

Last Sunday after Epiphany/Transfiguration

March 6, 2011

Matthew 17:1-9

“WALKING WITH” OUR INTERNATIONAL PARTNERS

Elizabeth and Doug Searles, members of Schleswig United Church of Christ in Schleswig, Iowa, serve in our name, and that of the Presbyterian Church (USA), with our partner, Kosciol Ewangelicko-Reformowany—the Evangelical Reformed Church—in Lodz, Poland. As mission workers for church growth and outreach, they understand that they are not there to “fix things,” as Americans so often want to do. They understand that “walking with” our international partners means just that—and not trying to lead the way. Indeed, as they struggle to polish their Polish, as they like to say, they know their daily struggles are not very different from those of anyone who seeks to do “kingdom work” anywhere.

And Liz and Doug make sure to pass along the lessons they are learning in mission. Accordingly, last September, when fifteen pastors and lay leaders from Iowa came to work—as only Iowans can—the Searles made sure that the Americans hammered and painted under the direction of the local Polish congregation, as requested by the ecumenical partner. Each side—Polish and American—“walked with” the other. “Sometimes,” as Liz Searles says, “that means a time of stumbling about and tripping over each other’s feet: and sometimes that means un-choreographed and reverential dancing in the spirit—the dance of faith.

“As we serve in Poland,” she continues, “we admit that we sometimes become frustrated and want more—we’re from a ‘give me more’ society, after all. We want more vision, or more lay participation, or more outreach, or more...something. We have come to Poland full of energy and dreams, ready to be put to work. We’re the ones who said: ‘Here I am, Lord. Send me!’

“But cultures run deep, changes come slowly—almost imperceptibly--centuries of domination and oppression having taken their toll; and thriving congregations germinate and gestate from within,” she says. “We were called faithfully to experience God, ministry, and congregational life in a new way and not impose our own ways, whether they seem tried and true or shiny and new. That’s a lesson we need to relearn day-by-day as we walk with our partners.”

Elizabeth and Doug Searles can “walk with” our Protestant partners in Poland only because we give generously to Our Church’s Wider Mission.

First Sunday in Lent
March 13, 2011
Psalm 32

PREPARATION, PENITENCE, JUSTICE

In his 2010 book, *Thieves in the Temple: The Christian Church and the Selling of the American Soul*, UCC pastor and journalist G. Jeffrey MacDonald argues that many Protestant churches have traded their traditional moral authority for an easy affirmation of our culture's values, no longer preaching to sinners seeking redemption but to consumers shopping for a low-calorie religion.

A harsh critique, perhaps, but still deserving of our consideration, especially in this Lenten season. After all, these forty days are intended for serious self-examination, as we prepare ourselves to enter into nothing less than the passion and victory of our Lord, Jesus Christ. This is no time for a religion that only soothes or entertains. For us, as for Christians through the ages, this is a time to observe the three traditional Lenten practices, usually identified as the disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. To be sure, some Protestants have redefined those practices, emphasizing daily devotions, temporarily giving up something, and volunteering for service projects. But the principles behind those revised practices are the same—preparation, penitence, and justice to one's neighbors.

If Christians take their Lenten disciplines seriously, they count on Sunday worship to reinforce their faith and practice with prophetic, biblically-based preaching, earnest prayers of confession and intercession, anthems and hymns of grace and mercy. For committed Christians, Lent is no time for "lite" religion.

As Jeffrey MacDonald writes, "The pastoral vocation is to help people grow spiritually, resist their lowest impulses and adopt higher, more compassionate ways." Growing spiritually, denying our appetites, and yes welcoming strangers into our midst: aren't those precisely the practices Christians have always sought to observe during Lent?

