

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 4, 2011
Acts 17:22-28

SEASON OF CREATION

As Kermit the Frog says in a somewhat different context, "It isn't easy being green." Having to recycle newspapers, switch to compact fluorescent light bulbs, eat only sustainable fish—and that's just the beginning. Christians are called to a ministry of environmental stewardship that means more than just lowering the thermostat this coming winter. We are called to join with our brothers and sisters in Christ in something new, an interfaith celebration called the Season of Creation.

During this Season of Creation--the four Sundays in September--we join in celebrating our Creator God. We also celebrate Christ, the creator, and the wonders of creation sustained by the Holy Spirit. Today, the First Sunday of the Season of Creation, we celebrate Creation Day with Christians around the world, and recommit ourselves to a ministry of healing the Earth.

Accordingly, in this Season of Creation, we affirm that we will:

1. Celebrate Earth as a sacred planet filled with God's vibrant presence.
2. Unite with all creation in praising the God of creation.
3. Confess our sins against creation.
4. Embrace our kin in creation as our extended family.
5. Proclaim the good news that the risen Jesus is the cosmic Christ who fills and renews all creation.
6. Go forth on a mission to be partners with Christ in the healing of creation.

Bible readings for the next three Sundays are: September 11: Land Sunday (Psalm 139:7-12); September 18: Wilderness/Outback Sunday (Romans 8:18-27); and September 25: River Sunday (Revelation 22:1-5)

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 11, 2011
Psalm 139:7-12

PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND THE COMMON GOOD

Many American cities have one: a public school named for Horace Mann, the 19th century reformer of American education. Before Mann, if children went to school at all, they went to one-room schoolhouses. Mann and his allies literally revolutionized education in America, first of all by making it free and open to all. "I believe in the existence of a great, immortal, immutable principle of natural law," Mann declared, "which proves the absolute right to an education of every human being that comes into the world."

Many of our ancestors in the Congregational Churches enthusiastically joined in Mann's crusade for public education. Their goals included shifting the burden of financial support for schools from parents to the public, dividing students into classes defined by age, extending the school year to nine months, and making attendance compulsory.

Today, we in the United Church of Christ maintain that commitment, and successive General Synods have reaffirmed our dedication to and responsibility for quality public education. General Synod 15 warned that "While children from many areas have comfortable schools with all the educational trimmings, poor and ethnic minority children often face overcrowded and deteriorated facilities, and a lack of enrichment programs and modern technology." General Synod 18 cautioned that "Because the poor and their children are disproportionately people of color, the educational inequities in our public schools reinforce the racial/ethnic injustices of our society." General Synod 23 proclaimed advocacy and support for public education one of the "foremost civil rights issues in the twenty-first century." And General Synod 25 called upon all settings of the United Church of Christ to promote the common good by providing "opportunity for every child in well-funded, high quality public schools."

At the beginning of this new school year, let us resolve once again to preserve and protect the values of public education in our democratic society.

Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 18, 2011
Romans 8:18-27

SESAME STREET SAVES

Just like adults, children are fascinated by money. So, many educators believe, it's never too early to start teaching them financial literacy. Apparently the folks at "Sesame Street" agree. This month, episodes of the award-winning children's television show are presenting "For Me, for You, for Later," a series that will teach some of the fundamentals of money management.

Among other things, the programs are intended to explain to pre-schoolers how we make choices about money, and to help them learn to make sound financial decisions. In one segment, for example, kids are asked to divide their money among three jars: one each for spending, saving, and sharing. That could be a lesson in family financial management for all of us.

The producers of "Sesame Street" recognize that many parents watch the programs with their children and hope that the lessons the Muppets teach are not lost on adults. All of us appreciate that, as a teaching tool, television can only go so far, and nothing can surpass the impact of the home in the forming of children's values. Getting adults to think of the family budget in terms of three pockets--one for spending money, one for saving, and one for giving--could make a difference in their lives, and in those of their children.

