influencing their experience of the present. To love children is to teach them things they might need to know. But mostly to show them how beautiful they are and how Jesus needs them to be his hands and they are beloved.

To love one’s neighbor pulls one across the globe, and into our backyards. Who are all these people? What are they doing traveling with us on this day? Eating turkey. Sharing life. Breathing. Laughing. Telling stories. Mourning loss. Being happy. Irritated with a cousin, or sibling. We are also grateful that there is a world where evening meals share different settings and a plenary of tastes. We are grateful for global neighbors. Among all the things that love can teach, our three great loves (Love of Neighbor, Love of Children, Love of Creation) teach us gratitude.

November 25, 2018

Reign of Christ

**A Wise Reign**

John 18:33-37

*United Black Christians Anniversary*

Jesus said his kingdom was not of this world. He said that to Pilate, the tool of the Roman Empire. He might have meant, “I am not of your kingdom. My understanding of how things work is not the same as yours, O Pilate.” Who are the Pilates of this world today? To whom would Jesus be speaking if he was on trial today? And where would that trial take place?

Jesus always knew what to say to the powers of his world. He spoke truth with compassion. He said what was genuine and from his heart without apology and without rancor.

We are now in times of challenge and controversy surrounded by Pilates. All of them think they are King of the world. Just as Pilate interrogated Jesus we are all interrogated by the world. And sometimes the questions are worth considering. They might be: Where do we stand? Who do we serve? In who or what will we find hope today? Who has the power? Who gets to ask the questions? Who gets to give the answers?

This last Sunday in Pentecost is called Christ the King Sunday. It’s a late addition to the liturgical calendar. It was introduced by the Roman Catholic church in 1925. Originally called Reign of Christ Sunday, protestant denominations adopted it as European churches saw the rise of ideologies like Fascism, Communism and the Nazism. Declaring Christ “King” was a way of saying there is another power in this world.

This Sunday’s scripture is perfect because it says that yes, he is a king; he’s just not Pilate’s kind of king. It might suggest that we could look around and see who today thinks they are King of this world? Who is the true King? Whose world is this?

The UCC Statement of Faith says many things about the power of people of faith, about our call to be a united and uniting church and witnesses to a triune God. Among those statements is one that reflects this scripture. It says: *We believe that the UCC is called to be a prophetic church. As in the tradition of the prophets and apostles, God calls the church to speak truth to power, liberate the oppressed, care for the poor and comfort the afflicted*.

When Jesus speaks to Pilate he is doing just what the church is called to do in his name: *Speak truth to power.*