During this season of Lent, let us try to recapture some of the spirit that animated the earliest Christian communities. Let us heed the words of that great missionary of the early church, the Apostle Paul. "Do not be conformed to this world," he wrote, "but transformed by the holy spirit." (Romans 12:2)

Second Sunday in Lent
March 20, 2011
Genesis 12:1-4a

GIVING IS GOOD FOR YOU

Some people think that, by giving, they're doing someone else a favor. In fact, they're doing themselves a favor. Yes, giving of our time, talent, and even treasure, is good for us.

Consider the personal benefits of giving. In their book, *The Power of Giving: How Giving Back Enriches Us All*, Azim Jamal and Harvey McKinnon write: "By giving, you can live to your potential, avoid loneliness, become fearless, touch your spirit, and find meaning and fulfillment."

There's even scientific proof that people who give experience what's called "the helper's high." Stephen Post, author of *Why Good Things Happen to Good People*, says, "Researchers in many diverse fields have identified a physical biology of giving and positive emotions, a sense of warmth and joy in life. People even report feeling increased energy."

Does that mean that givers may even experience improved physical health? Yes, according to Dr. Cheryl Phillips, president of the American Geriatrics Society. "In my work with older patients, I have seen many times that people who stay engaged in volunteer activities remain more vital and independent than those who withdraw from the world. We know people who volunteer tend to feel better and even have longer lives," she says.

So, science indicates that giving of one's time and talent can be emotionally and physically beneficial to the giver. But that doesn't go for giving money, does it? Yes, it does. An article in the journal *Science* describes an experiment in which adults were divided into two groups. One group was given money to spend on themselves and the other was given money to spend on other people. "Participants who were randomly assigned to spend money on other people experienced greater happiness than those assigned to spend money on themselves," writes Dr. Elizabeth Dunn.

Another study of donors came to the same conclusion. When asked what it felt like to give, people described a feeling of excitement and joy when they wrote a check. "It's so important to them that half the respondents were willing to make compromises in other areas of their lives to sustain their philanthropy if necessary," says Penelope Burk, author of the survey.

All of this may be hard for people weaned on the "give until it hurts" motto to swallow. But those words aren't in the Bible! When the Apostle Paul says that God loves a cheerful giver, he may even be saying that God created us to be givers because it would make us happy.

Third Sunday in Lent
March 27, 2011
Exodus 17:1-7

MUCH THE SAME

Times have changed since 1949, when our One Great Hour of Sharing offering began. In those days, Father wore a hat (not a baseball cap) to church. Mother wore gloves and “nylons.” And, believe it or not, the kids’ shoes were shined. Church was most likely downtown, and boasted a big steeple. And worship probably began at eleven o’clock.

Times have changed since then, but One Great Hour of Sharing is still a vital part of our church’s wider ministry. That’s because the world’s needs remain much the same. To be sure, the refugees in need of help in 1949 were Europeans, recovering from the Second World War. Today they are Iraqis and Sudanese, driven from their homes by regional conflicts. But the need for help remains much the same.

Our grandparents’ gifts to One Great Hour of Sharing helped resettle thousands of “displaced persons” in Europe after the Second World War, just as our gifts next Sunday will bring food, clothing, shelter, and medical care to refugees in the Middle East and Africa.

Yes, next Sunday. That’s when many United Church of Christ congregations will receive this special offering that provides disaster relief, community development, health care, and education to people around the world, including some here in North America.

While the world’s needs remain much the same today as they were in 1949, the way One Great Hour of Sharing responds to them has changed. In 1949 American mission bodies had to improvise ways to get the aid to people in need because of a lack of effective relief infrastructures in many countries. Today we work in cooperation with partner churches and charitable agencies in more than eighty countries. They can channel our aid quickly and directly to the most needy, because of their indigenous networks.

Please give as generously as you are able to One Great Hour of Sharing. Why? The reason, simply, is this: Jesus asks us to, for his own sake. As he said, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it for one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it for me.” (Matthew 25:40)

Fourth Sunday in Lent

April 3, 2011

Psalm 23

ALMOST MIRACULOUS: LOWER INFANT MORTALITY RATES

Kamila Barakzat spends her days engaged in one of the most challenging and sometimes taboo aspects of medical work in rural Afghanistan: women's health.