Churches and charities cannot help but celebrate "Sesame Street's" emphasis upon giving money--or "sharing"--as the programs put it. But, for Grover, the furry blue Muppet, sharing goes even farther than giving money. As he says, "I sometimes like to share my money with people who might need it. But I also share other things, too! I share my time, and my energy, because those are very worthwhile too."

Grover's words, and their order, may be a little different, but the three kinds of sharing he mentions are the same as we teach in the United Church of Christ when we preach about Christian stewardship--the proverbial Time, Talent, and Treasure.

So God really is still speaking today, even on children's daytime TV!

Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 25, 2011

Revelation 22:1-5

AMERICAN INDIAN MINISTRY SUNDAY

People have always found passages that speak directly to their special conditions in the pages of the Bible. When African American slaves stole away to worship in secret, they repeated the Exodus story of liberation, singing "Let my people go." Generations of the once free-roaming Indians of the Northern Plains, confined within physical and psychological boundaries by our government, have been sustained and uplifted by these immortal words from Isaiah: "they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." (40:31)

When a missionary couple arrived on the same Missouri Riverboat that carried some of Custer's cavalry, the Indians welcomed them with both curiosity and consideration. Eleven years later, Poor Wolf, a spiritual leader, was the first Indian on the reservation to become a Christian, but others soon followed. Still, that did not mean that they and their descendants would necessarily be treated with justice or respect.

Juanita Helphrey, former State Director of Indian Affairs in North Dakota, and now a member of our New Town United Church of Christ, still remembers the day at school when her turn came to read aloud from an American history textbook. "I stood before mostly white kids as I read and suddenly the word 'savages' jumped out at me right in the midst of a paragraph. I stopped reading because I suddenly associated with it and remember thinking, 'they're talking about me; do those kids think I'm a savage?' I felt diminished, mortified, and wished I was invisible."

On this American Indian Ministry Sunday, we celebrate the courage and faithfulness of our Native American members, who live mostly on reservations in the Northern Plains, and in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, and worship in twenty-one local churches associated with our Council of American Indian Ministry. These brothers and sisters in the UCC built and now maintain their church buildings themselves. But they do not have the financial means to pay their pastors. They depend upon the rest of us to help provide that support, and we gladly do so with our freewill gifts to the Neighbors in Need Offering, which will be received in many of our churches next month.

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 2, 2011

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

NEIGHBORS IN NEED

Imagining a World without Hunger

Understanding their call to work and witness for justice and peace, Church of the Apostles United Church of Christ of Lancaster, PA, uncovered a new purpose. They discovered a ministry to at-risk adolescents as an alternative to street gang membership. The ministry, called DigIt, teaches life skills through involving youth in sustainable agriculture practices. Following the prompting of the Holy Spirit, relationships were built and a partnership ensued.

Last March, Church of the Apostles offered part of their 21- acre green space to DigIt, giving the organization gardening space to grow, harvest, and sell more produce while transforming the lives of area youth. The church fertilized, plowed and tilled the soil at no cost. DigIt promotes gardening without chemicals and pesticides, and the harvested vegetables are sold in the city. Produce is also taken to urban low-cost housing communities and sold at affordable prices door-to-door.

According to Senior Pastor, the Rev. Rebecca Meyer, transformational experiences arose within the church from their work with DigIt. “Three distinct generations shared gardening space and social interactions began. Relationships developed slowly and intentionally. We are taking small successful steps. Regrettably, we note that racism is alive and well. So as God transforms our congregation, God continues to nudge our conscience toward loving ‘the other.’”

“Change takes time. We know it will come gradually with lots of ‘God moments’ which were not part of ‘our plan.’ This serves to let us know that *God is still speaking* and if we watch and listen, the transformation in us will be revealed.”

Celebrate ***Mission 1*** with the UCC, Nov. 1 – 11, 2011: One united Church on a shared mission for 11 powerful days to feed the hungry and confront food-related injustice.

www.ucc.org/mission1

Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 9, 2011
Exodus 32:1-14

THINKING ABOUT A MISSION TRIP?

