

Ejected, Rejected, Repentant and Reformed

By Lillian Daniel

A mother grimaces in the awkward moment when her baby's loud crying rings out and bounces off the old church's high ceilings. She pats her child nervously, looking from side to side to see who she might be disturbing. Should she stay or should she go?

We know this woman, don't we? We've seen this interchange, haven't we? If you haven't been the mother, or the people in the pews who turn around in annoyance, perhaps at one time, you were the baby. The beauty of that opening scene of the new UCC television ad is that most people have had a part in that little drama at one time or another.

As a mother, I remember the unbearable sound of my own child's crying, which probably seemed so much louder to me than it did to the people around me. When I was a new parent of a small baby, everything suddenly shifted. Normally confident and at ease, in those early days of motherhood I ventured out in public with a fragile sense of my place in the public square. Had I remembered all the gear that would make the trip a success, from the diapers, to the correct car seat strap, to the cheerios?

In church, the stakes seemed even higher. Who was I to disturb people's peace and quiet in worship? I remember whispering panicked little "Shush, shush" noises, certain that someone was about to turn around and give me "the look" that the television ad captures so well. Too often, when visiting churches with a noisy tot, people get that frosty look and parents wither in their hopeful intentions of getting a few hours with both God and a little one.

But I also remember other times, when I winced in my pew upon seeing the head in front of me turn slowly around, only to be surprised instead by a smile, or an empathetic shrug of the shoulders, or even better, an offer of welcome and help. Yet it is a call to repentance for the church that as that shoulder in front of me turned around, I never knew what to expect. Would it be a look that put me in my place, outside the walls of the sanctuary, or a look that encouraged me to stay?

In our new ad, an ejector seat absurdly propels this mother and her crying baby into the air. Next, others are ejected, cast out with such comical whimsy that it is easy to miss the prophetic edge to the scene. In our chuckling, we might just miss that this ad is call to repentance. Everyone who is ejected in this ad could, of course, be ejected less dramatically from any church, UCC or other. By ejecting all kinds of people, this ad reminds us, after we've stopped laughing, to look inward for our own ejector buttons. As Jesus said in the gospel of Matthew, "How can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye', while the log is in your own eye?"

While the United Church of Christ has a historic tradition of being early to welcome, let me suggest that, since our churches are full of human beings, we are not perfect, and God is not done with us yet. We are still ordinary sinners with one finger on the ejector button and another hand on a crying baby. We could be any of the characters in that scene, wondering if we fit in while forgetting the small things we do to make others feel left out. Jesus speaks to all of us when he chides, "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?"

Do we run around our congregations like insiders, trusting that since we the members know where everything is, no proper signage is necessary?

Do we make announcements in which we instruct a first time visitor “to see Sally for more information,” as if anyone except the insiders would have a clue who Sally is? Do we glare at the crying baby who interrupts the high point of the anthem that the choir has rehearsed for months? Do we stare at the gay couple who hold hands, but smile at the newly weds who kiss? Do we send out a thousand subtle signals every Sunday morning that make it clear who is in and who is out?

The ejector button image is a call to repentance for all of us. In the creativity of an absurd image and a ridiculous situation, God is still speaking, and asking us to see ourselves in new ways. Recall again Jesus’ words, “How can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye’, while the log is in your own eye?” No, we’re not perfect. We have to look – again and again - for the ejector buttons in our own hearts and churches, and speak the brave word: God is still speaking to all of us, ejected, rejected, repentant and reformed.

Questions for Thought, Discussion and Action

- 1. Have you ever felt nervous in church? Can you relate to any of the people who were tossed out? How about the family who gave the young mother the cold looks and later pulled away from the homeless woman? Can you relate to them as well? Be honest now!**
- 2. What are the ejector buttons in your own church? Are there signals you give in worship that would make a first time visitor feel “out of the loop” or in danger of being ejected? For example, look at your church’s printed material through the eyes of someone who has seen the God is still speaking, ad and is visiting your church. Are there examples of “insider language” that might act as an ejector button to the newcomer?**
- 3. Consider Jesus’ words from the gospel of Matthew: “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?” (Matthew 7:3) If you turn to your bible, you will see that this sentence follows some important words about the danger of judging others. How does this passage fit with the Stillspeaking Initiative?**



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