Working within the deeply conservative and patriarchal social structures that characterize Afghan society, Kamila, a mother and child health coordinator with our ecumenical partner, Church World Service (CWS), sees her work as central to the rebuilding of Afghanistan.

"The overall health of a community directly depends on the health and knowledge of women," she says with a deep sense of conviction. "This is where we have to continually focus our efforts if we are going to address the health needs of entire communities."

Kamila describes what can be regarded as an almost miraculous decline in the infant mortality rates in the seven Church World Service target districts in Nangarhar and Laghman. From October to December 2009, only one newborn death was registered – a truly remarkable accomplishment in a country with the third highest infant mortality rate in the world.

Dr. Sardar Muhammad, the CWS health program director in Afghanistan, attributes this success to the higher number of women receiving tetanus inoculations, and the community-based maternity healthcare outreach efforts.

"In addition, well-equipped delivery rooms and qualified staff have further helped draw an increasing number of women to choose to deliver at CWS-managed health facilities," he adds.

"Our ability to work in some of these difficult areas with the most vulnerable segments of society is due in no small part to the ability of CWS staff to build long-term bonds of trust with local communities," says Dr. Sardar. "The only way forward in improving community health is for our staff like Kamila to continue to negotiate the power structures within Afghan family systems without transgressing cultural boundaries."

Gifts to our One Great Hour of Sharing offering provide support to Kamila and Dr. Sardar, and countless others ministering in our name around the world.

Thanks to your generosity, lives are changed.

Fifth Sunday in Lent
April 10, 2011
Ezekiel 37:1-14

UNITED AND INCLUSIVE

In 1955, two years before the formation of the United Church of Christ, a sociologist named Will Herberg published a book entitled *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*. The title revealed an assumption about American society that may have been true then: that everyone in the United States belonged to one of those three religious groups.

The founders of our denomination shared that assumption. When the United Church of Christ was formed in 1957, the word “United” was used in the hope that other mainline Protestant churches would eventually join the denomination. Whether or not they aspired to unite all Americans who were not Catholic or Jewish into one big church, they nevertheless viewed society in denominational terms. In other words, neither Will Herberg nor the leaders of the new United Church of Christ gave much thought to the people now referred to as “unchurched.”

Protestant church membership was growing during the 1950s, and most believed that the trend would continue. We know now that it didn’t last very long. Today fewer and fewer people identify with any of the three religious groups that Herberg named. When asked their religious preference, more and more people answer, “None of the above.”

That has changed the meaning of “united.” Inviting people who are either indifferent or hostile to organized religion to join us is not what our forebears had in mind when they spoke of a “united” church, and adopted as their slogan those words from John: “that they may all be one.” (John 17:21) But for tens of thousands of Americans today, God is no longer speaking, because what they heard in church or through the religious media somehow excluded them. They feel unwelcome in church because of their theological views, gender, racial and ethnic identity, sexual orientation, or physical or mental abilities.

These persons are included when we in the United Church of Christ invite others to join us now in listening to the liberating word of our still-speaking God. In the beginning, our church reached out in unity to other Protestant denominations. Today, we extend our “extravagant welcome” to everyone—“whoever you are and wherever you are on life’s journey....”

Sixth Sunday in Lent
April 17, 2011
Matthew 26:14-27:66

THE DILEMMA OF PALM SUNDAY

For many years, Palm Sunday has posed a dilemma for me, and for others as well. How do we enter into the joy of the day when we know what happened later that week—the betrayal of Judas, the falling asleep of the disciples while Jesus prayed, the denial of Jesus by Peter, the judgment by Pilate, the choice of Barabbas by the people, the abandonment of Jesus at the cross by all but a few? Like actors who must carry out their performance as if they do not know what happens later in the play, we must find a way to shout “Hosanna!” on Palm Sunday morning.