Are you thinking about participating in a mission trip overseas? Better be prepared It's not the long flight, the modest accommodations, or even the unfamiliar food you need to worry about. Nor even the struggle to communicate with people who don't necessarily speak English. No, what you should be concerned about is the possibility that you will be permanently changed by the experience!

Few volunteers who go on mission trips and spend time alongside others from another country-- another culture--remain the same afterwards. Something happens while they are talking and eating, praying and singing with their hosts. And that experience alters them profoundly and permanently.

They have barely unpacked from their journey before they're talking about a return trip. Experts have come up with two words to describe this condition: "critical presence" and "accompaniment." Persons with this condition exhibit several telltale symptoms:

- *They bring new energy and commitment to the church's mission and benevolences committee.

- *They cover the church bulletin board with photos of their trip.

- *They write articles about their international partners for the church newsletter.

- *They increase their pledge to the church.

- *They volunteer to help interpret and promote the One Great Hour of Sharing offering.

- *They read anything they can find on world affairs, especially when it concerns the country or region they visited.

- *They help organize a visit from members of the partner church, and volunteer to host them.

Well, are you still thinking about participating in a mission trip? Good for you!

Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 16, 2011

Exodus 33:12-23

NOT FORGOTTEN

"We won't forget you!" What pastoral couple hasn't heard those words on the occasion of their retirement? In our United Church of Christ, they're more than a nice sentiment. They're a promise.

Almost alone among Protestant churches, our UCC Pension Boards assures that retired pastors as well as their surviving spouses are not forgotten. Not only via the U.S. mail, but also in person. Once a year, they receive a telephone call and then a house call from an Annuitant Visitor, a retired pastor trained to provide assistance with questions regarding pensions, health and dental plans, Social Security, death benefits, clergy taxes, and many other concerns. Without prying, the Visitors also try to determine if an annuitant is in financial difficulty, and thus might qualify for a supplementation grant or a Christmas Fund check.

"Most of our people are doing something in the church, or the Conference, or volunteering," says Doug Allen, who makes some seventy visits a year in Minneapolis and its suburbs. But others--especially widows--"are often lonely people." They, above all, need to know that they have not been forgotten by the wider church, he says.

Don Kaufman, one of three Annuitant Visitors in the Indiana-Kentucky Conference, has fifty contacts--individuals and couples--who know they can count on Don if need be. With just a couple of phone calls, for example, he recently resolved a health insurance problem that had been troubling a clergy widow.

Naturally, like all the other Annuitant Visitors, Doug and Don get plenty of "thank-you's" from their contacts. But their greatest satisfaction, they say, comes from the opportunity to express to retired pastors and their spouses, in behalf of both the Pension Boards and the wider United Church of Christ, our gratitude for their years of faithful ministry and service. Hearing that sincere statement of appreciation has sometimes brought these retired servants of the church to tears.

This unique UCC program, the envy of other denominations, is supported through income from the Fund for Ministerial Assistance, which was established thanks to legacy gifts received by the UCC Pension Boards over the past century. Gifts to the Fund can be provided in the form of wills, life income gifts, or outright gifts of cash or appreciated assets.

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 23, 2011
Deuteronomy 34:1-12

MISSION: 1

Mission: 1 is coming! Get ready and decide how you will participate in this special church-wide mission taking place November 1 – 11, 2011. For these 11 days, the United Church of Christ will be on a shared mission to feed the hungry and confront food-related injustice here in the U.S. and worldwide.

- In 11 days, the UCC will collect more than **1 million items of healthy food** and other household items for local food banks and outreach services.
- In 11 days, the UCC will make an extra-special push to gather online contributions of at least **\$111,111 for Neighbors in Need**, our UCC offering that addresses hunger, poverty, and justice issues throughout the United States.
- In 11 days, the UCC will deliver more than **11,111 letters to Congress**, asking our government to reform U.S. foreign assistance in ways that more effectively benefit hungry and poor people worldwide. Our letters will join with thousands of others in the hunger organization Bread for the World's 2011 "Offering of Letters" campaign.