Over the years, I have tried different ways to recapture the joy that I always felt as a child on Palm Sunday morning, when I knew we would sing and wave our palms in church, while preparations for Easter were about to begin and a new Easter dress and shoes were about to be purchased. I have tried to use mindfulness, one of the teachings of Buddhism, to be aware of the moment we are in, savoring that moment as a gift and allowing ourselves to sense fully all that the moment has to offer. I have tried to focus on what it means to have Jesus in my life every day and to share that joy with someone else.

But recently I have begun to reflect on what it must have felt like to be standing on the side of the road in Jerusalem that day. There must have been all kinds of people there—those who desperately believed that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, those who were skeptical and just wanted to see him for themselves, those who were his enemies, and those who just happened to be there. But they were all caught up in the frenzy of the moment and for that one moment they became followers instead of bystanders. So they waved whatever they had and they shouted in joy, “Hosanna, Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

And it dawned on me that that is what God is asking of us today. To move from being bystanders to being followers. But, unlike those who were there that day, we know that to be followers on the road with Jesus requires incredible service and sacrifice. But we also know that the reward is great. For, after all, we do know about Easter Sunday morning.

Rev. Bernice Powell Jackson
First United Church of Tampa, UCC
Tampa, Florida

Easter
April 24, 2011
John 20:1-18

“CHRIST IS RISEN! CHRIST IS RISEN INDEED!”

Before those words were church words, reserved like polished brass for holy days, they were the words of victory in the midst of community struggle—political words. Communities do not emerge as communities without conflict and struggle. There can be healthy struggle, but the conflict of Holy Week is anything but healthy. We do not have to revisit a far-flung Roman province 2000 years ago to find deceit, betrayal, desertion, trumped-up charges, innocent suffering, false imprisonment, torture, mockery and death.

“Christ is risen” is the affirmation of Jesus’ initial followers that God reigns, not Caesar. We want the affirmation that “Christ is risen” proclaimed over our mortal remains someday, but Jesus’ resurrection was as much political as personal. *God reigns*, not Caesar. *God reigns*, not the gain of betrayal. *God reigns*, not the nails of the status quo. *God reigns*, not the taunting. *God reigns*, not the suffering. *God reigns*, not the past, not privilege, not the power to crucify. Christ is risen; therefore *God reigns*.

But let’s be clear, Jesus’ resurrection is not limited to the political anymore than it can be reduced to the personal. This is a day large enough to sing “We Shall Overcome” and “I Come to the Garden Alone.” Justice and Jesus.

If this creation is good and if God is just, how can we deny that we will ever see the fruition of our commitment to living and serving the God who reigns? Haven’t we all sat at weddings or graduations saying, “George, Sally should have been here”?

One of our favorite song titles is from Ladysmith Black Mambazo: “Hope for those who Died before the End of Apartheid.” The hope of eternal life is not that we will continue to exist as frail elderly or eternally frail but that we will experience the fulfillment of every small act of kindness, of every time our courage set our face like flint against ego or racism or selfishness or the resort to violence. Eternal life is not our reward to wallow in selfish comfort, but to at last experience the reign of God where righteousness and peace kiss, where children’s teeth are not set on edge by the sour grapes their grandparents ate, but where justice prevails, mourning is complete, laughter outdistances tears, and the joy of life and the praise of God our Creator and Redeemer and Sustainer is contagious.

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Amen.

Revs. Richard and Jill Edens
United Church of Chapel Hill
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Second Sunday of Easter
May 1, 2011
John 20:19-31

I DON'T HAVE TO PROVE IT

“Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” John 20:25b

I can't prove to you that Jesus lived, died and was resurrected, nor that he healed people on the Sabbath or that he forgave his tormentors. I can't prove to you that one God can also be three in one, and that together that force has parted the waters, burned bushes and fed thousands on short rations. None of this can I prove. But I can tell you that I have faith in it.

I can say it because “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen.” (Hebrews 11:1) I can hope and believe in what is not before my eyes. I don't have to be logical, and most of all, I don't have to prove it. Not to you, not to anyone.

In our culture, it seems like people of faith are always on the witness stand being asked to prove things, and we Christians tend to cooperate. We come up with the search for the historical Jesus and scholars who vote on whether Jesus said this or that. Or archaeological studies that will finally prove whether or not Jesus was resurrected. Documentaries on the History Channel draw us in, as if finally, we might look reasonable to the viewing public, as though finally we will get our proof.

I'm tired of playing by that dull and pedestrian set of rules, which has everything to do with a litigious, factoid-hungry culture and nothing to do with following Jesus. I don't come to church for evidence or for a closing argument. I come to experience the presence of God, to sense the mystery of things eternal and to learn a way of life that makes no sense to those stuck sniffing around for proof.

Rev. Lillian Daniel
First Congregational Church, UCC
Glen Ellyn, IL

This message first appeared as a Stillspeaking Daily Devotional reflection on the website of the United Church of Christ. Go to www.ucc.org to sign up to receive these devotionals every day by e-mail.

Third Sunday of Easter
May 8, 2011
Luke 24:13-35

THE LECTIONARY

Earlier this morning, in the 15th century abbey church of the Franciscan monastery overlooking Nice, France, the congregation stood as a monk approached the lectern to read from the Gospel. He opened the Bible and announced the text: Luke 24:13-35.

At St. John United Church of Christ in Wood River, Illinois, and in many other UCC congregations, the very same text will also be read aloud at worship this morning. Coincidence? Not at all.

Although divisions in the body of Christ persist, there is at least one shining example of ecumenical cooperation we can celebrate. It's called the Revised Common Lectionary, which contains the recommended Bible readings for every day of the year. A distinguished committee of Protestants and Catholics, known as the Consultation on Common Texts, worked together to create the Revised Common Lectionary nearly 20 years ago.

How do churches find out what's in the Lectionary? In the United Church of Christ, all congregations receive a complimentary 18-month Desk Calendar and Plan Book every year, thanks to church-wide support of Our Church's Wider Mission. The Calendar includes the lectionary readings for every Sunday and for all the major Christian holidays. So UCC pastors and lay leaders always have conveniently at hand the very same scriptural references as their counterparts throughout the Christian world.

In addition to identifying the biblical texts for each Sunday, the United Church of Christ also offers preaching help for pastors. "Sermon Seeds," a sermon preparation resource created by the UCC's national staff, is offered every week on the UCC website. For interested laypersons, the UCC also offers "Weekly Seeds," with Bible readings, reflection, prayer, and focus questions for thought and discussion. Available on the website as well as by e-mail (sign up at www.ucc.org), "Weekly Seeds" can be used for personal devotions or group Bible study.

The United Church of Christ's website is truly rich in worship resources for congregations as well as individuals, and all thanks to giving to Our Church's Wider Mission.

Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 15, 2011
Acts 2:42-47

“GLAD AND GENEROUS HEARTS”

Businesses don't seem to want consumers to know who they are anymore. They drop their names in favor of initials. Most of us still remember what KFC stands for—and, of course, BP. But what about RBC?

Our church, too, is known by its initials. Not because we in the UCC have anything to hide, however. Our name, the United Church of Christ, has never been a secret. But it has been a problem--from the start. It says nothing about who we were: Congregational, Christian, Evangelical, Reformed. And not much about who we are, either.

When he heard that our church hotel in Cleveland is a Radisson, someone remarked, “That’s about right. I never thought of us either as a Holiday Inn or a Hilton.” That speaker believed he had a firm idea of who we are as a church. And like him, most of us also know who we are. We just can’t explain it very well—not only to friends, but even to family.

But maybe we don't have to. Look at the earliest Christian churches, as described in a passage from the Book of the Acts, which happens to be our focus scripture for this Sunday. Those churches knew who they were, to be sure. But they were known not so much by what they called themselves as by what they did:

“All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all people.” (Acts 2:44-47a) NRSV.