Start planning now to learn about food-related issues, advocate and raise money on behalf of the hungry, and share bread—and tuna, and peanut butter, and vegetables, and cereal—with our neighbors in need at home and abroad.

By helping our neighbors near and far through Mission: 1, we all join together to more fully realize our United Church of Christ motto and Jesus' prayer: "That they may all be one." When you get home from church today, find out more by going to www.ucc.org/mission1

Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time (Reformation Sunday)
October 30, 2011
Joshua 3:7-17

That They May All Be 1

“Jesus is gathered with his disciples. It is Thursday night, the eve of the crucifixion. He has told them he is going away and that they cannot follow him. . . . And then he prays. . . that they – God, Jesus and the disciples – may be as one. But then he extends his prayer, actually breaks it wide open until it stretches beyond the room, city, region, and even the time and history they occupy. ‘And I ask not only on behalf of these,’ Jesus prays, ‘but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.’

“Did you hear that? Two thousand years ago, understandably focused on his impending suffering and death, Jesus nevertheless turns his attention to us, actually prays *for us*.”*

Jesus’ prayer for us—“That they may all be one”—is the motto of the United Church of Christ. For more than 50 years since our founding, the UCC has worked to live out those words. We have sought to heal divisions even as we claim that the unity we seek is not the absence of disagreements—it is found in loving others in spite of them.

Jesus’ prayer and his commandment to love our neighbor inspired the United Church of Christ’s special campaign, Mission:1. For 11 days from November 1 – 11, we will be one united church on a shared mission to feed the hungry and confront food-related injustice.

The goals for Mission:1 are . . . 1 million items of healthy food donated to the hungry; at least \$111,111 in online gifts to Neighbors in Need; and 11,111 letters to Congress asking for reform of U.S. foreign assistance in a way that more effectively helps the poor and hungry.

One church. One mission. Yet as we join together to fulfill Jesus’ prayer for us, we become so much more than 1!

Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time
November 6, 2011
Matthew 25:1-13

Mission: 1 . . . 11 Powerful Days

Today we are in the midst of Mission:1—eleven powerful days when the United Church of Christ takes on a shared mission to help feed the hungry and confront food-related injustice at home and overseas. As UCC members make a special push during these 11 days to donate food, contribute to our Neighbors in Need offering, and write letters to Congress, we join our efforts with all who seek to alleviate hunger in God's world.

And despite the enormity of the problem, those efforts have made a real impact. According to the hunger and poverty advocacy organization, Bread for the World, since 1990:

- The number of people living on \$1.25 a day fell by 400 million people.
- The rate of chronically hungry people in developing countries fell from 20 percent to 16 percent.
- The mortality rate for children under 5 fell by 40 percent or more in Ethiopia, Malawi, and Niger.

While this is good news, the world suffered a big setback beginning in 2007 with the food price crisis and the global recession. As a result:

- Even though there has been an overall percentage decrease, 925 million people still suffer from chronic hunger worldwide, nearly 90 million higher than in 2000.
- 24,000 children die every day from poverty, hunger, and preventable diseases. That's one child every 3.6 seconds.
- 1.5 billion people are in extreme poverty, living on less than \$1.25 a day.

Our UCC motto and Jesus' prayer, "That they may all be one" compels us to confront these facts with a concerted mission emphasis. For these 11 days of Mission:1, across the whole United Church of Christ we are educating ourselves and one another about food-related policy issues; we are advocating on behalf of hungry people at home and around the world; we are raising money for hunger-action purposes; and we are sharing our plenty, donating tons of peanut butter, tuna, vegetables, cereal, and more to our local food pantries and outreach centers.

If you haven't done so already, it's not too late to be a part of Mission:1. Go to www.ucc.org/mission1 for more information. And plan to celebrate the campaign's success next Sunday, November 13, in your church.

Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time
November 13, 2011
Matthew 25:14-30

STEWARDSHIP SUNDAY

Jesus' statement, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also," may sound familiar, but if we don't read it with care we might reverse the statement through a kind of scriptural dyslexia. We might read it to say, "Where your heart is, there will your treasure be also." That would make sense to us because much of the time our dollars follow our heart's lead. We give to what matters to us. But that isn't what Jesus said.

That's the appeal you hear over and over again from, say, National Public Radio or your alma mater: If you care about this institution, you will write a check. In other words, "Where your heart is, there will your treasure be also." But Jesus didn't say that.

Jesus is speaking of a different dynamic: Give and spend where you want your heart to be, and then let your heart catch up. Don't just give to those things you care about. Give to the things you want to care about. Ask yourself, "If I were the sort of person I long to be, then what would I do? How would I spend my money?" Then, do what you would do if you were that sort of person. Put your treasure where you want your heart to be. And if you do, says Jesus, your heart will go there. If you want to care more about the kind of car you drive, buy an expensive one. If you want to care more about property values, remodel your house. But if you want to grow in your faith, bring an offering to God. Wherever your treasure is, your heart is sure to follow.

Martin B. Copenhaver
Senior Pastor, Wellesley Congregational Church
Wellesley, Massachusetts

Reign of Christ
November 20, 2011
Matthew 25:31-46

United Black Christians

On the third Sunday of November, we celebrate the founding of United Black Christians (UBC), an officially recognized special interest group of the United Church of Christ, providing voice and vision for more than 70,000 African Americans.

UBC represents lay and clergy persons who faithfully minister in more than 278 predominately African American congregations of the United Church of Christ and those African American members in congregations that are not predominately African American.

United Black Christians seeks to provide voice for the African American members of the United Church of Christ, strengthen Black churches in the UCC, train and nurture leaders of our churches for Gospel- inspired service to the Black community, and enhance clergy-lay ministry partnership. In addition, UBC advocates for liberation and racial justice at home and abroad, monitors affirmative action within the UCC, and focuses on youth and young adult ministry.

First Sunday of Advent
November 27, 2011
Mark 13:24-37

LONGING

Our journey through the church year begins with Advent. And though we might like to begin with shouts and acclamation, a hearty “happy new year,” there is something entirely different about this beginning. Our year begins, as does the spiritual life, with longing, a deep yearning for a better day:

Awash in seas of injustice, or wars and rumors of wars, we long for peace and justice in human life, in our communities and among the nations of the world.

As we journey through our cities and towns on cold, dark nights we see people seeking food; families in need seeking shelter and rest; children, cold, seeking warmth. Our longing becomes a cry: How long O Lord? How long?

As we move inward we meet our restless hearts. Facing ourselves we see that somehow we have settled into spiritual arrhythmia, a rhythm of life that cannot sustain. But it is here, too, that we meet our longing, knowing that somehow, in the deep down of life, there is a pulse, a beat that engenders, nurtures and loves all that is.

With this deep longing, you would think that there is something we can do to fix things—bending and turning things aright. But we know that as we bend and turn things around, things often get twisted. Not only are the best things in life -- peace, love, hope, joy -- free, they are a pure gift: the gift that we receive in the advent, in the coming of Jesus Christ. No bending, no twisting called for or needed. What are we to do? We wait. We wait in our deep longing. How long, O God?

Advent is also a time of promise. The light will come. God will break through into human life, into your life. Beyond the horizon of all hope, Bethlehem, the stable, shepherds and angels tell us: the love of God is embodied in Jesus Christ. As we receive Christ our hearts pulse with the steady rhythm of life. God’s mercy becomes our own. We come to embody Christ’s love in our very human lives. In this we find that the One who has come, Jesus Christ, comes again and again. Not only is there a second coming, there is the continual coming of love into the world. Thanks be to God.

Rev. David Parks-Ramage
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