The Revised English Bible transmits those early believers’ sense of fellowship in Christ and its fruits perhaps even more vividly: “they shared their meals with unaffected joy, as they praised God and enjoyed the favor of the whole people.” (Acts 2:47a)

What if we did the same? Shared our meals, if not all our possessions and goods? “And day by day the Lord added to their number....” (Acts 2:47b)

Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 22, 2011
Acts 7:55-60

THE HOLY SPIRIT WAS THERE

Any tough-minded agnostic will tell you there's no proof for the existence of the Holy Spirit. But there is. Look at the history of Christian mission in China. Before 1949, there were six hundred thousand Protestant church members and four thousand missionaries in China. After the Revolution, and the outbreak of the Korean War, all the western missionaries left China. Sixty years later there are more than sixty million Christians in China. How could that have happened? The answer is clear: the Holy Spirit was working all the time.

Christians don't need such proofs to confirm our faith—or our understanding of mission. We know that the Holy Spirit doesn't depend upon us. Indeed, the truth is precisely the opposite! With only the Holy Spirit to guide them, Christians in China carried out the “Three-self Principles,” Self-propagation, Self-support, and Self-government, to maintain and grow their church.

After all, the gospel isn't something that missionaries carry, like a precious piece of luggage, to “unreached” people. The Word is already there when they arrive. For Jesus Christ has always had the means and the power to go anywhere, with or without us, as a noted Asian theologian has declared.

But that is no reason for us to be any less committed to God's mission. Our gifts of tithes and offerings, as well as our selves, are needed to carry on the work of the Holy Spirit. They enable us to respond when our partners anywhere in the world invite us to join in their ministry and mission. When called, we help them train clergy and laity for church leadership. We advise them on questions of child nutrition and agriculture. We provide the materials and tools they need to rebuild their homes after a flood or earthquake.

Those of us who give of ourselves, and those of us who stay behind and give of our means, are united in our commitment to God's mission, sustained by the Holy Spirit, to bear witness to Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8) Or as Glen Lapp, one of our partner medical workers, murdered in northern Afghanistan last summer, put it, “trying to be a little bit of Christ in this part of the world.”

Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 29, 2011
John 14:15-21

THE “PROSPERITY GOSPEL”

In 2006, James H. Cone, the eminent black liberation theologian, declined an honorary degree from a seminary where the commencement speaker was a promoter of the “prosperity gospel,” the belief that the way of salvation is the road to riches. With his courageous gesture, Rev. Cone made a bold affirmation of the principle of authentic Christian stewardship.

The “prosperity gospel” encourages people to hope for and seek more and more material things. But the Bible testifies to God’s abundance, assuring us again and again that we already have enough. Or, to quote from the words of that beloved hymn, “Great is Your Faithfulness,” “All I have needed your hand has provided.”

The “prosperity gospel” preaches that material wealth is an authentic sign of Christian character—that God rewards pious Christians with money and possessions. But Jesus insisted that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God, and told a would-be follower first to sell his possessions and give to the poor.

Speaking of the poor, the “prosperity gospel” also teaches that if someone is not wealthy it somehow means they have not given their lives to Christ. In view of that attitude, says Rev. Bob Edgar, former general secretary of the National Churches of Christ in the USA, “I have to think that the last thing you’d want to be in today’s America is a young, homeless, pregnant and destitute woman. Yet that is precisely the kind of person God chose to bring Jesus into the world. There was a message in that choice,” he continues. “It was that love for the poor is the greatest moral imperative, one that calls for compassion, not condemnation.”

Authentic Christian stewardship, as James Cone so boldly demonstrated, affirms that God has already provided us with more than enough to care for Creation—the human and natural world bestowed upon us. Our salvation comes with the faithful stewardship of God’s many gifts, not the acquisition of more and more possessions.